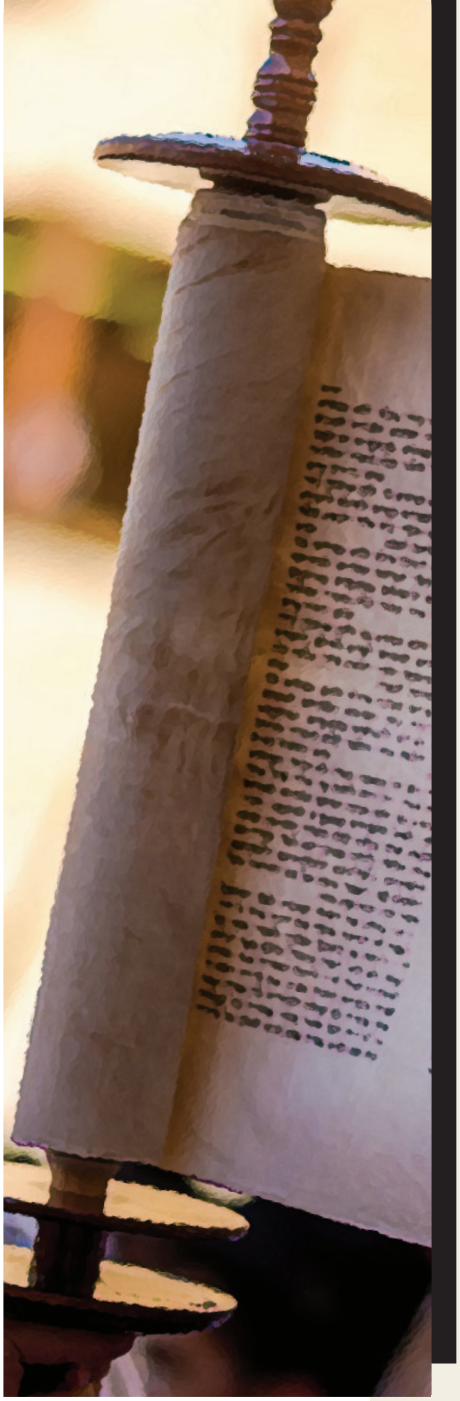


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH

In this week's *parshah*, Bnei Yisrael are about to cross the Jordan River and enter Eretz Yisrael, and Hashem commands them to drive out the Seven Nations along with their idolatry.

Pointing out that Bnei Yisrael have already been commanded to destroy the Seven Nations, Rashi asks why they have to be told again, right now. He explains that having the correct intention in mind as they enter Eretz Yisrael is actually a precondition for succeeding in all their future battles and the rest of their lives there. Without the right intentions, "waters will come and wash you away," Rashi adds, quoting the Gemara.

The Chiddushei Harim draws on these *pesukim* to stress the importance of starting any new project the right way. Taking the first step will often set the tone for everything that follows, and if that first step is a misstep, things will continue to go wrong afterward.

However, that's not a reason to despair. All it means is that once a person realizes that he's heading in the wrong direction, he has to stop, change course, and resolve to do things right from then on. Just as Hashem creates everything afresh each day, so too we can make a fresh start any time it's needed.

When challenges are minor, a person can sometimes get away with never really getting to the root of things and fixing them, but when the problems are deep-seated and have been going on for months or years, a fresh start is absolutely needed in order to make real change.

Tinkering around with little changes will at times not even be noticed. When needed, it's important to make a *cheshbon hanefesh*, admit to what's been wrong, and "reboot the system." Only such a fresh start merits the special *siyatta diShmaya* of new beginnings.

