RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS CHUKAS BALAK

WHEN PARENTS INTERFERE

There are only a few *parshiyos* named after people, begging the question: Why would the Torah name a *parshah* after Balak, an evil non-Jew? The Rebbe Reb Meir'l of Premishlan explains that while all non-Jews hate Yidden, most of them won't admit it, and we don't necessarily realize how careful we have to be with them. Balak, however, was a "*kosher'e goy*" who let it be known that he hates us. His honest expression of his feelings put us on our guard, and so we can have a *parshah* named after him.

If being honest and open about our feelings can be commendable even when the feelings are negative, how much more so when the feelings are positive. There's the story about a couple who came to a marriage counselor. The wife's chief complaint was that they've been married for many years and her husband *never* tells her he loves her. The husband looked confused and responded that he told his wife when they got married that he loves her, and since nothing had changed since, he didn't see a reason to say it again.

We often assume that people know how we feel or what we mean, either because we told them once before or because "it's obvious." But it's not always obvious, and even when it is, sometimes things that are a "given" should still be said.

This applies even more in times of difficulty. Maybe one spouse thinks that "nothing has changed since I last told you," but for the other spouse, things have changed. Perhaps one spouse is going through a rough time, feeling vulnerable - or even like a failure - and concerned that they have lost the love and respect of the other spouse. Whenever there's reason to believe that a spouse, or a child, may be concerned about our enduring feelings for them, that's the time to reassure them that you still think highly of them.

We know Balak and other gentiles hate us, but we can still learn something from the one goy who wasn't afraid to say so. All the more so when it comes to expressing good feelings. That's the way to build good relationships.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED BY

APPRECIATIVE READERS, LISTENERS AND FOLLOWERS,

MR. & MRS. B. BLATT

THANK YOU RABBI GRUEN FOR ALL THAT YOU TAUGHT US AND ALL THAT WE LEARNED

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you so much for the wonderful weekly speeches you post on TorahAnytime. They are clear, insightful, and practical and your style is humble, genuine, and Torah'dik, so it's easy to be *mekabel*!

My in-laws have always been nice to us… when we did exactly as they wanted. But the minute we acted differently, there were huge blow-ups and it would take weeks or months until they would talk to us again.

The family is super close. Even the siblings-in-law are like one big happy family and know everything about each other. A few years ago, we moved away and my husband became much more serious and frum and a real *ben Torah*. His parents were very angry when we moved and we reassured them that it was temporary. Since my husband has done so well here, many *rabbanim* he asked told him to stay where it's best for him and just try and make his parents calm.

Every time we visit, it's a huge fight about why we took ourselves away from the family and why my husband has become a "fanatic." It's really all about trying to manipulate us to move back near them. My father-in-law went as far as trying to manipulate us into coming home.

Last time we went to visit was the worst as every single one of his siblings ganged up against us for being so different from them.

We tried so, so hard to be super nice to everyone but because we really are different, frummer, it just rubbed them the wrong way and eventually caused a blow up, a LOT of humiliation, and weeks of anguish. My husband never answers back to them.

My husband tried to make it work, but it just got worse.

For weeks, they ignored our calls. We got bad feedback from family members that we're destroying the family. I was ignored at family *simchos*. By now, we hardly have a relationship at all.

My question is, is there anything I can do to repair the relationship? A few things won't change. My husband is not going to stop being a *ben Torah* because it irks them. They talk about others being *bnei Torah*, but still "normal." We know that they are controlling and manipulative and it's best for us emotionally not to move back.

How can I learn to emotionally disconnect and not get upset from their behavior towards us?

I forgot to mention even though it's the most important point, that I know I'm the luckiest woman in the world to have the most wonderful amazing husband straight from the kindness of H-Shem!! At least my problem is with the in-laws and not with my spouse but it's still quite a big issue and I really want to have guidance with it.

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Before addressing the bigger picture and the questions you posed, I want to start by commending you for being proud of your husband. It's not easy. Sometimes, even when someone is proud of their spouse, what they're doing can be causing so much anguish that they may start to wonder whether their spouse should change in some way and tone things down. Even when a person believes in what someone else is doing, they can still become resentful regarding the consequences.

But that feeling is wrong. You should be proud of your husband and give him your full support and tell him that you're there for him. I remember hearing of a well-known *gadol b'Yisroel* who said that he went through difficulty and only achieved greatness due to the backing of his wife.

