RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS EIKEV

FLEXIBILITY IS FUNDAMENTAL

The Apter Rav in his *sefer Ohev Yisroel* gives a classic Chassidic interpretation of the opening *passuk* of this week's *parshah*, *"Vehayah eikev tishma'un ... ushmartem va'asisem osam."* The root word *eikev* can also mean "end" and the root of *ushmartem* can mean "waiting." The Apter Rav teaches that for Moshiach to come, we have to keep all the *mitzvos*. We're getting ever closer, but we're not there yet. We know it will happen one day. Since *"eikev tishmaun,"* in the end we will listen and perform the *mitzvos* anyway, why *"ushmartem,"* — why wait so long? We should simply *"va'asisem osam"* — just do the *mitzvos* so we can finally be redeemed.

Sometimes we push off things that have to happen anyway, knowing that eventually, we'll do whatever we're supposed to. If it's going to happen anyway, you might as well do it right away. It's not that these things can't be done later; they can. While we don't always push things off until it's too late, we often miss the optimum time for doing them. When it's obvious that we're only doing what we should because we ran out of other options, other people are far less likely to appreciate our actions. As for ourselves, doing things at the earliest possible opportunity usually means more flexibility about how to act, and the results are better. Often, *shalom bayis* issues crop up for this very reason. Sometimes a couple sees a problem coming, but they push off dealing with it until they *have to*. If they would only be wise and do earlier what they'll be doing later anyway, they would be so much better off.

Sometimes people leave their entire *shalom bayis* on a back burner. As long as everything seems to be coasting along, they allow resentment and little issues to mount — until a major crisis erupts and everything is so much harder to deal with.

This is all aside from the issues that are actually *caused* by procrastination! It's so common for spouses to get nervous and frustrated by the other's pushing things off. Yes, we all need to be more patient, but we also need to stop testing the patience of those around us.

If your marriage can use help, but you aren't yet in a crisis mode, that's exactly the time to get help! Seeking help doesn't mean there's something badly wrong with you or your marriage. It means you're dealing with things before they become intolerable or spiral out of control. If you call a gardener for maintenance, the entire process is pleasant and doesn't cost too much money. But if you only call the gardener when your property is overgrown with weeds, you have a big job on your hands and you're left with a large bill.

It's better to be preemptive.

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SHLOMO Z. NEIMAN
BY A FRIEND WHO FEELS FOREVER INDEBTED!!

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

My wife and I have a solid relationship which has become even stronger thanks to your weekly lectures. Following your guidance helps me be a better spouse, particularly when it comes to being more flexible. This has resulted in my wife becoming more loving and flexible as well.

Perhaps you can provide advice on an issue that has been a thorn in our relationship for several years. I am a natural early riser. Most days I awake at 5:00 a.m. It's difficult for me to sleep past 6:00, even on Shabbos. As such, I usually go to sleep around 9:00 p.m. My wife has a more typical sleep routine: she goes to bed around 11:00 p.m., and wakes up at 7:00 a.m. We both sleep well at night and require about eight hours to feel well-rested.

My wife is upset that I go to sleep early because it doesn't allow us to spend much quality time together. Child care and daily tasks usually end around 8:15 every evening. She does a great job taking care of the house and children. I start preparing for bed by 8:45. I'm fortunate to have a flexible schedule by day, and I try to schedule time for us to spend together then. However, her schedule is less flexible. Still, I feel she could rearrange some of her daytime activities to allow us to have time together every day. I resent that she doesn't make daytime togetherness a top priority, (while continuing to complain that I'm not available past 9:00 p.m. when SHE is ready for quality time). Please provide any advice towards rectifying this situation and overcoming this challenge in our marriage.

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

It's gratifying to hear that I have a part in your ongoing growth. It's great when people make their relationships a priority and look for ideas and tips they can implement in order to grow. Aside from enhancing even a good relationship, it helps to catch problems before they become major and to deal with things early on.

You mention that the classes helped you become more flexible which helped your wife become more flexible in response. Flexibility is one of the most important qualities in relationships. I share this with people when they ask me what qualities to look for in a potential spouse. I tell them to find out how this person behaves in a challenging moment. How flexible are they? What's their tolerance level? The fact that they're fine when everything is going right doesn't tell you much. How flexible or inflexible are they? Flexibility is one of the most important factors in marriage.

