

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

NOT EVEN WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

This week's *parshah* includes the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim*: "*Ish aviv ve'imo tira'u*—A man shall revere his father and his mother." The Ksav Sofer, highlighting the Torah's use of the word "*ish*—a man" to describe the child in this parent-child relationship, notes that the *mitzvah* of respecting one's parents applies not only when a person is young and in need of his parents to provide his physical needs, but also when he is grown-up and no longer needs their help.

When discussing this *mitzvah*, the Sefer Hachinuch stresses how it is based largely on gratitude for everything one's parents have done for him and that the obligation of gratitude is never fully repaid. All the same, it's not uncommon for children to feel that they have "outgrown" their parents and no longer need not only their cooked meals but also their advice. The Ksav Sofer warns us that this is a mistake, as a person must look up to and respect his parents no matter how mature he (thinks he) is.

This teaches us a basic element of respect we should apply in all relationships, no matter how much or little we "need" the other person. We should always seek out the good points in others and find something to admire and respect. But certainly when it comes to our parents, we are obligated to do so.

Unfortunately, some parents seem to actually invite their children to see them in a less than complimentary light. An example of this is when parents share their difficulties in *shalom bayis* with their children. Sometimes, they are hoping that the children will take their side; at other times, they just want a listening ear. This is almost never a smart move, though, as one's children are far too emotionally involved to be able to provide help, no matter how wise and loving they may be.

Children who find themselves in such a situation should do their best to find a creative way to step aside. And grown-up children in all situations must remember that no matter how many children of their own they have, no matter how many *shiurim* on *chinuch habanim* they have heard, it is still not their place to step into their parents' home and "offer helpful advice" on how to do things "better."

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Parshas **Kedoshim**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

In the past, I have asked you several questions related to *chinuch*, but this time I'd like to ask you something different. It concerns my parents. Neither of my parents are "easy" people to get along with. My father is a *talmid chacham*. He's read your book, and understands it better than many people do, and in general he is a very intelligent person. My mother is also a very intelligent person with a lot of insight and always with good advice in difficult situations.

I'm the only married child and I speak with them often. Between the lines, I can pick up that what they're really telling me is how much my father wants my mother to realize what a difficult person she is to live with, and vice versa.

They actually have quite good *shalom bayis* in general, with *derech eretz* for one another, but they do have significant financial stresses so that does make things more tense a lot of the time. But mostly what they tell me is how difficult they find it to cope with the other one's personality and how hard it is for them.

I did start sharing some ideas with my father that I heard from you, just as a by-the-way, and I noticed that he started to try some of them out. I wondered if you had any other ideas, and also, some advice in general on how to approach this without breaching the *halachos* of *kibbud av va'eim*?

Thank you



It's clear that the person writing this letter has only the best intentions. The same is true of virtually all parents who are tempted to intervene in their married children's *shalom bayis* if they see their children in distress. But parents or children are most often simply not the right people to be addressing problems so close to home.

In very rare cases, the help can be given so wisely and cautiously that it does help. Far more usual, however, is for the help, genuinely given, to actually make things worse. Not because the people involved lack intelligence or love or caring, but simply because they are too emotionally involved to see things clearly, or to remain detached and objective enough to be helpful.

This applies even if the parent voluntarily shares difficulties with his *shalom bayis* and the child does nothing beyond listening and nodding his head in "understanding." In fact, anyone who finds himself in a situation where he's being called upon to lend an empathetic listening ear needs to be careful not to just nod along to a sob story. Agreeing (or even just seeming to agree) with everything the other person says, even when it looks like you're being helpful and making it easier for the person to "endure" the

pain and suffering, can blind that person to their own part in the problem.

This is much more of a concern in the parent-child relationship, where sharing details of *shalom bayis* problems can be or become harmful both for the child and the parents. Furthermore, in almost all cases a child will end up taking sides, even if he doesn't want or intend to, and that too will only make things worse.

Getting involved when you're not the person who should intervene is almost always misguided, as the famous *vort* on Chad Gadya illustrates. If we look at the story and say, "Poor goat, bad cat, good dog, bad stick etc..." then what emerges is that Hashem (*chas veshalom*) was wrong to kill the Malach Hamaves. However, was the dog really right to come along and take the goat's side? What business was it of his? If he hadn't become involved, the whole story wouldn't have escalated... and once we see it this way, the story "comes out right."

