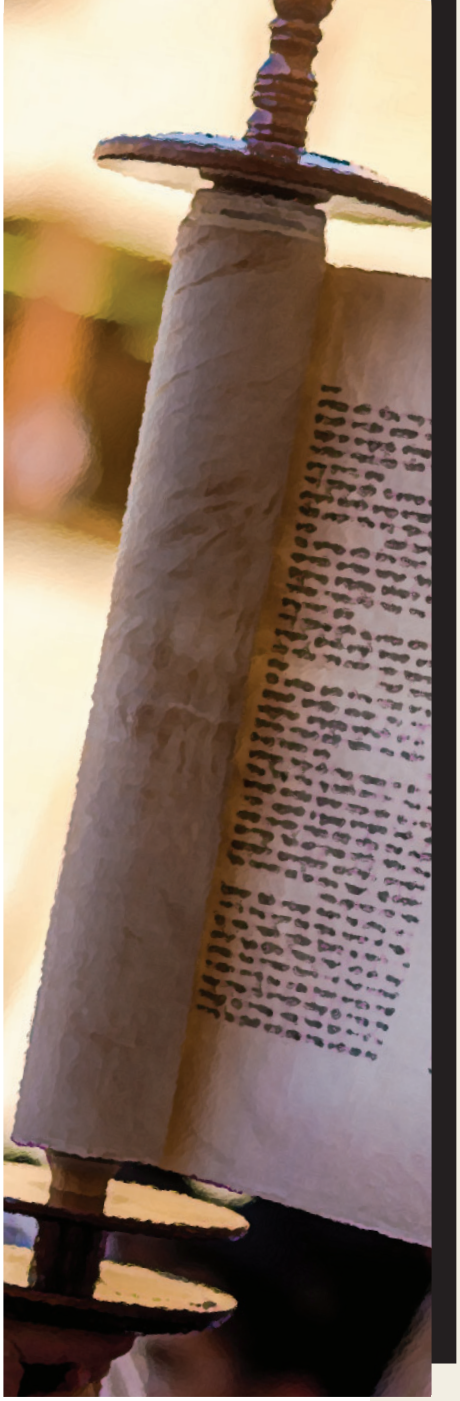


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

RELATIONSHIP FUNDAMENTALS

Following the deaths of Aharon Hakohen's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, Hashem told Moshe Rabbeinu: "*Al-yavo b'chol eis el-hakodesh*—Do not come at all times into the Holy..." The Divrei Yisrael explains this as meaning that one should not come to serve Hashem when he has "all the time" in the world. He links this idea to the *mishnah* which states, "Do not say: When I have spare time, I will learn Torah..." noting that even if a person really does have lots of spare time to learn and utilizes it well, this isn't what Chazal intended to say. Rather, it's learning specifically when one is busy, grabbing extra time out of a full and busy schedule, that is so special.

A person should do what he is obligated to do in terms of serving Hashem whenever that is required, even if the obligation arises when he's tired, busy, or distracted. If Hashem had wanted a nation of servants entirely at leisure to serve Him, the Divrei Yisrael notes, He would have given the Torah to the *malachim*. What Hashem wants is a holy people who serve Him out of love, which means putting in the effort where necessary and not waiting for "the right time."

Among our responsibilities to Hashem are being there for our parents, spouse, and children. And the same lesson applies here; an obligation is an obligation regardless of whether the timing is right.

Furthermore, an obligation remains an obligation even if the other person isn't fulfilling his or her own obligations toward us, and certainly it remains an obligation even if we are upset at that person for not falling in with our wishes. So many relationships are harmed by one spouse telling the other, "When you'll do xyz then I'll do abc." Even if the threatening spouse is "right."

If someone isn't stepping up to their obligations toward you, this shouldn't be overlooked, but a marriage must never descend into a childish feud of tit-for-tat and score-keeping.