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Parshas
Matos-Massei
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

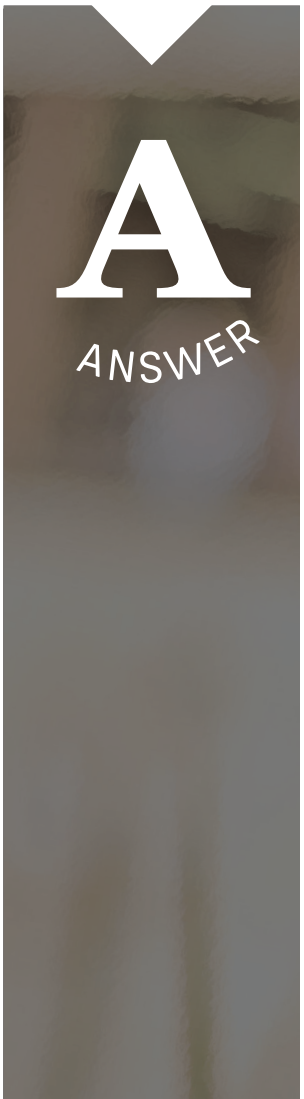
I've been married for around 10 years, and I've listened to so many of your *shiurim*, and they've helped so much. Thank you.

I have a question that I'd like to ask, about my mother-in-law. My wife and children spend a lot of time at her home, not just on Shabbos but also on weekdays, in the evenings. The problem is that she is so critical of the way my wife and I are bringing up our children. We are more strict than she'd like, more particular about our children doing what we tell them to, and whenever my wife or I tell one of the children to do something, my mother-in-law jumps right in, yelling that we're too strict, and telling the children that she'll "protect them."

I've asked her several times, very nicely and sensitively, to say anything she feels should be said to my wife or me in private, not in front of the children, but it hasn't made any difference. I'm very worried about the influence this is having on the children and the way they see their parents, but I don't know what to do.

Should I tell her that if she doesn't stop acting this way, we'll have to stop visiting? I really don't want to have to take that step. Perhaps I could give her your answer to this question to read?

Thank you



It's important to differentiate between situations where a solution or suggestion is warranted, and those where only a change in the situation will help. I've given classes teaching EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique), and one of the introductions I give is that not all problems can be solved by resolving the emotional stress that a problem causes. Resolving your anger at the landlord, who is not providing heat in the winter, may make things less stressful, but it won't warm your home. You need to deal with the situation.

There do exist situations that are not meant to be tolerated, and where the only "solution" is removing ourselves from the scene. When it comes to a spouse or one's children, one must do everything and anything to make it "work," because these are the people you want to spend the rest of your life with. When it comes to other people, such as colleagues at work, sometimes the most effective method of resolving difficulties is staying away. You can always try and wrack your brains to come up with ideas for improving things, but in cases where you simply can't control the other person's response, there really may be no other way of dealing with something than distancing yourself somewhat.

It would be a shame to have to spend less time with your in-laws, but sometimes you've tried everything already, and the only solution is to reduce the amount of time spent at their home. It is possible to do this without too much grief or hurt feelings.

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Sometimes, people recognize that there's a tradeoff and accept the way things are. If a couple depends on financial support from their parents, for

instance, they may accept that they have to swallow their feelings at times and put up with things that are unpleasant.

In this particular situation that you describe, however, you seem to have come to the correct conclusion that the damage being done to the way your children perceive you and your wife is so great, that it's not worth the price.

The question then becomes, as you write, how to express yourself in the best possible way.

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The first thing to do in any situation where you have to say something that the other person will be upset by, is to stress the positive — how much you love visiting and spending time with your mother-in-law, how much you and your wife and the children gain from the relationship, and how much you respect her opinions. You can clarify that you have no doubt that whenever she expresses her opinions, she only has your welfare and the welfare of her grandchildren at heart.

One of my favorite communication rules is avoiding the word "but," which tends to delete much of what was just said. So, without any "but," you can continue and clarify that as much as you would love to continue visiting often and gain so much from the visits, if she continues to criticize your parenting in front of the children, you feel that you won't be able to spend much time there anymore.

Repeat how much it will upset you to have to take such a course of action, and that you simply don't feel you have another option.

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It's possible that this will help, and your mother-in-law will begin to make the necessary changes. If she does, show your appreciation and express how much it means to you. Tell her you understand that it's definitely a challenge for her not to intervene when she sees you doing things differently from how she believes they should be done.

