RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

THE POWER OF THE HAPPY SPOUSE

This week's *parshah* begins with Yehuda approaching Yosef and making a request: *"Bi adoni, yedaber na avdecha davar be'aznei adoni ve'al yichar apcha be'avdecha* – please, my lord, let your servant speak into your ears and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant." The Divrei Yisrael explains that it appears that Yehuda wants to tell the viceroy something in confidence, but at the same time, he is afraid that he may become angry at what he hears.

What was Yehuda's secret? He wanted to share the important lesson he learned from his encounters with Tamar – how he had been convinced that she was in the wrong and deserved to be killed, until the briefest of comments from her made him realize that it was actually *he* who was in the wrong. Perhaps, Yehuda was hinting, the same could be applied to the present situation, and the viceroy could reconsider and see that the brothers were not as wrong as he thought. (Ironically, it was actually Yehuda who ended up learning that lesson again with the two words: "Ani Yosef"!)

Sometimes, when we're convinced that our own perception of a situation is accurate, we can also apply this lesson as we entertain the possibility, even just for a moment, that perhaps a friend or spouse isn't entirely in the wrong. Of course, this is far easier said than done because people are always subjective, but many times, just the acknowledgement of a doubt can be enough to shift the perspective and dissolve a lot of anger.

That said, a person should most definitely not constantly take the full blame for everything that goes wrong. Being overly self-critical is not helpful. However, there is usually room to consider what could have been done differently even when the other person was in the wrong. Maybe the situation could have been avoided. Maybe you could have reacted differently. Right and wrong aside, each of us is responsible for our own actions and reactions.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF
הרה"ח ר' שלום דובער בן הרה"ח ר' יצחק ז"ל קאלאדני
נפטר ה' טבת תשע"ט לפ"ק ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.
שהשאיר אחריו דורות ישרים ומבורכים זרע ברך ה' לשם ולתפארת
SPONSORED BY HIS FAMILY WHO CONTINUES HIS LEGACY WITH PRIDE

QUESTION

HELLO RABBI GRUEN,

First of all, thanks for all your clarity in your weekly *shiurim*, they help me a lot.

I'm writing now as I am very upset. I am a powerful woman, although I'm kind and always happy. Even my tone of voice is basically positive. Yet every day is a struggle for me because I have to deal with my husband's anger and negative comments. His tone of voice is negativity itself. Right now he got upset and his anger is blown up out of all proportion. He acts like a little child while I am sitting on the couch and crying. Why isn't my husband being supportive and acting like a man by showing love and affection when something isn't going his way?

I sometimes feel cheated in my marriage. A happy man can make such a happy home, but it doesn't work when only one party, me, is the one who's trying.

Please, if you can tell me anything to calm me, as this is really getting to me. I'm having creepy thoughts about how to get out of this.

Thanks in advance!

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Firstly, I want to commend you for starting out by stating that you're upset. Some people don't realize just how upset they are, and being aware of one's frame of mind is so important, because we interpret situations through the lens of our emotions. Sometimes, we only recognize our feelings in hindsight, but even then it's helpful to understand that we judge situations based on emotions as well as plain facts. If you're jotting down your thoughts about something while you're upset, whether in an email to someone (like here) or in a journal, just make sure you also note the way you're feeling at the time, so that when you read it later you don't convince yourself that this is the only way to understand what was going on.

Another thing I would like to note before getting to your question in detail is that while in general, I try only to address the person writing the question, anyone who is generally negative, who screams, or walks around with an angry face should realize that while he or she may be justified, behaving in this way can destroy a home. If you're raising your voice, picking on things, or creating arguments, *even if you're right*, you are affecting your family and your home in ways that you would rather avoid.

Nobody wants to live with someone who's negative and angry, regardless of the causes.

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Now to your question: It would be wonderful if your spouse would make your home a happy place to be. And you may very well be right that your husband is having a negative effect on the atmosphere in your home. Building a happy home should be a joint effort and nobody should rely on someone else to do the work. The question is, however: What can *you* do to get your husband to join you in your effort? (And of course the same applies to men who feel this way about their wives.) While you aren't responsible for your husband's behavior, there's probably still a lot you can do to affect it. As I often remind people:

Even if you aren't part of the problem, you can still be part of the solution! So while I truly understand that you may not be at fault for what's going on in your home, and that you are sadly feeling the victim of someone else's shortcomings, please allow me to suggest how you can still have a part in rectifying the situation and seeing things change for the better, without waiting for someone else to make those changes first.

Let me explain what being part of the solution might mean in your case. First of all, it means working on trying to keep your equilibrium even when your husband may be losing his. This can be a real challenge and it's normal to get thrown off-balance in such situations, but even if you only succeed partially, that's still a big step.

