RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Tazria-Metzora

Fostering Goodwill

In his sefer Rav Tov, the Yetev Lev talks about the *maamar* "*mitoch shelo lishmah, bah lishmah*". He explains that whenever we do a *mitzvah*, our actions create a *malach* in Heaven. When we do it entirely for Hashem our *malach* has a *guf* and a *neshama*, whereas when we do it for other reasons it just has a form – without a *neshama*. That is why, he continues, it says that "*Hashem takes a good thought and considers it an action*".

When one has a good thought the *malach's* form is created, and then when he goes and acts on that thought, a *neshama* is added to his *malach* to make it complete. The Yetev Lev then ties it in with this week's Parsha. He explains that the form of the *malach* is considered to be female, and the *neshama* is male. "*Isha ki tazria*", sometimes only a form exists. Then, "*V'yalda zachor*", eventually the *neshama* is added when the mitzvah is complete.

Many people prefer for things that others do for them to be wholehearted and perfect. If it isn't so, they believe, then it isn't worth much. But Chazal have taught us that "*shelo lishma*" is also worth something, if only because it has the potential to become whole eventually. It's important that we see and appreciate the less than perfect things in life, even those done for a motive or incentive, knowing that they can, and even hoping that they do, improve; turning into something more meaningful and wholesome one day.

Let's take a typical morning routine as an example. In a perfect, "*lishma*" world, your son wakes up on time, takes his clothing from the shelf, gets dressed without delay and makes his bus on time. But we don't live in a perfect world, and in most homes things do not quite go as smoothly. Perhaps, instead of expecting perfection from him, that he should do things correctly and for the right reasons too, you might want to help your son get himself ready more smoothly, by letting him do so for other reasons. Aside from getting him a good alarm clock, or setting out his clothes for him the night before, you might even consider trying to be up then and prepare him a hot chocolate, or offer him some other incentive he can earn.

I once advised a father to do this for his child and he was indignant. "What am I?

My son's slave? Why do I need to prepare his drink?" No, dear father, you are not your child's servant. But you have a goal and, even though his reaching this goal in this manner might technically be considered "*shelo lishma*", as all he really cares for presently is the drink, this is one way that might help you be able to reach your goal faster, having him grow into reaching something more "*lishma*". In fact, on a day when you are not available to prepare his drink, he might still get ready on time because he is already used to it. And that will be the day when his "*shelo lishma*" becomes "*lishma*".

This can be done when dealing with adults as well. Of course we want our wives to be calm even though we come home late or our employees to be diligent out of the goodness of their hearts. But most people are human and very far from perfect. Therefore, instead of expecting them to be superhuman, try to incentivize, prepare proactively, or be on your own best behavior instead of constantly challenging people to see how far their tolerance level will take them. Maybe one day your actions will pay off and have someone else actually tolerate more and behave nicer toward you.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

In our marriage, there is no gift giving at all. We see gifting as impractical. If any of us needs anything, we can get it ourselves. If my husband buys something for me and I won't like it, I end up returning it. He knows this, and the same is true for him with gifts from me too.

Is this okay or should I try to change it? I know people do this especially before a Yom Tov or after a baby. Is it worth the extra money? Am I depriving my marriage by not making this happen?

Answer:

First let's take a moment to thank Hashem that this is all that you are struggling with. It should never be taken for granted when the questions or challenges one is faced with are minor and even relatively trivial. Yet while it is not a major problem, it is still something that is worth discussing, and is true for gift givers and non-gift givers alike.

It's important to remember that gift giving is not an end unto itself. It's not about finding out your spouse needs something, buying it for him, and then they have it. If that is the case, then it is indeed way more practical to have them get it for themselves. This is especially true when a wife buys her husband a gift using *his* money.

The main idea of a gift is the thought that went into it, and the feelings it represents. By giving a gift, you are letting someone know that you thought about them, you care about what they might need, and they are important enough to you for you to go out and choose a nice gift for them.

When choosing to gift your spouse, make sure that the thought behind it remains the focus of it. Some people tend to overdo it by buying too many or too extravagant presents. Never forget that it's often more about the note that goes with the gift than the gift itself.

