

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

A GOOD EYE

When Balak's servants arrived at the home of Bilaam on a mission to persuade him to curse the Yidden, Bilaam made little pretense about his willingness to accompany them. In fact, he was all too transparent.

R' Pinchas Koritzer notes that when Balak's servants promised that he would be "greatly honored" if he complied, Bilaam responded: "Even if Balak gives me a house full of silver and gold, I cannot do anything that would transgress the word of Hashem..." Until then, no one had mentioned payment for his services, but Bilaam's greed was so great that he proved unable to hide it.

Too often, we expect those around us to understand not just what we're saying but also what we mean, which is probably what Bilaam expected too. The problem of two people speaking different "languages" and trying to get along is one that affects many types of relationships, especially marriage. People expect others to speak to them in their own "language" (or at least hope they will), and on their own terms, and it never even occurs to them that a spouse, child, parent, or colleague may be seeing or experiencing things very differently.

Miscommunication isn't just in the words people use. It starts with different experiences and interpretations. It's very common for one spouse, for instance, to complain that they are giving the other spouse "so much" and not being appreciated. But when you ask them whether the gift was tailored to the giver or the recipient, they are taken aback by the question as it's something they've never even thought about.

It's impossible to get it right all the time as one cannot see the world through another person's eyes. However, even a little effort in this direction goes a very long way. If we can learn not only to give in order to please another person, but also to receive what others give us with genuine appreciation, recognizing that they meant well even if they didn't express themselves in exactly the right way, we will make tremendous progress toward building stronger, healthier relationships.

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Parshas
Chukas - Balak
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I just listened to your class dealing with a woman who complained that her husband was wasting his nights on his phone. Thank you for your answer and for your platform in general — it's so inspiring!

I'm in a similar situation. We have been married for a number of years and have a very good life together, *baruch Hashem*. My husband is caring, smart, generous, and enjoyable to be around. He makes sure to give me whatever I need with a smile, be it money, time, advice etc. He's successful at work, *b"H*, and comes home for an hour in the early evening before going back out to learn, and then stops back at the office briefly to finish up calls and prepare for the next day.

That leaves us with a limited amount of time together, especially when all the kids want his attention. My issue is that he's always answering phone calls and voice notes. My concern is how this affects the kids. They basically see that they are not as important to him. I often see a child talking to him about his day or whatever and he's nodding to the child while answering a text. It hurts so much to see this. He helps me with the nighttime routine, which I am grateful for, but throughout it, he sits there and scrolls on his phone while the children are trying to get his attention.

How does this affect them? What kind of role model are they seeing? It's hard for me to respect him in such a state. We've discussed this numerous times, and I used to end up yelling at him a lot, but since I heard your explanation of why we should stop doing things that don't work, I have been holding back. But the issue is still there. I'm still worried about the kids' future.

I know he needs time to recharge after a day of work, and we tried making screen limits or leaving the phone in his car, but it didn't work. I feel like a broken record telling him time and again that the kids need his attention.

How do I deal with my concern that the kids feel that they're not as important to their father, or in general that they see a role model who's very much into his phone?

Thank you so much

A ANSWER

The problem you describe is extremely common. This doesn't downplay its severity. And, while it may be less excusable if a stay-at-home mother is busy on her phone instead of busy with her children at a time when they need her, the excuse that a husband's phone use is work-related is often inadequate.

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Now for the perspective. You describe your husband as "caring, smart, generous, and enjoyable to be around," and as someone who "makes sure to give me whatever I need." That's quite an impressive list of qualities and accomplishments for a husband. While spouses shouldn't be assessed by

comparison, it is worth pointing out that a minority of spouses could be described in such glowing terms. Although it is only human nature to be more focused on the things that bother us than on the things that we're happy with, this is an aspect of human nature that we need to work to overcome.

Your husband, like all of us, is made up of a mixture of different traits and attributes. He supports his family with many hours of long work and he learns every evening. He clearly spends enough time with you for you to describe your life with him as "very good." And yet, you sum him up as a poor role model for your children due to a single aspect of his behavior that disturbs you greatly.

Furthermore, if I may take notice, you don't explain why your husband leaves the office early only to return later, which sounds like an inconvenient arrangement for him. It appears from what you write that he does so in order to make time for learning and his children. True, that time with his children is not spent in the way you wish it was. But he is there when he has reason to still be at the office.