As we're still in the month of Av, I'll share a *vort* I heard on, *"Mishenichnas Av mime'atin besimchah; mishenichnas Adar marbin besimchah* — When the month of Av arrives, we lessen joy; when the month of Adar arrives, we increase joy." The root word of "*av*" can mean "to want." When a person is very specific about what they want, it can cause a lessening of joy. An inflexible person is far more likely to become frustrated and unhappy. "Adar," on the other hand, is similar to the Yiddish word, "*uhder* — either/or." When a person is open to other possibilities, it's easier to find ways to be happy and make others happy too.. Before discussing the particulars of this letter, I would like to comment on the idea of proper sleep. It's wonderful that both of you emphasize the importance of getting eight hours of sleep. When someone is well-rested, it does a lot for their marriage. Harav Avigdor Miller *zt"l* used to advise people to make sure they sleep enough, stressing that this can help people be more tolerant and deal with anything that comes up. Many people don't lend enough importance to this.

A *mashgiach* in *yeshivah* once said that one hour of sleep can sometimes accomplish more than many *mussar seforim*. It's also been said that it's better to sleep for 23 hours like a horse and behave like a mentch for one hour, than to sleep like a mentch for one hour and behave like a

horse for the other 23 hours. Many don't realize how much sleep deprivation is affecting them and their relationships. Of course, the issue of sleep and how much of it is needed needs to be discussed properly and shouldn't become a basis for arguments and aggravation — but not sleeping isn't helpful for anyone.

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There are times when people ask questions about certain situations in their marriage and the best advice they can be given is to accept the situation and learn to live with it. Sometimes, rocking the boat will do more harm than good. But there are times when acceptance is the wrong route. If a couple can't agree on when to spend time together, and therefore they're not spending time together, that's not a situation that should be accepted. It's not good. They *have to* spend time together. It's wrong to make peace with something that's not good. If something is wrong, you have to do something about it.

The fact that a husband and wife have different sleep-wake styles and preferences is very normal (although it wouldn't be normal if it were to an extreme, and one of them was up all night and slept all day). Some people get stuck on proving to their spouse why their method is more normal. Sure, in the olden days people woke up earlier. True, the Torah praises those who rise for *vasikin*. It's also reasonable to argue that at night, when the day's over and all the necessary chores are accomplished, it's more natural to settle down and relax together. But arguing makes the situation personal and emotionally charged. If one likes to get up early and one likes to sleep a little later, there's nothing wrong with that as long as it's within normal bounds.

I will mention that some people get up *very* late and that causes a lot of resentment. This is true for both men and women. Some women get up early to go to work while their husbands, who are officially in *kollel*, get up at midday. Then they're upset that their wives look down on them. It's true the other way too. If a husband gets up early to go to work and the children get themselves off to school on their own while the wife stays in bed until the afternoon, the husband is very likely to be upset. Getting up late won't earn you respect.

In this case, one spouse is getting up at five and the other at seven. Neither is getting up late. It's okay for them to have different ways of doing things. At the same time, spending time together is essential. It's fundamental. It has to happen. (In fact, the Torah refers to the couple's marriage relationship as *onah*, which means "time." It's important for a couple to spend *time* together regularly.)

When something is very important to you, and you can't make peace with not having it, you make it work. When something *has to* happen, it usually does, eventually. The question is how. Don't wait for a crisis to make time to spend together.

But even the "problem" alone can and should actually be appreciated. The fact that not spending enough time together is a thorn in your marriage is a good sign. It shows that you both want to spend time with each other. Be grateful for that. Unfortunately, there are couples who try to avoid spending time with each other because of other thorns.

Other couples don't have a choice. One of them might have a very challenging work schedule which doesn't allow them to spend much time together. But they can still find ways to make it work. In this case, it's more a matter of style and preference, both of which can be set aside for something so important.

