RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH

THE ART OF DRAWING LINES

In this week's parsha, we learn about Yaakov Avinu's preparations before meeting Eisav; sending gifts, *davening* for help and preparing for war. As part of the plan, Yaakov Avinu split his family. "*Vayomer im yavo Eisav el hamachaneh ha'achas vehikahu, vehaya hamachaneh hanishar lifleitah* – He said, if Eisav will come to one camp and strike it down, the other camp will be saved."

The Divrei Yisroel brings a lesson on this *passuk* from Harav Yechezkel of Kuzmir. If a person experiences failure or a setback in his *Avodas Hashem,* he shouldn't stay stuck on it. Becoming obsessed with a failure will pull a person into a depression, which will cause him to fall even lower and make it harder to get back up again. Rather our attitude must be, if Eisav attacks one camp, let the other one survive!

Eisav represents the *yetzer hora*. He often tries to make us fall in some area. But don't get stuck. Focus on the remaining camp. Be strong and save what you can. Don't obsess over that one thing which the *yetzer hora* got.

If a person can rise up from his setback, he'll be able to move on. The Divrei Yisroel further gives a *mashal* about a store owner who sees someone steal an apple from him, and drops everything to catch the thief and get his apple back forgetting that *all* his apples may be stolen while he's out.

We must always focus on what we *can* salvage. We can't get stuck on our failures.

Often, in relationships, people get stuck on those things that bother them. They may color their entire relationship black because of the one area in which they are challenged. It's important to work on the concept of "saving the other camp." If something didn't go well - a bad moment, a disagreement - try salvaging the rest of the day, the week, the vacation, the meal. Don't lose everything to one difficulty.

This is much easier said than done, but so important to master. It's easy to notice where your spouse can grow in a specific area. But that won't help you much. Think about where *you're* getting stuck and how *you* can move on despite the aspects of your life and relationship that you can't control.

In the most challenging marriages, there's often more good than bad. There's more to salvage than to lose. But the pain of disappointment makes it hard to see through.

Perhaps discussing the following intense question can help us contain the negativity and allow the good parts to blossom.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I listen to your weekly clips on Torah Anytime and find them very informative. Thank you.

After listening to last week's class, "If only my husband's Shabbos seudah would look like my father's," I felt compelled to reach out with my question. I want to know, at what point does "different" or "new" cross the line to "unacceptable"?

When someone grew up with a Shabbos seudah that was holy, careful with topics of discussion and befitting behavior, it becomes unacceptable to discuss mundane topics - or worse. This is not about a Shabbos table that's the *same* as her fathers, just a *seudah* that's more than a weekday supper.

How about these examples:

A man who grew up going to the mikvah every Friday and now goes only when he feels like it...

A man who falls asleep at the Shabbos table or discusses politics and other inappropriate topics...

Someone who used only certain *hechsherim* and now uses anything labeled "kosher", even *chalav akum,* (in a community with easy access to good *hechsherim*)...

A person who was taught that the internet is not kosher, and now uses a smartphone with a very light filter...

Someone who was trained to never miss a *tefillah betzibur*, and now only *davens* when he's in the mood and often skips *Maariv* altogether...

Somehow, there are things that people do consider to be totally unacceptable and may even be grounds for divorce. With the examples above, do we say, "it's not terrible, look instead at his strong points"?

At least he sits by the Shabbos table...

At least he's eating kosher...

At least he isn't watching anything forbidden...

Respect the fact that he *davens* sometimes....

Look at the bright side and learn to live with it...

I guess my question is, where does one draw the line of "accepting" when in the realm of *hashkafos* and *minhagim*? Should a woman lower her standards completely, or is there room to say that something really is just not acceptable? I'm really confused about when and where we draw the line. Your advice would be very welcome.

Answer:

This is a very painful and heavy question and I hope the suggestions can be helpful even to those who aren't in such intense situations. It's hard to get too nitty-gritty and people in difficult situations would probably benefit more from individual guidance, but I'll try to address the topic in general.

Where does one draw the line with a husband *or* a wife? The truth is, there is no fine line. There are men and women who choose to stick it out with a spouse who isn't following the expected path the same way they would stick it out and deal with their child who unfortunately wasn't following the expected path. Some children are very challenging, and parents will try to be patient, tolerant, loving, or whatever it takes to work with that child – because it's their child. Many people have the same attitude towards a spouse. Good for them. They feel that as long as there is no intolerable abuse, this is their *zivug*, the one with whom they're building a home, their children's other parent. They try to make it work to the best of their ability.

Other people draw a line for far smaller issues than this questioner describes. They can't deal with the differences and the fact that this isn't what they wanted. Life is about choices, and there's no 100% agreed upon right or wrong in such areas.

