

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

HELP! MY SPOUSE ISN'T PERFECT

Parshas Bamidbar opens with Hashem counting Am Yisrael, not for the first time. Rashi tells us that this is one of the signs of Hashem's great love for us, that He counts us "every hour." How is this constant counting a sign of love?

The Rebbe R' Yitzchok Eizik of Zidichov (in his introduction to the *sefer Tefillah l'Moshe*) explains that each and every Yid has his "good hours" when he's doing exactly as he should, in the best possible way. It could be that for the rest of the day, he's just an average person, sometimes slipping, sometimes struggling. But catch him at his right "hour" and you'll find a *tzaddik*. Therefore Hashem keeps counting Yidden, so as to catch them in their good hour.

If Hashem focuses on the good points in each of us, even though we have our less good points too, then surely that's what we should be doing for one another. Too often, we look at ourselves and see our good hours, identifying with them and brushing over the times when we slipped — and when we look at other people, the process is reversed as we judge people according to their less-than-good hours and overlook those precious minutes and hours when they were getting it right. Instead, we need to see others in the best light as well.

We should remember the famous words from the *tefillah* of the Rebbe R' Meilech of Lizhensk: "...may we see the *ma'alos* of other people and not their failings..." We know others have failings, just as we have. But we ask Hashem to keep our focus on other people's strong points, as this is the way to uplift them.

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Parshas **Bamidbar**

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your very insightful, practical, and relatable *shiurim*. My husband and I greatly enjoy listening to them and discussing them. They provide us with a platform to discuss many topics and improve our *shalom bayis*.

My husband has amazing *yiras Shamayim*. I see it in the way he keeps *halachah*, follows *Daas Torah*, and feels good with himself when he is doing *ratzon Hashem* (he also has a healthy dose of Jewish guilt). He is an incredible husband and takes great care of me and our children. He is *b"H* very happy in full-time learning and makes sure to *daven Minchah* and *Ma'ariv* with a *minyan*.

The one area that my husband struggles with (which I noticed right after we got married) is going to *Shacharis*. To his credit he makes sure to put on *tefillin* every day and *davens* at home.

When we were newly married I had a hard time with it especially as my father almost never misses *Shacharis* (though my brothers do plenty) and I harbored resentment towards him but never said anything outright. I quickly learned that this was not beneficial to our marriage and started looking for positive ways to encourage him to go such as asking him to have coffee with me early in the morning (once he was up he went to *Shacharis*) or giving him a lot of encouragement and positive feedback when he did go (acknowledging that I know it's so hard for him and that I admire him for going, and making sure he knows that I don't think he is a failure when he doesn't go).

Since then, I got used to him not going, which is good because there really are no hard feelings or embarrassment and I have no trouble seeing his many positive traits.

These days, *b"H* we have children and I work and life is busy. I don't have the time or energy to think of creative ways to coax my husband into going to *Shacharis*, and I guess it has become less of a priority to help him go. On the rare occasion that he does go he doesn't get the same enthusiastic positive feedback that he used to and sometimes I feel resentment because that usually happens on a Friday or Shabbos and I think to myself that if he isn't going to *Shacharis* anyway then if he's up early he should watch the kids so that I can sleep.

My job requires him to take the kids to school and some mornings, this makes the only *Shacharis* option for him the *neitz minyan*. When we made this arrangement it was with the unspoken acceptance that "You don't go to *Shacharis* anyway, so..."

I do however carry guilt for 1) becoming numb to the value of him going and whether he goes, 2) not encouraging him to go, 3) leading a lifestyle that doesn't allow him to go, 4) reaching the point where I resent him sometimes for going.

What is (and isn't) my responsibility in this situation? What can I do to help myself and my guilt? And, of course, is there anything I can do to help him?

Thank you so much

A ANSWER

I'm glad that my *shiurim* are giving you the ability to discuss important topics in a natural and pleasant way. It seems that they offer an opening to talk about things that you might have found it hard to bring up otherwise. Communication is one of the foundations of married life, and discussing important matters at the right time, in the right way, is essential.