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Parshas
Acharei-Kedoshim
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

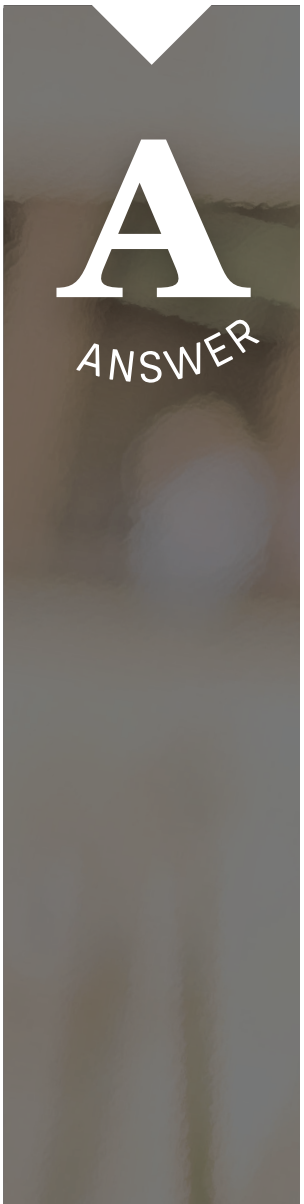
Thank you for all your amazing articles. I need to ask how to react to something that really hurts me. My husband bought a bike to ride to work and back. He didn't even tell me about it; I happened to see him riding it. I have no idea when he got it.

I'm always telling him that he seems to think nothing is important enough to share with me (he's a quiet type). He has no excuse for not knowing how I feel as I've told him so many times already.

I am really upset and next time he wants me to fulfill my basic obligations I want to tell him that I'm not an item on the shelf that whenever he needs me he uses me. I'm not ready to be that. If he doesn't treat me as a wife there is no need for me to act like a wife. But... that's probably not the right way to react.

So far, I haven't said anything because I don't know how or what. Can you please help me with this and give me some guidance?

Thank you.



First of all, I'd like to commend you for holding off with your reaction. That's no easy thing to do when one's feelings are so hurt. Indeed, many people fail that test and let their emotions get the better of them. So much harm can be caused by hasty reactions. By contrast, one generally loses nothing by postponing a reaction to a calmer, more guided moment. It's wonderful that you recognize that you can't simply let your emotions dictate your responses.

Even when a person does react too hastily, of course, that doesn't mean that all is lost. One can still calm down, apologize, and resolve to do better next time. Often, we need help in knowing how to do that and it's usually a smart move to reach out to an objective third party for guidance, to get a clearer idea of how to react — or retract — when needed, and I'm glad that's what you decided to do.

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The issue you describe sounds disturbing and I don't want to trivialize it. Concealing or failing to inform a spouse of something significant in one's life can indicate a breakdown of communication. Communication is what I consider to be one of the three most important things in marriage, so this really can be a sign of a serious problem.

But let me share with you what I feel the other two most important things are: flexibility — being willing and able to bend for another person; and healthy boundaries — a clear understanding of what "belongs" to whom in the relationship.

It seems that all three of these points are relevant to the issue you mention. I'd like to focus first on the question of boundaries.

In any relationship, including marriage, just about anything a couple will deal with falls into three categories: mine, yours, and ours. Whenever a disagreement arises, it's important to identify in which of these categories

the issue at hand lies. A disagreement in the "ours" category generally obligates both parties to discuss, take each other's opinions into account, and compromise if necessary. Disagreements in the "mine" and "yours" categories should usually be dealt with a little differently. While it is basic decency and *mentchlichkeit* to take a spouse's feelings into consideration even when that is not a black-and-white obligation, if a husband or wife makes a decision in their own sphere, the other spouse doesn't have an automatic right to be involved in that decision.

In your case, your husband has decided to buy a bike and ride it to work and back. Technically, that's "his" decision to make and he wasn't obligated to inform you of his purchase. You don't have to like it and you have the right to express your feelings on the matter, but you don't necessarily have the right to prevent him from making that decision.

When treading such a fine line between expressing one's feelings and trying to influence an outcome, it's always wise to consult with someone beforehand. Often, one spouse is convinced that the question is "*hashkafic*" and therefore involves both of them; "he can't just do what he wants!" On closer investigation it may emerge that the issue is in fact about image or status or something else entirely, and that this is one time when the upset spouse is called upon to demonstrate flexibility and "allow" the other party to simply do what he prefers.

I don't know whether you live in Antwerp, where bike-riding is the norm for *heimishe yungeleit*, or New York, where it may be less so, but regardless, a decision to buy and ride a bike is for your husband to make, not you.

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Nonetheless, I do understand your hurt feelings. Your husband did not consult with you before making this purchase, and it appears that he's been concealing it from you for some time. Even if he wasn't obligated to involve you, his decision not to do so has hurt you and maybe he should have known that, even without you constantly telling him that you feel shut out of his life.