In some cases, given enough appreciation and positive reinforcement, people will continue to improve until the problem fades away. If that happens, you can certainly overlook the occasional lapse as long as she realizes that she slipped up and doesn't do it again. A murmured, "Please can we not say this in front of the children?" might be enough to remind her, if real changes have been made. If things improve, that's wonderful.

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If you have to stop visiting your in-laws, as unfortunate as it is, it doesn't mean that the relationship is over. You can still maintain contact and keep things positive in areas that are unaffected by your differing opinions on how to raise your children.

I often counsel young couples to ask their parents for advice throughout their married lives. Even if you may not feel you need it, and even if you don't end up taking the advice (as long as the parents won't find out), there's no reason not to give them the good feeling that you value their opinions. There's usually no reason for any married child to give their parents the message: "I'm married now, and I'm going to do things my way." Children should always express appreciation to their parents for their upbringing and all of the time, effort, and wisdom that was invested in their *chinuch*.

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You mentioned possibly sending my reply to your mother-in-law to read. Although your mother-in-law should take your concerns seriously and do her best to stop criticizing you in front of your children, confronting her with this message is unlikely to help.

As I always stress, people can only do what they can do — they can't control other people's responses. It would be wonderful if she sought out advice on this issue and accepted the need to change, but no one can force another person to change or take guidance.

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I understand from what you wrote that you and your wife are on the same page in this situation, and that's something to be very grateful for. In general, if spouses are on the same page, then even if their viewpoint and behavior aren't the most ideal, things will still work out.

I like reminding people to make sure one problem doesn't spill over into another one. A *chinuch* problem shouldn't become a *shalom bayis* problem, and mother-in-law problems shouldn't become *shalom bayis* ones either. In a situation where the son-in-law is in conflict with the mother-in-law, and the wife takes her mother's side, it's very important for the husband to tread carefully and not try to force his wife to see things his way.

He can ask his wife to support his right to see things the way he does, and take action as he sees fit. And his wife should never take her parents' side against her husband. But trying to get one's wife to see things in the same light as he does is both unnecessary and counterproductive. Although it's hard, it's possible to gloss over the way one's wife feels about her parents, and try to keep her out of the argument, understanding that she feels conflicted between her parents and her husband..

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And along those lines, it's important to ensure that this in-law problem doesn't become a *chinuch* problem. The grandchildren should be kept out of the dispute as far as possible. There's no need, and no justification, for speaking badly of their grandmother to them.

People justify such things, thinking that it's important for the kids not to be mistaken about the incorrect behavior of the other person. Unfortunately, in divorce situations, parents are often tempted to badmouth the other side, "to make sure they know who they're dealing with." This has a devastating impact on the children, and in your situation, it would be very damaging for the grandchildren if you criticize their grandmother in front of them.

It takes a bit of honesty for anyone in such a situation to admit that they are only using their children to further their own agenda, but it is very wrong.

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Before concluding, I would like to address a few words to any grandparents who might be reading this — of their own accord, that is. It can't be stressed enough that parents only have one shot at *chinuch* — while their children are still unmarried and living at home. Once they're married and out, your time's up. If you consider them old enough and mature enough to get married and establish a family, you should also view them as old enough and mature enough to bring up their children properly.

And if you don't see them as mature enough to be parents, why do you imagine that you will suddenly have success in being *mechanech* them once they are married? In any case, you already did your best at being *mechanech* them, and at this point trying to control one's children is always wrong, no matter how old they are.

That doesn't mean that you can't respectfully express your opinion, sensitively and in private, if you feel that something must be said. However, going over your children's heads and addressing your grandchildren directly is very harmful for everyone involved and should never be done.

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It's not unusual for parents of married children to realize their errors in the field of *chinuch* only later in life. However, the time for correcting things is past. We can always do *teshuvah*, apologize for where we went wrong, and try to exert a positive influence in the future. But mixing in is wrong, and a little bit of mixing in, is also wrong.

May Hashem guide us all to be *mechanech* our children with wisdom and *siyatta diShmaya*, and give us *nachas* from all our children.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: MATOS-MASSEI 5784

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