Another foundation for any successful relationship is seeing the good in another person, and it's wonderful that, although you have an issue troubling you enough to write for advice, you introduce your husband with an extensive list of his positive qualities. It's so important for people to remember that even if a person may have one noticeable failing, that doesn't detract from the positive aspects of their personality and all the good things they do.

Seeing the good doesn't mean that we overlook issues that need addressing. When we do address them, however, it should be while keeping an image of the "whole person" in our mind's eye. Just as we wouldn't want to be identified as "the person who struggles with x," we shouldn't label others as problematic in general.

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Among your husband's positive qualities you list "Jewish guilt." That's something people talk about a lot, with some seeing it as a good thing and others less so. We often tend to contrast guilt with complacency — if someone is doing something wrong, they either feel guilty about it (which should lead to improvement) or they don't (and they'll carry on doing it). In fact, guilt is more nuanced than this, and it's important to classify it correctly.

Early *sefarim* categorize feelings of remorse and guilt as either *atzvus* or *merirus*. *Atzvus* is the result of the kind of guilt we don't want to have. More than sadness, it's depression over where we've gone wrong that leads us to give up on ourselves. *Merirus*, usually translated as "bitterness," is more like regret over where we've gone wrong that leads to a determination to do better. It can be hard to distinguish between the two unless we look at the outcome — so that's how we know whether our "Jewish guilt" is something to welcome or drive away.

In your husband's case, it's not entirely clear whether his guilty feelings are doing him a service. It appears from your letter that he rarely *davens Shacharis* with a *minyan*, which some would interpret as him not caring one way or another. It certainly can seem that way.

Chazal tell us that when a person repeats a wrongdoing, it becomes "like it's permitted" to him. That doesn't mean that he literally thinks it's permitted. And, given that your husband is learning full-time and *davening* the other two *tefillos* with a *minyan*, you can assume that he doesn't actually think that missing *Shacharis* in *shul* is okay. What Chazal mean is that it becomes so much easier to keep going down the wrong path, and very hard to turn around and change one's ways.

And it really is very hard indeed. It's a challenge that you can't relate to, firstly, because you're a woman and women don't have the *mitzvah* of *davening* with a *minyan* and therefore also lack the *yetzer hara* not to; and secondly, because you're not your husband. It's so unhelpful to compare him to your father because your father has his *nisyonos* in other areas. You can't even compare him to your brothers, who seem to have similar challenges, because no two people are completely alike. And, even if it looks like they are failing in similar ways, only Hashem knows how much each person is trying to overcome a challenge, and every bit of effort, even if it doesn't have a positive outcome, is taken into account.

This is your husband's challenge, not yours.

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Does that mean that it shouldn't concern you? Some may suggest so. Many encourage a husband or a wife to "stop meddling" in their spouse's business and take a step back and focus on their own shortcomings. At the other extreme are those who encourage a husband or wife (usually the wife) to be an "*ishah kesheirah*" who "builds up" her husband and points him in the right direction, supporting and assisting and pushing. Which approach is right?

If you would ask the Rambam, he would say: neither. In almost every area in life, the middle path is the right one to take. Let's see how this applies to you and anyone else in a similar situation.

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You started with one extreme approach: adopting your husband as your project. You got married to someone who isn't perfect, which makes you feel very resentful and uncomfortable. (Your husband might feel the same way about you, but don't let that concern you.) It's now your responsibility to fix him; otherwise, he might remain imperfect forever, which is unthinkable, and it will all be your fault.

So, you pester him, and berate him, and nag him, and sometimes you do it "nicely" by waking him up with a smile and a fresh cup of coffee, hoping the aroma will tempt him out of bed. When he does get up early and goes out to shul, you congratulate him much as one would compliment a five-year-old, and he doesn't have to be super-perceptive to know that when you tell him, "Amazing! I'm so proud of you!" what you really mean is, "You better do it again tomorrow, and forever more, or else."