Rather than trying to justify his silence and concealment, I would like to understand it better.

You describe him as a "quiet" person, as if that explains his choice not to tell you about what he did. It's possible that he is simply very uncommunicative and that this problem dates back to the very beginning of your marriage (and even before). However, I doubt that this is the true explanation for his not sharing. In fact, quiet people often lack the confidence to make such decisions on their own, when it involves going behind someone's back.

In my experience, the most common reason why one spouse hides or fails to share information from the other is fear of the reaction and the repercussions of sharing. I have heard many young men tell me that they used to share things with their wife but no longer feel able to do so, because of the responses they got. It could be a wife who objects to a decision a husband has made or wants to make, and demands that he comply with her wishes when she is not entitled to do so. It could be a wife whose involvement in decisions that don't involve her directly ends up stalling things entirely. And worse, it could be arguing or sulking, berating or weeping. When this happens enough times, the other spouse learns to keep things to himself whenever possible, simply for self-protection.

I don't justify concealing things from one's spouse, and in fact I believe that there is virtually always a way to communicate effectively even with a spouse who has screamed, sulked, berated, *and* wept. I also believe that spouses should surely do their best to find that way. Nonetheless, if you are the kind of spouse who responds to sharing in a less than optimal way, it's well worth considering whether that has resulted in what now looks like a breakdown of communication.

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In your case, you've shown a willingness to reach out for guidance which is great and shows that you have the capacity to look at your own part in this issue as well as your husband's.

The next step is to address him with this in mind, starting with your acknowledgement that the decision was his to make. Then, you should certainly express your feelings, telling him how hurt you feel that he made this decision without involving you on any level, and that he hid it from you.

If I was right about why he may have not shared this with you, then if you're able to pivot and accept the blame for this yourself, that could make a tremendous amount of difference. It's not easy, but it is well worth trying. Tell your husband that you know you haven't always responded in the best way

to things he's shared with you in the past, and that in the future, you hope you'll do better, now that you are seeing things more objectively.

Then, add how much you would appreciate it if he does share things with you from now on, and stress that you just want to feel included and cared about — you don't want to run his life.

The last step is perhaps the hardest, and that's letting go of the outcome. So many people take this advice from me and come back later to say, "I did what you suggested, and it didn't help." When I ask them what "it didn't help" means, it turns out that what they were hoping, or expecting, to happen was that their spouse would not only start sharing with them, but would also do whatever they said they wanted.

If the end-goal of communicating "right" is to get your own way, what you're doing is something on the border between control and manipulation; it isn't communication. And there's no surer way of shutting down communication than trying to control someone, even if it's done "nicely."

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You write that you're considering turning him down next time he wants you to fulfill your basic obligations, as you don't feel treated like a wife. You also acknowledge that this is "probably not the right way to react". You're right on that one. It isn't.

While I understand your hurt feelings, responding in a way that is, essentially, taking revenge is just plain wrong. It's perhaps easier to understand and even partially excusable if one presents the response as a natural consequence: "You made me half an hour late for the *simchah*, so now we're going to leave half an hour later than we agreed." Even then, such behavior is childish and counterproductive. But when the "consequence" is unrelated to the prompt, it's both senseless and harmful. Especially as you are dealing with a breakdown in communication, you want to do everything you can to open the channels again, not make things even worse than they already are.

Furthermore, refusing to fulfill one's basic obligations is wrong in and of itself. You are a wife, whether you feel like acting like one or not, and in becoming a wife you accepted upon yourself certain duties that you remain obligated to fulfill regardless of whether you think your husband is fulfilling his. In fact, the situation you describe isn't one of him refusing to fulfill his duties, but rather of hurting your feelings. "Not acting like a wife" is just about never called for, but it is totally out of place in the situation you describe.

This doesn't mean that you must swallow your hurt feelings; it does mean that you have to learn how to express them in a productive way, asking your husband to help you find a way to move forward that works for both of you.

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Communication is one of the building blocks in every marriage; in fact, it's so important that the other foundational issues — flexibility and an understanding of boundaries — often resolve themselves as soon as husband and wife learn to really talk and listen to one another. *B'ezras Hashem*, with honesty and a willingness to give each other space, you and your husband will be able to resolve all your issues and continue to build a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: ACHAREI-KEDOSHIM 5786

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