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At times it really isn't practical to get your spouse a gift, either because you're not sure what they need or it's something they need to choose themselves. In such cases it is okay to get them a gift certificate, even though it isn't as personal. When given over correctly, it still carries the same message: that you went out and spent money on your spouse so that they can buy something for themselves in your name. Of course, if you add a nice note, that's even better. Another option is to offer to go along with them when they choose their gift, so that you experience the purchase together.

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We can take a lesson on gift giving from the mitzvah of *mishloach manos*. The goal of *mishloach manos* is to foster friendship, "*a person to his friend*". If Chazal would have wanted us to enjoy a hamantash and a mini liquor on Purim, they would just have told us to go to the store and get it for ourselves. But they understood that when we receive a package from someone, even if it is rather insignificant and we could've gotten it ourselves, the fact that the giver went to all that trouble to prepare it for us fosters love, friendship, and connection.

Gifts are actually one of - what's known as - the five love languages, but it's important not to get carried away with this information. Even though one type of "love language" is more dominant in yourself or your spouse, it's never a good idea to just stay stuck on one. There are several ways to show that you care for each other, and it doesn't always have to be the same way, gifting is only one of a few ways to demonstrate your love. You don't have to do all five things at all times, but there's certainly a time for all of them, and relying on only one is not either a good idea, even to someone who does appreciate it. There are so many ways to show him or her how much they mean to you.

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Another point to remember, even though you set up your home as gift-free, is that avoiding gifts should not cause you to forget an occasion. Even without the gift to mark it, it is still appropriate to mark special occasions in some way. When a major event comes and goes without mention from one's spouse, it can be quite disappointing. It feels like you didn't think about them. If you don't think a gift will do it, you can try verbally congratulating them on the occasion. You can even just bring home a little treat from the grocery store or simply write a nice card.

There are many ways to gift each other, and it doesn't have to be anything major or even tangible. It is just used as a way to demonstrate how much you think of each oth-

er, and this is something that every relationship can benefit from.

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But as much as you might feel okay without a gift, or even better without it, it's important to remember that the Torah says that men are obligated to buy clothing and/or jewelry for their wives in honor of Yom Tov. One could argue that this was instituted because women did not have their own money, but it's not likely because it doesn't say anywhere that an unmarried woman who does have her own money is obligated to get something for herself. It seems obvious then, that it isn't about receiving something new for Yom Tov as much as it is receiving something new for Yom Tov *from your husband*. Chazal understood that this is a vital building block to *shalom bayis*, well before the "love language theory" came to be, and we don't need to be smarter than them.

There's something about receiving a gift. We often see Bar Mitzvah boys proudly lugging home a huge package of gifts after their Bar Mitzvah. What's in there? Seven sets of Mishna Berurah... The kid knows that, but he would still prefer to get that than nothing at all.

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But there's another important part of gift giving and receiving that you may have a mistake about. Gifts have to be received graciously, too. The way you receive the gift plays a major role in the results. If you run and exchange every gift that your spouse gets you, then it will obviously leave a sour taste in their mouth and they won't be tempted to do it again very soon. Even if the gift isn't your favorite, thank your spouse profusely and compliment his choice. Wait a bit before you exchange it; first, because the gift might grow on you, and second, so that it doesn't look like you can't wait to get his or her gift off your hands. Sometimes it's even worth keeping something you're not so happy with, just to make the giver feel good. See it as "giving" instead of "receiving", and feel good about it.

If you think your spouse does not know how to accept your gifts, think about how *you* can change, by thinking of what will be appreciated and how, which can be easier than trying to change the way someone else accepts what you choose. Maybe you can change the way you present it. Maybe *you* can accept *their* gifts more graciously, making it less about figuring out what to buy, and more about who it is that bought something.

Both giving and receiving is an art and while many a marriage can be just fine without it, it might pay to learn how to do it properly, especially with a spouse, as it can enhance the peace and harmony in your home.

Wishing you all the best,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: TAZRIA-METZORA 5781

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