There are wives, and husbands, who do this, with largely predictable results. In fact, one can imagine the overall effect on the relationship. People just don't like being controlled. They tend to respond badly to being told that being anything less than perfect is not okay. And even if a spouse does seem to improve for a short while, if they're only doing it to please someone else, and they don't accept responsibility for themselves but let someone else carry the burden, changes aren't likely to last.

But the other extreme doesn't usually have a happy ending either. This is the approach that many adopt when all their efforts at controlling fail. In a nutshell, it's despairing of one's spouse entirely and "washing one's hands" of them. "He's just a failure — it's not my problem. I'll try to put it out of my mind."

This attitude is wrong for so many reasons. Even if it wasn't your husband we're talking about, but instead a Yid in China, it would still be wrong, because we should care about every Yid and how he's doing. How much more so when it concerns one's spouse, the person we are supposed to love

and cherish more than anyone else, simply because we are married to them.

Sometimes, people think that in order to avoid falling into the trap of codependency, of feeling responsible for how someone else acts and feels, they need to actually become apathetic toward them. This can even lead to enabling the person to continue down whatever damaging path they're on — not just failing to reach out a helping hand, but actually encouraging them to keep on going. When you and your husband set a daily schedule that barely leaves him the option of *davening Shacharis* with a *minyan*, that's effectively what you did.

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The best path to take, for you and anyone else with a spouse who isn't perfect, is somewhere between these two extremes. It's a path of caring without controlling, of accepting without judging, of encouraging without nagging, and praising without manipulating. It may sound complicated but it really isn't, once you start from the right space.

This is fundamentally your husband's problem, but you care about his welfare because he's your husband, so of course you want to help him overcome this struggle. You can't "make" him do anything and if he doesn't change, that's not your fault, but if there's something you can do to help, offer to do it.

And all the while, you keep reminding yourself that he's not perfect and nor are you. He has many wonderful points and some less-than-wonderful ones, and so do you. Just as he can't relate to the areas in which you struggle, you can't relate to the areas where he slips. Just as he knows nothing about all the times when you pushed yourself to do something you knew had to be done, or tried not to speak *lashon hara* (and ended up saying something wrong and regretting it), you know nothing about all the times he's tried to get up earlier and just not managed to. Nor do you know about the resolutions he's made to do better (because he didn't succeed in following through). And certainly not of the times he's *davened* that Hashem should help him overcome this *nisayon* while continuing to feel terrible about his failures.



So, with all this in mind, choose a calm moment and ask to discuss the morning routine with him. You need to talk to him about the practical side of things, given that you've unintentionally fallen into a pattern that reinforces the issue instead of helping him to overcome it. Admit this and apologize, acknowledging that you have been part of the problem and stressing that you regret this and want to become part of the solution. Then, ask him what you both can do to give him back his mornings; show willingness to meet him at least halfway.

You need to tread carefully because this isn't about you pressuring him to change, but rather, about creating the possibility for him to do so. Therefore, you shouldn't mention or even hint that the ideal outcome for you is that he'll start *davening Shacharis* with a *minyan*.

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You tried the tactic of praising him for each time he overcame his *nisayon* and that's great, in general. It's understandable that you stopped doing that, as it's hard to maintain an approach when one doesn't see results, but if you can shift your focus from the specific goal you have in mind to the more general goal of showing love and appreciation for your husband, you may find it a lot easier to offer genuine praise with no strings attached.

Your husband is so much more than this issue, as you clearly realize. Of course you care when you see him doing something that hurts his *neshamah*, even if you think you came to terms with it — and that's as it should be.

Not caring about someone else is a terrible thing to aim for and can only do harm. Taking responsibility for perfecting someone else is also not the way to go, aside from being impossible. Building together and helping each other to focus on the good and find ways to fix what needs fixing is the golden middle path that we need to tread.

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
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Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org