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However, let's review some of the basic principles relevant here. We're taught not to be our spouse's "mashgiach" and not to control their choices. Why? There are two reasons. Firstly, you are not responsible for someone else's choices or decisions. There may be times when you should rebuke or try to help someone, but that's true for anyone, not only your spouse. Even so, remember that you are not *responsible* for their decisions. Each person has their own *bechirah*. Your spouse and your children too. *Halevai* we can take complete responsibility for our own decisions.

The second reason is that there isn't all that much you can really do to control someone else's decisions. You can make it easier for them. You may be able to project an attitude that will affect their choice for the better. There are things *you* can do, but that's only what *you* are in control of.

You can *help* them, and make it easier for *them* to choose, but you can't choose *for* them. And after all that, you're still not responsible for their choice. You may be responsible for what you do that causes someone to make a wrong choice, but you're still not responsible for that choice – only for your part in it.

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So is there ever a time when you should actually take matters into your own hands and *do* something? You asked for the fine line and I'll try to offer some clarity on that; if you find yourself in a difficult situation, try to break it down and realize where it's affecting you and your children. That's where the fine line is.

If someone is making a wrong choice to miss a *tefillah* or watch something inappropriate – hopefully this should never happen – that's that person's choice. You can and often should try to be helpful and encouraging about it in the nicest way possible, but it's still their choice.

When it does affect you directly, or it affects how someone is now treating you because of it, that changes the picture. You still can't control the situation, but you can try to do something about it. Once it encroaches on *you*, allowing it to pass won't be good for either of you. It may be tolerating and enabling undesirables to happen and continue, and should be addressed carefully and delicately.

This is also true when a parent feels that something their spouse does is affecting the children. It's in her place to bring it up respectfully and discuss it with her husband.

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When you bring up an issue, be careful with your approach. "I understand that this is difficult or challenging for you. I feel that it's affecting me/the children at this point. What can we do to make sure that it doesn't affect us?" When you're respectful and understanding and talk in a way that shows that you're not trying to control anyone's decisions *except where it affects you or the home*, that's when you have the best chance to be taken seriously.

It's okay to communicate the fact that you're giving him the space to choose in those areas where it doesn't affect you. Hopefully, such a discussion can be the catalyst for continued positive change.

On the other hand, if you personally challenge or attack someone, it can cause him to become defensive. Using wording (which you might feel

make you more credible with your complaint) like: "You didn't go *daven* for a week already! Do you know what that's doing to the children? What do you think they'll grow into?" That challenge can make them challenge you back or try to defend what they did. *You* don't want that to happen. It will be counterproductive to what *you* are trying to achieve.

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Of course it's important to mention that when someone does something that appears to be halachically unacceptable, you're probably best off speaking to a competent *rav* who can guide you.

There are times when you're required to say something in a manner that will be productive. But when the issue at hand is not against halachah, (*mikvah Erev Shabbos* and *zemiros* are not halachah), you may want to be respectful of those choices. You may still be able to create an environment for that person to be able to do better, but you can only do what's in *your* control.

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There's another point that I want to discuss. We often hear about the crisis of children going off the derech. We're taught to be understanding of them, realize that they're going through a hard time, etc. What's less often discussed is the crisis of adults going off the derech. It's a sad reality. Adults and children can be challenged by the same issues: trauma, abuse, pain, etc.

One of the only ways to deal with someone who leaves the straight path is by opening your arms and waiting for the person to make better choices. That's true for children *and* adults.

If this is the case, then just like with a child, it's good to try to understand where the challenge is coming from. Understand that the behavior may not be a simple lack of self-control or motivation. You may want to make sure that you're dealing with the core issue and not only the symptoms. Try to make him feel validated and understood instead of more challenged and pained.

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We cannot pretend that the type of person you're married to doesn't make a difference; "it's your spouse and make the best of it". Unmarried people should *daven* for good spouses and married people should *daven* for continued goodness. Leah cried a lot when she thought that she was slated to marry the wicked Eisav. Because who you marry *does* matter.

But once you're married, it's good to be understanding and accepting and not make your spouse feel challenged by you. You can and should try to create a positive environment where good choices can flourish.

Most of the time, the more loving and accepting you are, the more of an influence you can have on the person you're married to. As difficult as it is to watch undesirable behaviour and live with it, if that's what now becomes the center and main focus of the person you're living with, it can be very hard to build a relationship that can have any real connection and meaning. However when you can try to see the rest of what there is, *"hamachaneh hanishar"*, often you can build on the good enough that will subtly influence the person you love to make better decisions as time goes on. It's an opportunity and a privilege to help those we love and care for.

Wishing you all the best, Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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