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Perhaps more than the solution to the problem is the importance of communicating about it in the right way. Start by emphasizing how important this is to you. Don't allow your need for sleep to seem more of a priority than spending time with your spouse. Saying, "I'd love to spend time with you but I need my sleep," is not only wrong; it doesn't feel good to hear it. Instead, you can say, "I want to spend time with you. It's so important to me. I feel like I'm missing something when we don't get to spend a few minutes together. I need a lot of sleep and it's not so easy for me." That's going to sound a lot better. It's no longer a debate on how important this is.

This also applies if there's a temporary reason why you can't spend time with your spouse. It's important to stress that it's something you feel is important and really want to do, and that you're looking out for the next available time when it could work. At least that will give a good feeling. (Make sure that you're sincere about it and not just using it as a tactic.) Mrs. Ruchoma Shain wrote in her book, *All For the Boss*, that during one of her first dates with her husband, he dozed off in the middle. When he caught himself, he explained that since his father was a *shochet*, their entire family went to sleep early and he wasn't usually up so late at night. Hearing the explanation, she wasn't offended. Today, not everyone would accept such an excuse, but we can still respect her acceptance.

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Just as a suggestion, it's possible that both of you can compromise on when to call it a night. Perhaps both of you can meet between nine and eleven and go to sleep at ten. (Of course, don't force your idea of a compromise onto your wife.) Such a setup would depend on how it's communicated. You can explain to your wife how much it means to you to spend time together, but by 11, you're too tired. Offer that you'll stay up an extra hour because it's so

important to you. Now it becomes a win-win. Both of you can feel good about it.

Again, even when working it out, and actually compromising, don't make the mistake of explaining why your way is better or why she has to do it your way. Instead, justify *her* way. Tell her you know it's normal to be up until 11. Let her know you understand how much she does until then. Tell her how amazing she is with the children and housework, (like you wrote in the question). "I know I can't really ask you to be ready earlier, but if you could, it would mean so much to me."

If you can't get your wife to be ready earlier, see how much more flexible you can be yourself. You may not have to wait for 11, but before she commits to a compromise, offer one of your own. "It's hard for me past nine, but it's so important to me, I'll stay up until 10." If necessary, maybe you could offer to stay up until 11. Maybe, with time she'll realize how important it is to you and she'll come forth.

What do you do when you have an event late at night and you *have to* stay up late? Do you take a coffee? A nap? There are ways to make it work when you need to; and yes, I think you need to. Not every night, but once in a while.

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A lot of this may depend on mindset. Perhaps you feel you must go to sleep at nine because you were up at five. But maybe you're waking up at five because you were in bed at nine? Maybe you can go to sleep a little later and wake up a little later so you can move your biological clock slowly. You don't have to do this every night or throw your entire schedule off course. You also don't have to schedule together-time every night. Maybe you can push your flexibility one bit more and go to sleep later once a week. Maybe after showing flexibility for a while, you can ask your wife if it would be okay with her to spend quality time together a little earlier to make it easier for you.

Even if you were the one to be flexible and come forth, thank her for the time you spent together. Make her feel good about it. It makes it easier for her to do it for you next time.

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Marriage is so important that many great people have been willing to do things differently because of their spouse, even for years on end. Sometimes, this only became apparent after the spouse passed away and they started doing things differently. There are many examples, but I'll quote one nice story we can learn from.

Right before the first Pesach after Harav Steinman's wife passed away, he instructed his grandson to prepare water for the entire Yom Tov ahead of time as a *chumra*. The grandson was puzzled. "I didn't think we were *makpid* on that. I don't remember ever doing so before." Rav Steinman explained that in the early years of his marriage, his wife once made a mistake with the water. Because he didn't want her to feel bad, he told her that they didn't really have to keep that *chumra,* and for the rest of her life, he wasn't *makpid* on this. Now that it would no longer hurt her, however, he wanted to start being *makpid* again.

We shouldn't self-obliterate for our marriages. Still, because you're married – and as long as you're married – you may choose to do something different than you would have if you were on your own. If you were on your own, you'd always go to sleep at nine. Because you're married, you may choose to do differently.

Of course, this is true not only about bedtime and scheduling. I hope my readers will all be able to apply these ideas and adapt them to wherever a difference of style or opinion crop up and threaten the happiness and stability at home. Again, flexibility is essential.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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