RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS EIKEV

APPLYING THE LESSONS WE LEARN – TO OURSELVES

This week's *parshah* opens by stressing the benefits of listening to and following Hashem's commandments: *"Vehaya eikev tishme'un es hamishpatim ha'eileh ushmartem va'asisem osam..."* While this may seem obvious, the Yismach Moshe derives an important lesson here on the manner in which we should learn Torah. Very often, people are keen to learn new ideas but it stops there – there's no practical consequence. The Yismach Moshe explains that this is because they don't learn with the intention of improving their behavior; they just want to gather knowledge. This is why the *passuk* focuses on the goal of the learning and listening: "*ushmartem va'asisem*," to actually *implement* it. The Torah is here to teach us what to do, how to behave.

I see many examples of this issue, for example, when people say: "My wife doesn't stop listening to lectures," or "My husband just went to a course," and then go on to complain that they don't see any changes. People can have self-help books piled up to the sky and yet their situation still isn't improving. Sometimes people are honest and they'll admit that they haven't changed their behavior – but then they rationalize their failure to do so. Often, people fall into the trap of using the knowledge they gain to justify their own behavior and educate *others* on what they should be doing.

The only way to benefit from lectures and courses – or any knowledge, insight or information, for that matter – is to keep in mind that what you're learning is for you, not anyone else. Be open to learning even when you don't think that the *shiur* is directly relevant to you. Resolve to pick just one good idea or suggestion and apply it to your life. Don't wait for anyone else to change before making improvements, even if you think they have a whole lot to improve on. You'll emerge a winner, and everyone around you will benefit too.

ברכת מזל טוב להר"ר יוסף געשטעטנער וב"ב שיחיו לרגל לידת הבן למזל טוב

יה"ר שיזכו הוריו לרוות ממנו רב נחת דקדושה לאורך ימים ושנים טובות

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

Firstly, I would like to thank you for your *shiurim*, which give me ongoing guidance and help within my marriage.

I would like to ask your advice regarding the following: We were B"H blessed with our first child a few months ago. Recently my mother in-law spoke to my wife and suggested that she consider asking a Rav about family planning for convenience etc. Although this might be coming from a good place, I feel that it is definitely something that interferes with a very private aspect of our marriage and is breaking an essential boundary. I am hurt by it especially since it goes against our *hashkafah* and what we are taught.

What is the correct way to go about this? Do I just brush it off and try to ignore it (although it may make an impression on my wife), or should we set a boundary before it goes too far? Also, how do we get this message across to my mother-in-law, especially as she has a strong personality?

Thank you.

Answer:

Although the question comes from an adult "child" asking for personal advice, I'd like to address the well-meaning parents of the couple first.

"Parenting" in its simple sense comes to an end at some point. While there are sources that state that if you see your married child doing something wrong you should speak up (and the truth is that the *mitzvah* of *Hochei'ach tochi'ach* applies to everyone), the Gemara in Kiddushin notes that the basic obligation of *chinuch* only applies when your children are under your influence (which, according to some sources, can include unmarried children still living at home, if they aren't open to hearing what you have to say.) While this may seem like a contradiction, there is no doubt that many aspects of parenting change once children are no longer living at home, and even when you do resolve to say something to a married child, it should never be before seriously contemplating (and getting guidance on) whether it's correct to do so and is likely to have a positive result.

Just this week someone told me that he was having a problem with his son, a *chosson*. In the father's opinion, the son wasn't preparing properly for his wedding and needed some good advice. Thankfully, the father went first to an *adam gadol*, shared the details of the situation, and asked what to do. The answer was that he should say nothing – and this was with regard to a child who wasn't even married yet.

Of course there will be times when well-chosen words can be beneficial. Oftentimes however, that's not the case, and you stand to lose more than you gain – and when in doubt it's generally not worth taking the risk. When you're dealing with a child who is still living at home, if you're being aware, you will probably notice signals from the child that show you that your approach isn't working. Until you see such signals, by all means you should be *mechanech* your child.

In your particular case, you're dealing with an adult child who's not living in your home and who has a spouse to contend with. Your job at this point is to trust him to build his own home, and to know what *not* to say.

This is especially true when dealing with something personal and sensitive like this. Your child may not object to hearing your advice on a relatively *pareve* topic such as buying a minivan instead of a car, but it's far less likely that he will take kindly to hearing your advice on something so private – and vastly less likely that his spouse will. In general, being overly involved in married children's lives can be very damaging in many different ways, and it can definitely harm their *shalom bayis* in cases where one spouse is receptive to your advice and the other isn't. Often, saying *anything* can backfire and make things worse. I've dealt with enough of these situations to know that holding back is almost always the best course of action, as the "there's nothing to lose" attitude is usually incorrect. What

a parent sees as "just a harmless suggestion" can be perceived in a totally different light by the married children and can have damaging consequences that no one could have envisioned.

