

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

THERAPY OR BITACHON?

Before sending Avraham Avinu to Eretz Yisrael, Hashem not only gave him blessings, but also added that those who bless him will in turn be blessed: "And I will bless those who bless you; and the one who curses you I will curse..." *Ma'ayanah Shel Torah* quotes R' Manish Halevi who notes that it would seem to be more appropriate for the *passuk* to read, "If someone blesses you, I will bless them..." mentioning the cause before the effect.

R' Manish then explains that while it may appear to us that the cause is a person's blessing and the effect is Hashem's blessing, the truth is that all blessing originates with Hashem. It is Hashem Who desires to bestow goodness upon us at all times, and therefore, when someone blesses a Yid, they become a conduit for Hashem's blessing, not the source of it.

With regard to curses, however, the source of evil in the world is man's *bechirah* to choose badly. This is why the *passuk* continues "...and the one who curses you, I will curse." In this case, the person cursing is the source of evil, not Hashem.

We ask Hashem for only good things to happen, but when things don't go as we would like them to, we need to examine ourselves rather than doubt Hashem. And when they do go as we wish, and we are able to surmount difficulties and find solutions to problems in our lives and our relationships, we need to remember that Hashem is the source of all blessing, whether the conduit is a Torah class, a mentor or consultant, the *zechus* of a *mitzvah*, or anything else.

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Parshas
Lech Lecha
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

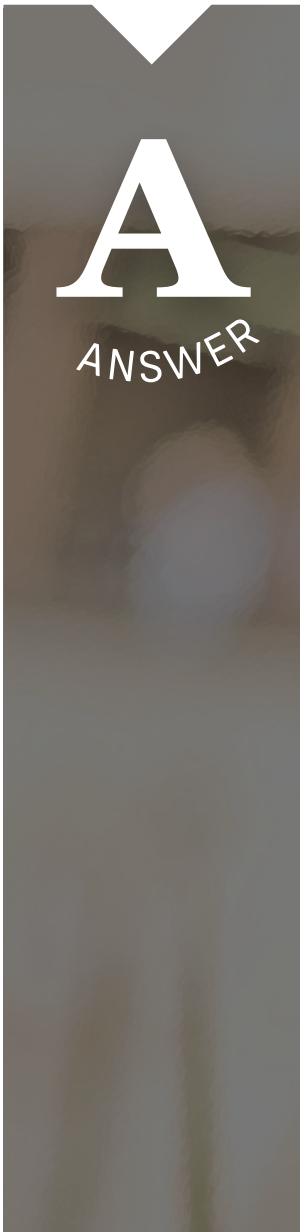
I really appreciate your *shiurim* — aside from being so helpful and so full of *emes*, they help me get back on track when I get triggered and bring me to solid ground.

I have a question. *Baruch Hashem* I have beautiful *shalom bayis* but we had a disagreement and we both agreed that you'd be the right address for this question.

Growing up, my siblings and I were physically abused and to this day I still get triggered even though it's years later (such as when I see a stranger screaming uncontrollably or someone else's child out of control and hurting those around them). I would like to try to overcome these triggers but we disagree on the method. My husband holds the way to overcome traumatic pasts is to learn *Chovos Halevavos Sha'ar Habitachon* and that if you learn that everything is from Hashem, this will lower the intensity of the trauma and you will eventually stop getting triggered. I hold that this won't help for the past and that I need therapy like IFS or DNMS.

Which one would you advise? I already told my husband that you are probably going to say both.

Thanks



I'm very sorry to hear that your childhood experiences are having an ongoing impact on your life. Despite the challenges of your upbringing, it is heartening to see that you have built a happy marriage.

It's also encouraging that you and your husband seem to be disagreeing in a respectful manner, with both of you looking for solutions rather than excuses, and refraining from attacking one another. It looks like you're basically on the same page about the need to address the events of the past in some way.

In general, it's to be expected that you have different views on the best way to go about this, not only because you're two separate people, but also because you perceive the problem differently. You went through traumatic events and will never be able to adequately portray them to someone who hasn't. Interestingly, even though your husband didn't experience what you did, his perspective as someone married to a spouse who is affected by trauma is also somewhat unique. It's quite possible that you can't fully understand his way of seeing things either.

