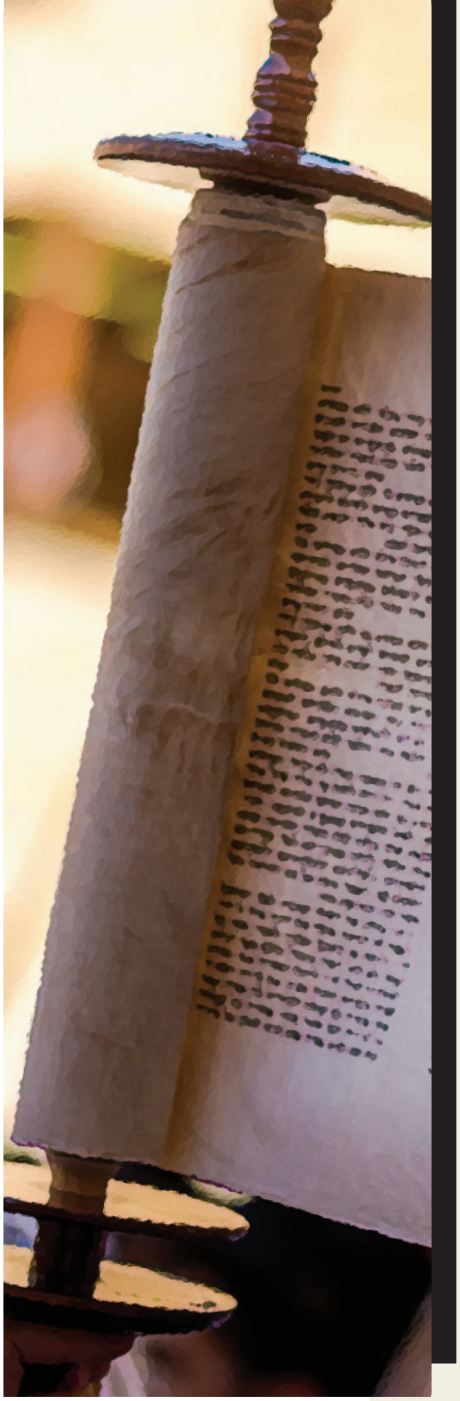


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

CLOSE AND CLOSER TO HOME — WHO TAKES PRECEDENCE?

Following the devastation of the Mabul, the Torah tells us that the waters "blotted out all beings that were upon the face of the earth, from man to animal ... and only Noach and those with him in the Teivah survived." If everything else was blotted out, asks the Ben Ish Chai, why does the *passuk* need to tell us that "only" Noach and his family survived — is that not obvious?

The Ben Ish Chai answers by citing the first *passuk* in this week's *parshah*: "These are the generations of Noach, Noach..." The repetition of his name, he writes, teaches us that Noach's *tzidkus* protected not only his family but also his entire generation. Similarly, he adds, Hashem's repetitions of "Avraham, Avraham" and "Moshe, Moshe" reveal that aside from acting as protectors for their families, both Avraham and Moshe protected the entire Jewish People.

After the Mabul, however, Noach only had his family left to care for. From then onward he was no longer able to protect his generation.

Not everyone has the ability to act as a protector for the wider community, but protecting one's family is the basic duty of every person. Those who have a wider influence (which is a wonderful gift) need a great deal of discernment to know when choices must be made and whom to prioritize when that happens.

It should be obvious, but isn't always, that one's immediate family comes first. Who will stick up for a child who feels victimized by his teacher if not his parents? Who will protect one spouse from an unfair work situation if not the other spouse? While we may prefer not to take sides, or to sometimes even side with the other party for whatever reason, the Torah teaches us that family comes first.

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Tizku L'mitzvos!!

Parshas
Noach
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I hope you can point me in the right direction. My husband and I have been married for several complicated years and recently had our second child. My question relates to my family of origin, because my husband sees them as a bad influence. I can understand this from his point of view, but I still don't agree with him.

His attitude is that people should have boundaries and that we need to keep our distance from my family. He is very logical about this, and doesn't seem to understand what family means.

I admit that this isn't really a typical situation, because one of my younger sisters is in an inappropriate relationship and is still living at home with our parents. I do understand how difficult this is for my husband to deal with, but it's not like my sister discusses her private life with the children. She's a good aunt and her friend is a very good and nice person. My family isn't happy about this person, but they eventually accepted that this is the situation.

My family is very close, even though we're all very different. So, it is VERY hard for me to hear my husband say that he will tell our kids, as they grow up, that my family is not okay and so on... He also wants to distance them from this sister as far as possible — ideally, he wants there to be no contact with her whatsoever.

I hope you can just point me in the right direction and show me the right way to look at the situation and what to do, because I can't really talk to or get advice from anyone.

Thank you very much!



When it comes to relationships, one rarely finds differences of opinion where one person is clearly right and the other must admit they're wrong and concede completely, and this applies even in more unusual situations such as the one you describe.

There is, however, one attitude which I feel is almost always completely wrong, and this is the issue you raise almost as an aside in the last paragraph of your letter. In my opinion, not having someone to get advice from is a key part of your problem, and very wrong in itself, regardless of all the various excuses people give to explain why it "just won't work for them." All couples need a rav or respected mentor to whom they pose all issues where they fail to come to an amicable agreement. Ideally, this person will be someone who knows both spouses and their backgrounds, and is willing to follow up and assess how the advice he gives is working out.

Strongly recommending that couples "make themselves a rav" (in the *lashon* of the Mishnah) is the only piece of advice I will ever give one spouse to be told over to the other spouse, the one who isn't asking for my input.