Some parents take the approach that a married son remains halachically obligated to honor his parents (while it's clear in *halachah* that a married daughter's first loyalty must be to her husband) and so feel justified in imposing their opinions and guidance on the son and his wife. Others may be supporting their children financially and think that gives them a right to give (read: impose) their unasked-for advice. They may even have good suggestions to offer – but that doesn't mean that they won't cause damage all the same. Yes, your children should be respectful, but don't make it too hard for them.

What if your child really is making a big mistake and you're genuinely worried about the consequences? There are such situations. In such cases, I would advise parents to find out who their child really respects and very discreetly, and with a lot of *chochmah,* approach that person, ensuring that your child doesn't find out. Again, if you're not sure, the smartest thing may still be to keep quiet and say nothing. You can tell your child's Rav about your concerns, adding that you don't want your child to find out that you approached him. Don't tell the Rav what you would like him to tell your child; just let him know what your concern is so that if the Rav ever has an opportunity, he can bring it up with your child. Trust him to go about this in the best possible way. Aside from being a Rav, he's objective, and his understanding of the situation and what can and should be done about it may be more accurate and correct than your own. So share your concerns with him – and then *walk away*. Don't follow up. Don't call to find out if the Rav was able to do something about the issue. Drop it. Helicopter parenting over married children is bound to crash somewhere.

And let me add: Even when you can't say anything, you can and definitely should always daven for your child to make the right decisions and do the right thing. It's tragic when resentment causes people to convince themselves that they don't care. It can be easier to cope with it if you pretend to care less, but you can care, as you're human, and you can daven and reassure yourself that you're doing something that truly helps. In general, "not caring" can often give off hurtful energy to your children, and will only cause more grief and less connection. Apathy is never appreciated. Respect and consideration for a couple's space is.

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A word to the couple:

You're a married couple with parents who are getting involved. This is something I hear about so often, and in this case, it's a sensitive topic which shouldn't be addressed before consulting with *Daas Torah* to make sure that anything you implement is in accordance with *halachah* and Torah *hashkafah*. There are clear *halachic* guidelines in this area, and before following the advice of a therapist or anyone else for that matter, it's vital to first verify the *halachah,* just as you would if you were consulting a mental health professional on any issue pertaining to running your home that has clear halachic ramifications, such as whether to fast on Tisha b'Av if you always end up losing your temper when fasting.

With that said, when you get married, your primary commitment is to your spouse, even though you (unlike your wife) retain an obligation to honor your parents. Twisting in all directions in the hope of pleasing your mother, father, grandparents etc. is rarely helpful long-term and certainly not if it comes at the expense of having a harmonious marriage.

You should always be *makir tovah* to your parents and aim to make them happy whenever and however you possibly can. You must always show honor and be as respectful as humanly possible. Try not to judge them, and keep in mind that they probably don't have anything other than your welfare in mind. At the end of the day, your parents want you to be happy. They may not know how best to go about helping you to achieve that, but that is what they want. However, your commitment is to your spouse. Neglecting your spouse in order to make your parents happy will only backfire. Your marriage and your future often come first in regard to the practical decisions and way of doing things.

Sometimes when I encourage people to make sure that their loyalty to their parents doesn't negatively impact their marriage, they try to turn it into a religious issue. "What do you mean? It's a *mitzvah*! *Kibbud av v'em*! I'm not from the new generation…" Often, the source for this way of thinking isn't so much the *mitzvah* (which, as mentioned, can and should certainly be discussed responsibly with a halachic authority) as a lack of confidence. A married child who is worried about his parents' disapproval or even anger may prefer to sidestep the issue by claiming a religious obligation instead of investing the necessary energy in clarifying what needs to be addressed and communicated. Aside from getting Torah guidance, situations like these which are often tricky and sensitive require personalized guidance for specific application.

Just this week, a parent of a married child showed me some nasty text messages his son had sent him. "You always do this… Don't talk to me…" This is not the way to address a parent. *Derech eretz* and giving *kavod* are always required. You can say respectfully, "I know you mean my benefit… I might be very wrong… I'm simply finding it difficult to… and as much as I wish I could do it exactly the way you're suggesting…" You can tell your parents that, "I'll talk to my Rav about it to make sure I'm doing the right thing, as I'm really unsure." You can also add, again, very respectfully: "I would really appreciate it if in the future you allow me my space, and allow me to get guidance from my Rav, as it's hard for me to keep hearing these comments, even though I know you're saying it out of love and care." And the next day, go visit your parents, or send them some nice pictures. The specific issue doesn't have to spill over into your relationship in general.