Beyond that, there's so much disagreement, even among the "professional" class of therapists etc., over the best way to address trauma in general. Many people fall into a trap of seeing their depression, anxiety, OCD and so forth as an integral part of who they are. They settle into a life of victimhood, self-pity, and excuses for never even attempting to dig themselves out and actualizing their potential. Others invest their lives in "overcoming" issues that may not be solvable and healing from experiences that they refuse to forget, instead of learning to properly manage their memories and live successfully in the present. Sadly, there are often many people who, with the best of intentions and under the guise of helping and caring, end up encouraging these misguided choices.

It's wonderful that you are looking for a way to move past the past. As you predicted in your letter, I will recommend both strategies you mention — or rather, I don't see any contradiction between them, as long as you keep in mind that both the illness and the healing are from Hashem. Therapy is simply one form of hishtadlus, and for many of us, it can be an important part of addressing the challenges we face in life. At the same time, your husband isn't wrong that strengthening your

bitachon in Hashem via learning *Chovos Halevavos* (or any other *sefer* that appeals to you) can potentially heal you from your trauma. *Bitachon* is something we all need, in every area of life, and only good can come of embracing it.

The debate over what the healing will look like when we strengthen our *bitachon* is an old and unsettled one. Very ancient sources support the idea that someone who puts his total trust in Hashem will be provided with all his needs. Other sources suggest that someone who puts his total trust in Hashem will come to perceive his situation as fulfilling all his needs, even though objectively speaking, he may still be a pauper, or childless, or sick, and so forth. Either way, either outcome is one of tranquility and very far from being in a state of confusion, doubt, or anger at Hashem and one's lot in life. Furthermore, this tranquility is something that only *bitachon* can give us. No one would dare to claim that even the best, most successful therapy gives a person that sense of tranquility and reliance that someone who has achieved proper *bitachon* can attain.

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Nonetheless, acquiring *bitachon* is hard work. While therapy usually does (and should) involve a degree of effort, strengthening our *bitachon* involves constant struggle and brings us up against challenge after challenge. It's understandable that, just as most of us don't resolve to develop our *bitachon* to such a degree that we no longer go out to work for a livelihood, so too most of us aren't always willing to put in the necessary hard work to resolve traumas via *bitachon* alone. Some would even say that we are required to use "normal, human" methods of healing in addition to enhancing our trust in Hashem.

From your letter, it sounds like your husband doesn't object to therapy in principle; he just believes that ideally, it shouldn't be necessary. This is a valid position to hold and you should acknowledge that, and reassure him that you are trying to strengthen your *bitachon*, both in this area and in all other areas of life. Then, you can add that it's also valid to hold that *hishtadlus* is permitted, alongside learning *sifrei bitachon*, and that you would very much like to try a combined approach.

It could be, however, that your husband objects to the particular type of therapy you'd like try to try (you mention IFS—internal family systems, and DNMS—developmental needs meeting strategy), either because he feels they aren't effective, or because he believes they aren't compatible with Torah *hashkafah*.

Regarding whether they are effective, I cannot advise you. I personally believe that often, therapies promise more than they deliver, and it's important to know what to expect, as unrealistic expectations can keep people in therapy for longer than necessary. Regarding the question of whether a certain form of therapy is compatible or conflicts with Torah, this should be presented to your family's Da'as Torah. It is important to clarify this, as there really are forms of therapy that are not in line with Torah *hashkafah*. Furthermore, even if the practice is "kosher," it's crucial to find a practitioner who is *ehrlich* and a *yarei Shamayim*. The outcome of being guided and mentored by someone lacking the values and sensitivities of an *ehrliche Yid* can often be disastrous, *R"l*.

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Your husband's objections could also be based on the cost. Buying a copy of *Chovos Halevavos* will set you back a few dollars. Therapy is expensive — extremely so.