A woman should stand by her husband and believe in him. She shouldn't allow the aggravation to get to her or between them. She should be there for her husband and know that their relationship and connection is the most important thing in life. This is true even in the case when a husband isn't necessarily a *ben Torah*. A woman should communicate that she knows her husband is trying his best and that she supports him fully. How much more so, though, when a man is most certainly doing the right thing.

You're doing the right thing. Keep standing by your husband and being proud of him, and with him.

You will need a Daas Torah to consult with here because you are getting into details of *kibbud av va'em*, one of the *Aseres Hadibros*. Although in general your husband definitely comes first when it's your parents in question, when it's his parents things are a bit more complicated and you may need ongoing guidance for how to balance your *shalom bayis* against the requirements of this *mitzvah*, while not changing your mindset or respect for your husband.

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Unfortunately, I have seen many such situations up close. I have no reason to assume that you have done anything to aggravate the situation, and sadly I've seen innocent people treated this way. I will just add that I have also seen situations that were aggravated by the victim, and although I will not be addressing this in this essay, it's important that people make sure that it isn't a possibility in any situation they're dealing with, before applying the advice or suggestions I'm presenting.

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The first people I want to address are any parents who find themselves in such a situation, in the hope that what I write will help others avoid treating their children this way — or even the questioner in this case, who will one day be the parent of married children *b'ezras Hashem*.

The fact that parents are trying to control married children is already a problem. And if someone is mixing into *your* marriage, you should know that it's a problem (even if you don't think it is!) Your allegiance to your spouse comes first, without setting aside the *halachos* of *kibbud av va'em*. (It's important to consult with Daas Torah when it comes to these *halachos*.) Don't allow your *shalom bayis* to be destroyed by people who are mixing in. This is something that parents should know.

I recently dealt with a similar yet milder situation where parents were crossing red lines. It's one thing when they ask, "Where's your husband; why isn't he home yet?" That's bad enough. Parents sometimes go as far as to mix into private parts of their children's marriages, or even disinvite certain children to family *simchos*, or ban siblings from talking to each other. All such things cross red lines and are terrible. If someone is doing that to you, you should know that it's terrible and that you shouldn't allow it or tolerate it.

For those of us who appreciate *bnei Torah* and *yiras Shamayim*, we think to ourselves: *Poor guy. He's sitting and learning, he's not hurting anyone, and people can't stand it.* But even if the person being victimized was someone who was *less* frum than his family, a family of *bnei Torah* with one "black sheep," it's still not right to cross them out of the family. It's terrible to make a *machlokes* over it. And it doesn't have the desired effect in any case.

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I would also like to briefly address the siblings. I've often heard about parents who told their children not to communicate with one of the siblings, to send them negative messages or hints, etc. It's terrible. If someone is telling you to do that to your sibling, it's wrong. It's not always easy to resist, but it's important that you do so nonetheless. Some people are strong enough to resist threats and manipulations. It can be very hard, though, when you're threatened that financial assistance will be cut off or that you too won't be invited to a *simchah* if you talk to the person being ostracized. It's clear that the right thing to do is to get advice from your rav regarding any *halachic* issues, and often you'll be guided to pick up the phone and talk to your sibling without your parents' knowledge. Who else, if not a sibling, should make a sister or brother feel part of the family? Don't be so afraid. When you find yourself in a hard spot, you want *chizuk* from your sibling. So if your parents are crossing them out or giving them a hard time, shouldn't you be there for them?

In most cases where I've seen someone not allow another person to talk to someone else, it's an issue of someone very insecure trying to control the people around them — for as long as it works — and not necessarily anything more sincere or real.

A while back, I spoke to a *yungerman* whose wife wouldn't allow him to talk to his only brother. The brother was going through a very hard time. They loved each other, but for some reason, it bothered her.

Ideally, I told him, he should tell his wife that he loves her dearly, and that this is his brother and *his* communication and it has nothing to do with her. If he didn't feel strong enough to say that, or he felt that the damage it would cause wasn't worth it at that point, there was no reason why he couldn't talk to his brother in a way that his wife wouldn't find out.

He took my advice and started communicating with his brother. A while later he told me, "You gave each of us a brother again."