But here's the tricky part: Sometimes your parents are right. They're older than you. They have more experience than you. They could be watching you do something very stupid and truly mean your benefit. As the one in (and emotionally involved in) the situation, you may not be aware of what's really happening or able to see all of the possible ramifications. An extreme example of this occurs when a married child is in an abusive relationship, and desperate parents (or other concerned individuals) try to alert their child to what's going on, only to be rebuffed. It's so important to consider that maybe, just maybe, others who are older, more objective, and more experienced might be seeing something you're not able to see. And your parents genuinely care about you. Take their suggestion seriously and discuss the

issue with a Rav or mentor you trust. Talking things over with a Torah authority is the only way to make sure you're doing the right thing, and such a person can also advise you on how best to address your parents.

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Now that we've discussed the question in general for parents and their married children, I'd like to address a few words to the questioner in particular:

It's important that you talk to your wife first, before taking any action, to make sure you're both on the same page and that the issue isn't coming between you and her. Don't blame her for her mother's comments or get into arguments about how wrong she is. Be understanding of her opinion even as you clarify your own. Give her a good feeling about how you're both addressing the issue, and ensure she doesn't think you care about her any less than her mother does.

With the proper communication I believe you can get her onboard with your being upfront with her mother. You'll be able to respectfully communicate in the name of both of you, that you know she means your benefit and you respect her genuine concern for her daughter and the family. Only then clarify how much it hurts you that she expressed her opinion on such a personal matter, although of course she didn't mean to intrude. Don't attack her, or debate the principle of mixing into your private life. Just tell her how it made you feel, and how much it'll be appreciated if she resists doing this in the future. Then add that, "I'll discuss it with my Rav, and I continue to get his guidance in general, so please allow us our space to ask when, how and from whom." Continue to be respectful, and don't apologize for what you said or pull back, or change your tune if the issue arises again – which it likely will, because people have a tendency to push boundaries simply to find out how firm they are. This is a sensitive issue that should remain between you and your wife, and one in which the two of you have a common and consistent message.

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I want to conclude with a few words on the actual issue of "family planning," although I can't fully cover the topic in this essay. I'm not a competent authority on this question, but I want to make a couple of points. You mentioned convenience. Convenience and family planning are not a Yiddishe concept. "Spacing children," planning the numbers of girls and boys etc. never was and never will be the Torah way. (We find in Chazal the idea of davening to have a boy, but certainly not deciding on when or how many children to have based on the dynamics of boys and girls in a family.) It's a secular idea that has seeped into our communities. The fact that people aren't embarrassed to talk about it is a terrible thing. Yes, there are times when it's okay and even required, within certain parameters – but only after consulting *Daas Torah*. A Rav may even suggest it to you if he thinks it's necessary. But it has nothing to do with convenience.

As a general piece of advice, don't doubt yourself as a parent. You have one child already, BH, but unless you have serious issues, why shouldn't you have more? Hashem created us capable of doing what the Torah outlines, and unless your situation is exceptional, you have no reason to start feeling incompetent or insecure about marching proudly forward to accomplish your life's mission to the fullest, and with pride! All those well-meaning, caring, and outspoken *shviggers* and friends who talk about this issue in public should know that it's extremely wrong to do so. Without even realizing, they are giving people a wrong perspective about having large families. And this applies even if they themselves have large families! It's well known what Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* said about the Yidden who were *moser nefesh* for Shabbos but with the attitude that *"s'iz shver tzu zein a Yid*." Many of their children were lost. Talk positively about those parents who are blessed with providing many soldiers for Hashem's army.

If you're feeling overwhelmed and want to discuss this with *Daas Torah*, by all means. Maybe you'll be advised to ease up in other areas, or even give up your job, because your first obligation is to build a family. Such questions are often about priorities, and they should definitely be discussed with your Rav. Please don't make other people feel insecure or doubt themselves.

May we all be *zocheh* to raise as many *avadim ne'emanim la'Hashem ul'Toraso* as we can, and be *zocheh* to Moshiach *bekarov*!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
EIKEV 5782

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**

To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND ANY QUESTIONS, ON THIS TOPIC OR ANY TOPIC TO RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG