RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS SHELACH

HUMILITY AND NOT HUMILIATION

When Moshe Rabbeinu sent Yehoshua off with the Meraglim, he gave him a *berachah*, "*Kah yoshiacha me'atzas meraglim* — May Hashem save you from the counsel of the spies." The Kozhnitzer Maggid explains that Moshe was concerned that Yehoshua's humility would cause him to seek to prolong Moshe's leadership — by accepting the Meraglim's plans with the consequence that Bnei Yisrael would end up remaining in the Midbar for longer.

The Imrei Emes adds a different twist. He explains that humble people tend to go along with others rather than promote their own opinions. As such, when Yehoshua heard what the Meraglim were planning, he would behave humbly and go along with their counsel. Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu blessed Yehoshua with the *Siyatta Dishmaya* to have the strength to know when it's right to stick up for something.

How can a person know when it's right to stick up for something? How can we know when we mean it *l'shem Shamayim*? How can we know when we should let go?

The only answer is *Siyatta Dishmaya*.

It's important to recognize this when it comes to *shalom bayis*. Being *mevater* generally stems from being humble. Humility is what enables a person not to take slights and insults seriously. On the other hand, there are times when someone should stick up for him, such as in a case that involves something related to Torah and *mitzvos*, or when a person simply can't handle something.

In the book *You & Me = We* the author explains that often, giving in can cause the biggest problems in a marriage. The reason for this is that people often give in with the subconscious hope that they will get something in return. When they're disappointed, they feel hurt all over again, and this leads to mounting resentment that is worse for the relationship than the initial argument would have been. Sometimes, we end up being less hurt and upset if we're less accommodating to begin with.

We need *Siyatta Dishmaya* to know when to give in and when to stand our ground. We also need awareness of this issue, to know when to seek out advice and guidance.

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I've read your book and listened to many of your lectures. Thanks a lot. I have a question that you can maybe address in a *shiur*.

I'm a very sensitive person. My wife is not like that at all. She'll often say something she doesn't mean and I can be deeply hurt, although I don't always show it because I also have a personality that can laugh it off. But inside, it can be very painful. Should I tell her when she does something hurtful, "Hey that was really nasty, that really hurt me?" Is it better to keep quiet and ignore?

For example, I spoke to her on the phone last Friday and she slammed down the phone on me. I was very insulted. I knew that I should probably keep quiet because it was Erev Shabbos and she was under stress. She for sure didn't mean anything by hanging up on me, but it still hurt... I hope you understand what I mean.

I want to point out that there is no verbal abuse here. My wife is really nice and we really have a very good, loving relationship. It's only here and there when she's under stress, and because of my sensitivity, I get hurt... In a different *shiur*, you advised a mother to comfort her child when the father is verbally abusive. Although that's not the case here, how would I go about doing that for myself? I really don't want to turn things into fights. I ignored the Friday incident and even forgot about it for a while until something else reminded me.

Should the *mehalech* be to ignore such incidents? If so, what can I do to process my pain and deal with it when it hurts?

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Not everyone is as honest as you are, and acknowledging how hurt you are is definitely a good place to start. Rabbi Twersky once suggested that the first step to overcoming a personal issue is to acknowledge that the issue exists. When people deny or won't admit that they're feeling a certain way, they start to rationalize and distort everything that's going on. "I wasn't hurt... I'm not jealous... I can't handle it because it's wrong in principle but I couldn't care less..."

Not admitting to a feeling makes it harder to deal with the situation. The fact that you acknowledge that you're hurt and in pain makes it easier. For some people it's easier to write things down than to say them, but as long as you're honest about it you're already headed in the right direction.

In general, it's important to clarify that there's nothing wrong with being a sensitive person. Denying that you're sensitive would be dishonest as well as foolish. If someone hurts your feelings, simply acknowledging that you were hurt helps. It's also helpful to admit that the other person didn't mean to hurt you, which you do, and I commend you for pointing it out. You're acknowledging that the fact that you were hurt doesn't necessarily mean that someone intended to hurt you. With this in mind, the sentence: "Hey, that was really nasty, that really hurt me," can sound contradictory. Was it nasty, just because you were hurt? Furthermore, telling someone that they were nasty can itself be hurtful. As you yourself write, maybe this is just how this person reacts when they're stressed or rushed.

You can certainly admit you were hurt, adding that you're sensitive. It's not always as easy as it sounds, because at the moment of being hurt, it's very hard to see things straight, even when you know you're sensitive.

On the passenger side mirror of a car, there's a safety warning: "Objects in the mirror are closer than

they appear." It's important to know when something isn't as it appears, and to *know* it even without being able to *see* it. It's normal for perception to be distorted by emotion. The best thing to do is to wait and let the intensity of the situation pass. People often find this advice difficult to accept; they feel they have to address things immediately, and that if they don't, it will give the other person the impression that it's not such a big deal. In fact, the opposite is often true. If something is still bothering you enough to mention it twelve hours later, the other person may take you more seriously than they would have if you had reacted defensively in the heat of the moment.

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My grandfather was a *talmid chacham* who spoke very little. One of the things he said that stuck in my mind was a *vort* from Reb Mendele Vorker *zt"l*. Sometimes, instead of writing a *lamed* at the beginning of the word as a prefix meaning "to," the Torah adds a *kamatz hay* as a suffix, (e.g. *Mitzraymah* instead of *le'Mitzrayim*). Rashi explains that both mean the same, and Reb Mendele Vorker asks why, in that case, does the Torah often choose a less simple way of saying the same thing?

He explains that this contains an important message: Often, it's better to postpone something you have to say. If the meaning will still be the same later, then postpone.