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What a child (or a parent of married children with *shalom bayis* issues) can say, before gently detaching himself, is something like, "I know there are other people who deal with similar things, and there are certainly people who can help, such as Rav X or Rebbetzin Z." A parent can even tell a child, "You know, your mother and I also had our own issues when we were younger, and we went to speak with someone who really helped."

After all, even if it does really seem that a parent wants a child's input and advice, a parent will generally be resistant to taking even well-meaning advice from their own child, while they would be much more capable of listening to advice, even if given in a more direct manner, from an outsider.

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Often, especially when we know the person well, there's a great temptation to try to "open their eyes," and this certainly applies within families when parents and children are all-too-familiar with each other's weaknesses. A person looking in from the outside, by contrast, will see the full picture with each person's strong and weak points, and will be wise enough and detached enough to help all the various parties to do the same.

Especially in this situation, where the child sees for himself that the parents can be complicated at times to deal with, he's very likely to be tempted to go to each of them and try to get them to see things the way he does — particularly as he thinks this is what the parents want him to do. However, it's likely to be very unhelpful if he tries this.

In any relationship, focusing on the other person's weak points tends to bring out the worst, not the best. But there are all kinds of ways to justify focusing on problems. Often, people think along the lines of, "If only she knew how wrong she was on that issue, she would change her mind," or "If only he realized how impossible it is to deal with him when he gets so tense, he would work on easing up a bit."

People can be prepared to deal with all kinds of difficulties, if only the person "making the difficulty" acknowledges how troublesome they are. I have encountered situations where someone could tolerate a spouse with an emotional issue, as long as they have acknowledged their difficulty and are getting help for it, even before it was resolved. It's when the "difficult" spouse refuses to admit that they are the source of all the problems that the identical issues suddenly become totally unbearable.

After all, it can be quite a comfortable feeling to be the healthy, coping spouse in comparison with the struggling, difficult spouse who has to be bravely endured. Inevitably, the "healthier" of the couple will end up seeing all the problems in their spouse and none of the problems in himself, even if that wasn't his conscious intention. While it may feel easier for him to bear, in the long-run, this perception isn't going to be productive for anyone.

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It really can't be said enough that one of the main factors in successful relationships is acceptance. I'm not referring to accepting that the other person is flawed and "*Nebach*, I have to deal with them," but, "He has his flaws, and I have mine. I choose to look at his good points."

Of course we all have our flaws, and most of the time, no one knows them better than our spouses. That's why if we focus on those flaws, the spouse will internalize the criticism and it will be that much harder to change the message if later on, we decide that we want to give a compliment or well-earned praise and the spouse just won't believe it's genuine because they are so used to being put down.

We can see this at work when children move up a grade in school and suddenly they start getting much better or worse report cards. It's rare for a child to suddenly change for the better or worse — more often, it's the new teacher's perception of them which makes all the difference.

It can also be the parents who are guilty of seeing and stressing only the flaws in their children and ignoring or being totally ignorant of their good points. Sometimes, a parent will even confide in me how worried they are about their child: "How will he find a good *shidduch*? And even if he does get married, how will he get along with his wife?"

In such cases, I usually ask the parent, "Doesn't he have any friends?" and the parent admits that yes, of course he does... Then I gently introduce the idea that perhaps these friends see qualities in the son that they somehow missed, and that it could be a good idea to look for them.

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We're just past Pesach now, and my thoughts turn back to that Pesach four years ago when so many of us were confronted with the difficult circumstances of lockdown and the fears of the pandemic that seemed such a threat. Several weeks after we all had to be confined to our homes, people I talked to started asking me, "Nu, so I guess you're dealing with more *shalom bayis* issues, with everyone stuck at home together, right?"

I thought about it a lot, and realized that it wasn't so, for the most part. Of course there were couples with issues, but even those couples who had been struggling before the lockdowns began were actually doing better, in general, than before. Why?

The Baal HaTanya explains that a *chassan* and *kallah* have totally different natures and ordinarily, would be incapable of living together in harmony. The *chuppah*, however, is symbolic of Hashem above both of them and their submission to His Torah and *mitzvos*, which enables them to build a home of *shalom*.

I believe that during the lockdowns, when people were grateful for being alive and felt humbled due to everything that was going on around them, it was easier to focus on the good points in one another and build stable and loving relationships, based on humility and appreciation.

The truth is that we all need large doses of humility to build healthy relationships, with our parents, our children, and our spouses. May Hashem help us to see the good in each other, fix the flaws in ourselves, and enjoy true peace and harmony forever.

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