Again, I'm not making light of the widespread problem of parents being absorbed in their phones when their children are trying to interact with them. You're right to be concerned and to worry that your children feel that they come second. On the other hand, do you actually know that your children feel that way? Could it be that they see a father who comes home early from work to spend some time with them, even though that means he has to go back to the office late at night to finish off?

And if they don't, might it be the case that if you were to stress that to them, they would come to see him in a different light?

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It's understandable that you'd like your husband to be a wonderful role model for your children. However, all you can really control is the kind of role model *you* are. You can decide to model perfection to your children, while stressing all the ways in which your husband doesn't measure up. Or you can model perfection and help your children to see all their father's positive attributes.

You write that it's hard to respect your husband "in such a state." Respecting people is hard, as we tend to notice their flaws more than their sparkle. Respecting and honoring a husband go somewhat hand in hand, and even when difficult, that doesn't make it optional. It's an obligation, and certainly in such a case where a husband is fulfilling all his basic obligations and more.

And there are also side benefits from being respectful. While there are no magic buttons we can press to get other people to change their behavior, when people feel respected, appreciated, and liked, they tend to be more receptive to requests to accommodate others.

Let's go back to how you describe your husband, as someone who is caring, smart, generous, and enjoyable to be around. Does he know you feel that way about him? Does he realize how much you appreciate that he "gives me whatever I need"?

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Communication is key to solving problems, but before we start to communicate, we need to set the scene. Even the most carefully crafted words will have little impact if the tone of voice is all wrong. Similarly, even the perfect script will fail to make an impression if the other person senses that he's being manipulated.

If your husband feels genuinely respected for all the good that he does, it's far more likely that he will take you seriously when you try to talk about the one area in which you see room for improvement.

You've tried yelling, and unsurprisingly, that hasn't worked. There are many other things you can try, once you've laid the foundations for good communication. In general, it's most productive to focus on your own feelings rather than what the other person is getting wrong. Most people respond to criticism with defensiveness, not by meekly admitting that they are totally at fault. And, most people are very easily disarmed when someone approaches them with a request and tells them how much they would appreciate it if they could try to be more accommodating.

I would suggest that when you talk to your husband, you start by acknowledging (as you admit in your letter) that he needs time to recharge. Make it clear

that you understand this and that you want to ensure he gets that time to unwind. Then gently add how much it would mean to you if he could, for example, give the children a quarter of an hour of his undivided attention, with no phone in sight.

You can even add that perhaps you're overly sensitive on the point, and that it's possible the children really don't mind him being on the phone so much. All the same, it would mean so much to you if he could put it away just for a short time each evening, during this special time that he makes for his family.

It could also help for you to tell him that you know it's a challenge for every parent to spend real quality time with their children, and that you find it hard sometimes as well. Ask him what he enjoys doing with the children — perhaps he can think of another or additional way to spend time with them aside from during the bedtime routine. In this way, you're opening up the possibility for him to admit that he would like to be more involved with them and less absorbed with his business obligations.

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As with any ongoing issue, don't expect overnight changes even if you do everything "right." It sounds like your husband has a job that involves a lot of responsibility and doesn't allow him to make abrupt or drastic changes. He may also be the kind of person who finds it hard to make conversation with young children, and feels that he's doing his bit simply by listening — which could even be true.

All the same, notice anything he does differently and compliment him and tell him how much it means to you and the children. Don't worry that praising someone and showing appreciation for small changes will prompt them to stop there. Usually, the opposite is the case — people will exert themselves far more when their efforts are noted and appreciated.

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But it's also possible that nothing will change. Your husband might simply tell you that while he'd love to do things differently, at this stage of life he's already doing the best he can. Or, he might promise to try and make changes and still fall short. You might be best off accepting that.

Accepting that your husband isn't perfect in this area is hard but totally possible, as long as you keep your focus on the bigger picture. Front and center should be all his positive attributes, while the phone issue stays in a corner, not harped on constantly. Sometimes, simply setting a disturbing issue to one side and admitting that one is powerless to change it can itself work wonders. The tension levels go down and space opens up to not only focus on the positive but also to find creative ways of dealing with what seemed like insurmountable difficulties.

Remember what you wrote — that you have a "very good life" with your husband. Don't let this one issue derail everything. And in general, even with bigger issues, it's important that a *chinuch* issue doesn't become a *shalom bayis* issue and vice versa. Join forces with your husband to bring up your children in the best possible way so that you can all flourish.



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