This is not because it isn't important to be open with your spouse. You *should* be open with your spouse… as long as there's no control issue going on.

This is a sensitive topic. If you're caught in a situation where your parents or spouse don't allow you to have a healthy relationship with family members, make sure you discuss it with a rav, but don't just let such situations happen without getting clarity and direction in order to ensure that no tragedies are slowly occurring.

When you call your sibling, you don't have to discuss whether your parents are wrong. You don't have to condone or validate what they're doing, and you can even clarify that you'd rather avoid the topic. You can simply say, "Hello, how are you? I miss you. How are your children doing?"

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And now to the questioner. When someone is mistreating you, you feel put down. It's not practical to try "not to care." It's normal to feel bad that others may be looking down on you because of what your parents are saying. It's not comfortable to be bad-mouthed.

What is interesting for you to know, on the other hand, is that sometimes, when people bad-mouth others to an extreme, their words aren't taken nearly as seriously as you might think. Recently, I was involved in two situations where one party was being put down. One situation involved a couple whose *shalom bayis* wasn't great. The woman kept

making notes about everything her husband was doing. It's very intimidating and discomfiting when someone writes down every little thing you're doing, right or wrong. Besides, it makes a person worry about who else is going to see those notes.

The other case involved a couple that was being publicly bad-mouthed. Someone was sending out horrible messages about them to hundreds of people. Difficult people with abusive tendencies, people who are hard to get along with, were besmirching their name. Everyone on the block — cousins, shul members, *mechutanim* — was hearing these terrible things.

I told the people concerned in both of these cases that while it must be very uncomfortable for them, anyone who sees ten pages of notes about everything you did wrong, or who gets text messages about things you're doing wrong in private, will realize that the person writing the report or sending the messages is the one who's in the wrong. Knowing this doesn't necessarily make the experience any easier to bear, but it's still important to realize that it's not about you. They're making themselves look bad.

When someone is mistreating you and telling others that you're not a good person, they're often making themselves look like fools for not being able to work it out with you in private. It's not reflecting as badly on you as you might think.

I know of someone who sends out weekly emails about people who he feels mistreat him, to whoever will listen, and as time goes on more and more people are coming to the conclusion that there's something wrong with him, and that maybe all the people he's bad-mouthing have a point. It doesn't make it comfortable to be slandered like that, but it's comforting to know that people aren't always as gullible as you think.

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It can be helpful to remember that people who mistreat others are to be pitied. People who need to be in control are quite pathetic. People who lose it when things don't go their way are a *rachmanus*. It's coming from insecurity, unhappiness, unfulfillment and maybe some other things. If you can see it that way, you can feel bad for them. You realize that they don't necessarily mean anything bad. They want to be happy, they want you to be happy, but they just don't know how to do it. They're lacking skill and understanding. If you can feel bad for them, it could change their attitude.

R' Avrohom Genechovsky in his *sefer* on *shalom bayis* relates a story about Rav Chaim Volozhiner. Rav Chaim was once walking with his students when a gang sprang upon them and tried to kill them. Rav Chaim asked to be allowed to daven Minchah one last time. Surprisingly, when he finished davening, the gang chief untied them and let them go. The students asked Rav Chaim to explain, and Rav Chaim told them that as he was davening, he was thinking about how a person could have reached the point of being a chief of a gang of murderers. "He was probably misunderstood as a child and went through a great deal of difficulty. Maybe he was thrown out on the streets and didn't have what to eat, so he started to steal. People fought back, which led to where he is now. What an unfortunate soul. I had such *rachmanus* on him. His heart felt my feelings, and he felt understood, and let me go."

R' Avrohom explained that when someone hurts you, think about it and realize that they must be hurting inside. Feel bad for them for having reached the point where they can't let others thrive and grow.

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Practically speaking, try as much as possible to be respectful. (Sometimes people don't even let you go that far, if they don't pick up the phone.) Keep on trying even if you don't see results. It's not about results; it's about being respectful. Send cards, pictures, compliments, even try to ask for advice on occasion. When people see you happy and confident in your marriage, while you're still being polite and pleasant, you'll be surprised at how much can happen on its own. Things may only change over a matter of years, but I've seen it happen.

Standing behind your husband and being proud of him, while being polite and trying your best to be respectful of his parents, is a wonderful way of life.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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