Even "just a few months" of therapy can cost thousands of dollars. Before anyone starts a course of therapy, they should ask the person how many sessions they think will be needed. The answer usually ranges between three months and a year. Therapists rarely tell someone at the outset that resolving a problem will require years of therapy, since hearing this may discourage the person from seeking help at all. The person may feel that the cost of years of treatment is prohibitive or question why a competent therapist would need so long to help resolve the problem.

In practice, however, many people do end up in therapy for years. Why? Therapists will often explain that they discovered unexpected issues or that the problem goes deeper than they originally thought. To which one might reasonably ask, "Am I your first-ever client? Has this never happened to you before?" Of course, like anyone providing a paid service, therapists also have a financial interest in clients continuing treatment. This doesn't mean they deliberately prolong therapy, but since most people's lives are complicated, there will almost always be additional issues to explore. The question is whether continuing to explore them is actually helpful.

In too many cases I've encountered, people who entered therapy for a specific reason end up involving a therapist in virtually every area of their life, regardless of whether the therapist is actually qualified to deal with *shalom bayis* or health or *chinuch* issues, and so forth. Yes, I know "everything is linked" to a certain degree, but if someone goes to therapy to learn to overcome childhood trauma and they end up discussing their marriage, they should stop and consider whether they would have, *l'chatchilah*, chosen this particular therapist to deal with *shalom bayis* issues. And that's aside from knowing how to assess if the therapy and advice is actually helping their *shalom bayis*.

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Following a recent class in which I discussed this topic, I received feedback from several people who were offended by what they understood as my discouraging people from

seeking therapy. Interestingly, much of that feedback came from people who were themselves currently in therapy. I apologized for having offended anyone, and in a follow-up class, I invited listeners to share experiences of emerging from therapy feeling happier, healthier, and better equipped to manage their lives. Surprisingly, I received almost no feedback of that kind. Of course, this doesn't prove anything, and I know people who have benefited tremendously from professional help. Nevertheless, I find it noteworthy how much we hear about people undergoing therapy and making progress, compared to how little we hear about people who have actually achieved the results they originally hoped for.

Over the years, I have noticed an important distinction. When someone seeks help for a particular difficulty, and the treatment remains focused on addressing that specific issue, the results can be very encouraging. This is why I believe that anyone seriously considering therapy should have a reasonably clear understanding of the problem, what they hope to accomplish, and how they will determine whether the treatment is actually helping.

My concerns are greater when goals are hazy, either because the person entered therapy with nothing more in mind than becoming "happier, healthier, and more emotionally secure," or because they were encouraged by the therapist to broaden their scope and address not only other, apparently unrelated issues but also their relationships with significant others in their lives. This can lead to a never-ending spiral of "new discoveries and insights," with no clearly defined goal or end in sight. It can also draw parents, children, and spouses into the process, with everyone expected to accommodate the "healing" relative, whose inappropriate behavior is increasingly seen as something to understand and excuse rather than something that needs to change.



Of course, some people have complex issues that genuinely require extensive treatment, and I am not suggesting that such treatment is unnecessary or ineffective. But I do believe we need to be more cautious about accepting the notion that the more issues we uncover and the more deeply we explore them, the more progress we are necessarily making. Fixing the past (assuming that is even possible) doesn't necessarily translate into living a happy life in the present.

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You didn't ask for my personal opinion on which form of therapy could help you best, but I'll take the liberty of sharing one thought. From my experience with various approaches, I would encourage you to look for something relatively gentle, practical, and focused on the specific difficulty you're trying to overcome. EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques), for example, is one approach I'm familiar with that I consider relatively safe and generally compatible with Torah *hashkafah*. I mention it as an example rather than a specific recommendation. Understanding every emotional block or past trauma is not always necessary in order to move forward. What you need, and thankfully seem to be looking for, is something that will help you manage those difficulties and focus on building a better future, rather than remaining caught up in the past.

Aside from that, all of us need more *emunah* and *bitachon* even if we aren't seeking to overcome specific challenges. Therapy isn't going to help us trust Hashem to run our lives in the best way possible, or to come to terms not only with what happened but with the fact that it had to happen, for reasons we can't fathom in this world.

B'ezras Hashem you and your husband will be able to work through your differences and find solutions that work for both of you so that you can build your lives together to the fullest.

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