This is such an important principle when it comes to communication, especially on sensitive topics. The Skverer Rebbe *zt"l* is quoted as saying, *"Fun nisht redden derleigt men nisht* — You don't lose out from not saying something." It's true in its simplest sense, but it can also mean that you won't ever lose out by not saying something *now*, because you can always say it later — whereas if you say something you shouldn't have, there is no way to retract it. So many things would turn out differently if we only took the time to think them through first.

Chazal teach us that, *"Seyag lachochmah shetikah* — the gate for wisdom is silence." If silence is the gate around wisdom, what's wisdom itself? Chazal may be hinting that if you first wait silently, you can say something wise later on, when your words are less likely to be distorted by your emotions. R' Menachem Monderer would often quote the Toldos Yaakov Yosef on the *passuk, "Chesil bachosech holech* — The foolish person walks in darkness." If the fool walks in darkness, the Toldos asks, where does the wise person walk when it's dark? Why do we seem to blame the fool for the darkness? He explains that whereas the fool "walks in the darkness," the *chacham* waits for the darkness to pass before setting out on his way.

You don't have to do things right away. The wise thing to do is stop and wait. The *chacham* doesn't necessarily have a better way of dealing with darkness than anyone else. So he waits.

Aside from all this, when you wait in order to respond with calm clarity, you're not only doing yourself a favor. You're doing the other person a favor too. If you want the other person to be able to respond clearly, without being put on the defensive, you need to give them space as well.

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Another important skill to develop is the ability to differentiate between different levels of hurtful comments. Some comments are what we'll refer to as normal and/or unintentional, though they may still hurt a sensitive person. Some comments are insensitive and wrong. And some are intolerable and unacceptable. Confusion about what fits where is common, especially as it can also depend on how often certain comments are made. Something intolerable that happens very infrequently may not need to be addressed; something relatively minor that is said on a regular basis often should be.

Within the category of normal are comments such as, "Please can you remember to wash my jacket before Shabbos," where the wife hears a message criticizing her for forgetting the last time around (whether or not that was her husband's intention). It could also be the wife telling her husband about the good advice her mother gave her on a certain issue where the husband hears the implication that she values her mother's advice above his own.

If you're a sensitive person, you shouldn't feel guilty about feeling hurt at such comments. All the same, bear that in mind when you discuss them. "I'm sure you didn't mean to imply that I'm always forgetting to do the laundry on time…" "I know you didn't mean that you don't value my advice…" Sometimes, it's enough to respond silently and reassure *yourself* that the other person didn't have evil intent. But if you want the other person to provide reassurance, you can ask for it, calmly and respectfully, and preferably not while you're still immersed in your hurt feelings.

Within the category of insensitive and wrong are dismissive comments, where a person shares his opinion and someone else ridicules it. Being spoken to in a condescending tone is also hurtful. Having someone make decisions for or about you without your involvement is hurtful.

Here, too, it's important to acknowledge that being sensitive can lead us to see things differently from others who are naturally less sensitive. However, you

shouldn't give the message that the comment was only hurtful because you are sensitive. If someone has acted wrongly and hurt you, it's important to say something so it doesn't escalate. At a calm moment, you can say: "When you speak in that tone of voice, I feel hurt, and I would really appreciate it if you tried not to use that tone of voice again."

Sometimes, however, people do need to say things that could be unpleasant to hear. There are still better or worse ways of doing so. If you find it very hurtful to be told something in a certain way, you can ask to have it said more gently. "I know I forgot to wash your jacket in time. If you could tell me in a calm voice, I won't get so upset, and I'm sorry — I'll try not to forget again."

I don't want to elaborate too much on things that are intolerable but some examples could be: one spouse screaming at the other in front of the children; telling a spouse they are incompetent, stupid, or evil; and so forth. Remaining silent is wrong and enables further such behavior even if you do so "for the sake of peace."

You must address such comments, but again, it's much better to do so after the event, not in the heat of the moment. And even if someone did something inexcusable, that doesn't give you the right to say whatever you want in response (aside from the fact that it won't help matters if you do so). Attacking the person directly ("How could you say such a thing?") is not likely to be productive. Instead, you can say, "I can't handle it when you use such language. By me, this is a red line. Please understand me." You may have to add that, "If it does happen again, I will have to do something about it." It's not about punishing the other person or disrupting your relationship. You can add a compliment and even a semi-justification, as long as you're clear about your lack of tolerance for such behavior. ("I know you don't usually speak this way, and I imagine something difficult must have happened today at work to make you snap like that. All the same, I just can't tolerate hearing such words.")

Just as it's hard to react in a balanced, careful manner in the heat of the moment, it's also hard to accurately assess the difference between normal, hurtful, and intolerable speech. You may need to ask someone to help you with that, but don't gaslight yourself; your feelings are valid. The only question is how to deal with them.

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At all times, it's vital to keep in mind (even though it's not always easy) that you're talking about your spouse here. When you're hurt by someone, it's easy to forget all the positive aspects of the relationship. And it's precisely because the relationship means so much that you are so vulnerable to being hurt by something that you would brush off with ease from anyone else. Remember that this is not a person you want to build a case against. When you have this uppermost in your mind, you'll find it easier to address issues differently.

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I can't end without mentioning that it's always important to do a little self-introspection. If someone is doing something hurtful or intolerable to you, stop and ask yourself whether there was anything you might have done to provoke it. That doesn't mean that you're to blame. Situations aren't usually black or white. It's often a combination of factors. But there are situations which can be avoided with a little forethought, once you recognize that the other person is genuinely challenged in specific circumstances. Again, this doesn't mean you're to blame, but you can still learn from experience and connect the dots without misinterpreting.

In every relationship, you can learn how to be nicer, and even cause someone to be nicer to you.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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