Aside from that, almost nothing is sufficiently black-and-white to enable me to make pronouncements on the way things "must" be done. It is often specifically when people recognize that there are (at least) two sides to every story as well as many ways of dealing with issues, that they find new ways of resolving difficulties.

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That said, you asked me to point you in the right direction, and in a general sense I would like to stress that while your own relationship with your sister is essentially in the category of "yours," the decision over your children's relationship with her belongs to your husband just as much as it does to you. This is the category I like to refer to as "ours," and this applies even if you are 100% convinced that your attitude is right and your husband's is wrong.

Your husband is certainly right when he insists that people need boundaries and that harmful influences should be kept at bay. No one questions this when it comes to the wider world, or even to certain elements within our own communities. Sometimes, unfortunately, the question arises within families and then, while it is more complicated to address, the issue still needs to be faced.

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Unsurprisingly, a negative influence closer to home has far more impact than one that is more distant. Often, we just don't see it because our feelings of closeness and emotional connection to the person blind us to their failings or at least persuade us that "it's not that bad" even when the person concerned is truly having a very harmful influence on our young and impressionable children. The influence may not be noticeable at the time — for instance, if the children are still too young to act on what they are absorbing — but I am familiar with many cases where years later, parents greatly regretted exposing their children to people and ideas whose potential danger they downplayed at the time.

Knowing how to show love and respect toward family members while not loving and respecting the wrong things they do is not always easy. What may seem easy, in the short-term, is instead erasing problematic family members from one's life entirely. In the long-term, however, this rarely works. As children grow up and hear outside perspectives, they may challenge a parent who has written off a grandparent or uncle or aunt as "off-limits," especially if the relative's faults were blown out of proportion. This is why being as honest as possible is the best option — the closer one's account of a certain person is to reality, the more likely it is that it will stand the test of time.

Blood is not just "thicker than water" — it's an entirely different substance. It's no big deal to cut friends or acquaintances out of one's life, but cutting off relatives is always traumatic for those involved as it goes against nature. The families we have are part of our lives for Hashem's reasons, though we may not be able to fathom them. But even if we can't understand why we have the challenge of certain relatives, we do need to find a way to stay in a relationship with them.

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If it was your husband writing, I would advise him to look for ways to do that, and ask him to open his mind to greater flexibility and sensitivity in this area. Since you're the one asking, what I'll tell you is, first of all: don't argue.

You write that you can understand his point of view, and that's a great place to start. You're looking for a practical solution to a real-life, flesh-and-blood problem, so the question of who's "right" or "wrong" is largely irrelevant. Both you and your husband have valid points of view and both of you need to respect each other's perspectives and tell each other that you do. And with that, you close the door on the bigger philosophical question and address practicalities.

Once you have stopped arguing about who's right, I believe that what you describe as your husband's "very logical" way of looking at the situation may soften. Feeling that his wife's family can and should be cut out of his children's lives may only seem rational to him as long as on the other side of the argument, you are insisting that he is utterly wrong and that there should be no restrictions on interaction with your sister and other relatives.

Very often, when people are challenged, instead of looking for a solution they instead harden their position and seek to bolster it with evidence and "proofs," trying to convince the other person that they are being absolutely logical and that there truly is

only one right way of seeing things. When, instead of being challenged, they hear, "I can see why you feel that way, and I understand you," they may lower their defenses and become more willing and able to hear another point of view.

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Knowing how to validate another person's way of thinking is a skill that can be learned by anyone. One important guideline is to avoid the word "but." Telling someone, "I understand you, but this is why I think otherwise" robs your "understanding" of any real impact.

Instead, be careful to compartmentalize what you say. Tell your husband, "I can see why you feel that way." Then stop. They are his feelings and he has a right to them, regardless of whether anyone other than him thinks they're well-founded.

Only once you allow him his feelings should you tell him about yours. "It's hard for me to imagine my children never knowing their aunt, and this is really hard for me to implement and stick to. Perhaps there's a middle way we can try? I'd really appreciate it if we could discuss this openly. Even when family members are behaving wrongly, I find it hurtful to have only those behaviors emphasized and turned into a reason to cut them off entirely."

You may and should certainly tell your husband how much it means to you to be able to maintain contact with your sister and other relatives. Add that you're open to setting certain boundaries and that you fully respect and agree with his position that they're necessary. This may all sound like so much compromise and moving further and further away from "what you really want to do," but the truth is that compromise in marriage (and any relationship) is *lechatchilah*. The connection between two people is what shouldn't be compromised — the details of how to maintain that connection are where compromise is vital.



Once you stop trying to prove your husband wrong, he will probably stop trying to prove he's right. That's when you might be capable of finding your way to solutions that will be acceptable to both of you. In almost every case where one spouse adopts this approach, the other spouse will meet them if not halfway then a lot further toward the middle than they ever thought possible.

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If this still doesn't work (and even if it does), an objective third-party, ideally a rav, should be brought into the picture, with both you and your husband welcoming the guidance and resolving to respect it. As a matter of fact, you don't have to wait for an argument to consult your rav.

Hopefully you will find a healthy way in which to communicate properly with your husband, as well as ideas that forestall conflict and protect your children from harmful influences.

We do not all have the wisdom and *siyatta diShmaya* to be an Avraham Avinu or a Sarah Imeinu who influences the wider world for the good. Sometimes, we have to be like Noach and focus on protecting our families in the Teivah, because that's what Hashem wants from *us*.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: NOACH 5785

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