Here's a cute anecdote that might help clarify my point. A certain person had been going to see Rabbi Dr. Twersky for therapy for some time, and at their last session, he asked Dr. Twersky if as a farewell gesture he could ask a personal question. After being given permission to do so, he continued: During many of their sessions, the man had noticed the doctor open a drawer, look inside for a moment, and then close the drawer again. What was that all about?

Dr. Twersky replied that often, while his clients were speaking, he found himself thinking about his own challenges in the same areas, which threw him off balance as he became too emotionally involved. Whenever that happened, he opened his drawer and read to himself a message he placed there specifically for such moments: "The patient is on the other side of the table." This got him back on track.

Using such wording would be terrible when referring to a spouse, but in general it is brilliant advice. When you're dealing with someone who's unstable, it can be helpful to brace yourself and say, "This is his issue." That doesn't mean that you don't care about the situation, or that you've decided that the person you're dealing with is crazy. But it does mean that you can avoid getting sucked into it, because it really may not be about you.

When you internalize this idea, that alone can make things a little easier. . In difficult moments, remind yourself that his work is *his* work, and that, as you write, you're a powerful woman. Know that you're strong enough not to be thrown off-balance by something someone says to you. Be *mechazek* yourself as you tell yourself that you're strong enough to pull through this moment, just as you've done at other times. Don't be dependent on the other person recovering his balance before you restore your own.

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As I noted above, this is much easier said than done. However, simply being ready to try can make so much difference. And when we do try and distance ourselves emotionally from a "scene," we often see things in a different light. Once we take a step out of the picture, we often see echoes of ourselves in what we're watching, and are forced to admit that we have similar *middos* challenges.

Although it's tempting at such times to tell ourselves, "Yes, but he's so much worse…" it's important to realize that people have an inborn tendency to justify their own behavior, even when they do *exactly* the same thing as someone else! For example, during a *shiur*, a certain rav quoted a Gemara on a specific page. A young boy interrupted and claimed it was on the page before. The rav was pretty sure he was right, but in order to avoid interrupting the *shiur* he simply said, "Nu, off by one page, not so bad." After the *shiur*, the rav checked and saw he really had been right. He called the boy over to tell him, and the boy responded, "Nu, off by one page, not so bad." He clearly didn't feel that *his own* mistake warranted being called out… It's important to be as tolerant of someone else as you are of yourself, *even* when they're wrong.

It's like the anecdote of the man who told his friend about the hard day he had; he fell down the stairs… lost his wallet… failed at his job… To each catastrophe his friend responded, "Pretty bad, but not the worst thing that could happen." Finally the man got fed up and said, "So tell me, what *could* be worse?"

"It could have happened to *me*," his friend replied.

Chazal teach that, *"Ein adam ro'eh nigai atzmo"* – which *seforim* explain as meaning that a person doesn't see his own shortcomings. But it's more than that, for even when we *are* aware of our shortcomings, we're tolerant of them, even though we're critical of others with the exact same issues. We each have our own things to work on.

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I once heard from a Sefardi *mekubal* that *shalom bayis* is much more about *chochmah* than about *avodas hamiddos*. A smart person knows how to avoid certain situations and making certain mistakes. The wisdom is in thinking ahead to see what may result from acting or responding in a certain way. *Sefer Shmuel twice* mentions an *isha chachamah*, and in both cases the reference is to making peace. And as we know, *"Chochmas nashim bansah baisah."*

You're not responsible for someone else's bad *middos*. You are not responsible for preventing your husband from getting angry. But there may very well be things that you *can* do to prevent reaching such a situation. Are there triggers that you can avoid? You don't *have* to, but you may *want* to. Can you figure out which situations throw him off? Maybe he's more likely to explode when he's hungry; maybe there are certain expressions you use (even if there's nothing actually wrong with your words) that he's especially sensitive to. Be smart and learn how to treat your husband in the way that he needs to be treated. (Of course, once again, the same is true for husbands regarding their wives.)

The Alshich teaches this concept from a *passuk* in *Mishlei*, *"Ketzar apayim yaaseh iveles, ve'ish mizimos yisanei* – An impatient man commits folly; a man of intrigues will be hated." Often, when someone does something wrong to another person, Hashem holds the person accountable not only for the wrongdoing but also for the angry or destructive reaction of the other person, because the perpetrator should and could have known that the victim would respond as he did. I hope it's clear and obvious that my intention is not to apportion blame (which isn't helpful) but simply to provide solutions that will benefit everyone.

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One last point about communication in charged situations: In a challenging moment, don't talk logic. Don't try to prove how wrong or unfair he is. It won't work and it can make things even worse.

Everyone has work to do. We're all on a journey. Tolerating a spouse's shortcomings is part of our life's work. Intolerable situations do exist, but general daily difficulties do need to be tolerated and dealt with. That's part of succeeding in a relationship. Speak to someone knowledgeable to guide you and you can ultimately achieve the calm and happy home you're working towards. It really is true that, *"Chochmas nashim bansah baisah."* In most situations, when we're willing to put in the effort, you can really build a beautiful home.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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