

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHEN YOUR SPOUSE WON'T CHANGE

The Torah tells us that when the sons of Yaakov spoke to Shechem and Chamor about marrying into their family, they answered them ***b'mirmah***, with deception. They agreed to the proposed marriages on the condition that all the men of Shechem undergo ***bris milah***.

The Or Yitzchak, Reb Itzikl of Radvil zt"l, raises an interesting question. How could the sons of Yaakov deceive them? They presented a condition the people of Shechem accepted, yet apparently intended to mislead them into agreeing to something they never intended to follow through with.

He explains that their words contained a condition the people of Shechem didn't understand. Chazal derive from ***himol yimol*** that a ***bris milah*** must be performed by someone who is himself circumcised. When the sons of Yaakov said that the people of Shechem must become like them through ***bris milah***, they meant that it had to be performed properly, by someone qualified. The people of Shechem, unaware of this requirement, circumcised one another and therefore failed to fulfill the condition. Their words were deliberately misleading, but they hadn't actually made a false statement.

This brings us to an interesting subject. Honesty is essential to a healthy marriage. Constant lying or misleading others makes it difficult to maintain trust. At the same time, being truthful doesn't mean we must always say everything exactly as it is. Chazal clearly teach us that one may sometimes alter the truth for the sake of ***shalom***. Discretion can be appropriate, while being completely straightforward can cause unnecessary hurt.

I've met people who proudly introduce themselves by saying, "I'm a very blunt person. I always say things exactly as they are." That may sound like a wonderful quality, but it doesn't give someone permission to say whatever comes to mind, regardless of whom it hurts. Being honest is important, but knowing what to say and how to say it is important too. Finding the proper balance between honesty, sensitivity, and ***shalom*** requires considerable wisdom.

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Parshas **Vayishlach**

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Hello Rabbi Gruen,

Your advice is sound, down-to-earth, and doable, and I thank you for it. I have a problem that I haven't heard you speak about, unless I missed it.

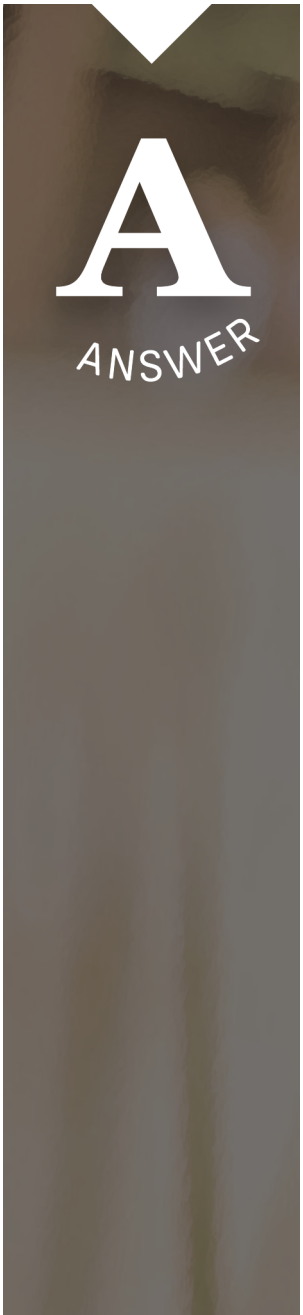
My spouse tells chronic untruths. She often says one thing while her actions suggest something entirely different, and it's become difficult to know what to believe. She is a very good cook but chooses to ruin the food unless we have guests. She refuses to keep a clean home, and under no circumstances will she allow anyone to come in and clean it.

I've gotten food poisoning three or more times already. She can spend hours cleaning, and the house is still filthy. She mops the floor by spreading a dirty cloth around.

She doesn't dress nicely and seems to need pain and misery around her. At the same time, she is caring, but refuses any help whatsoever.

Should I grin and bear it? Fight for normalcy? In the end, things always return to the status quo.

If you could pull a rabbit out of a hat and offer a remedy, that would be wonderful.



Unfortunately, I don't have any rabbits to pull out of a hat. When it comes to personal and relationship difficulties, there generally aren't any. People often look for magical solutions. They come to discuss a situation, and when I suggest something practical, they tell me, "I know all that already. I've heard people say I should do this or that. I was hoping you'd tell me something that would really help." But what makes you think those things won't help?

Knowing what to do and actually doing it are two very different things. Sometimes the solution isn't a new idea, but putting into practice something we've known all along.

Before addressing your question, I'm taking your description at face value. I don't know your wife, haven't heard what she'd say, and have no way of knowing how much of what you're describing is fact or interpretation. The situation could be quite different from the way it appears in your letter. Nevertheless, there are several important principles worth discussing.

Understanding the Behavior

One thing that stands out is that your wife apparently cooks very well when guests come, but somehow the food is regularly ruined when you're eating alone. If that's indeed what's happening, it suggests something more than simply not knowing how to cook.

Whenever someone repeatedly behaves illogically, it's important to ask why. Not "Why would anyone do something so ridiculous?" but what might be causing this behavior? There are two things to consider. First, it may be intentional to some degree, with something the person is trying to accomplish, consciously or otherwise. What might that be? Second, irrational behavior often has an emotional explanation. The person may not understand what's driving it. Sometimes people are aware of what they're doing, and sometimes they genuinely don't recognize their motives. After all, emotions don't always make sense.

Thinking about what leads to such behavior can be eye-opening. People have occasionally shared with me that they discovered things a family member had written privately in a journal or diary. This isn't to suggest that anyone has a right to read another person's writings. But sometimes the reader was shocked to discover that the writer understood much more about their behavior than they'd ever admitted. People sometimes understand things they aren't prepared to acknowledge openly.

The fact that your wife cooks well when guests come definitely hints at something deeper. Suppose a parent tells me his son is disrespectful, constantly fighting, and unable to get along with anyone. But in ***yeshivah***, the boy gets along beautifully with his friends and ***rebbeim***. Some parents find that even more frustrating. "So he knows how to behave! Why does he act this way only at home?"

I think the more important question is: Now that we know he's capable of getting along with people, what makes things different at home, and how can we help him use those abilities there? Similarly, your wife's cooking for guests demonstrates her ability. We don't know why things are different otherwise, but at least we have something to work with.

One possible explanation is self-sabotage. People sometimes interfere with their own success. You might see a child working on a beautiful drawing, and just as it's nearly finished, he scribbles across the page, crumples it up, and throws it away. Why? Perhaps he's afraid it won't be good enough, uncomfortable with the attention success might bring, or worried about future expectations. There can be all sorts of emotional reasons behind seemingly senseless behavior.

Sometimes people develop a pattern of disappointing others in ways that are difficult to challenge. Someone promises to drive you to a ***simchah***, then calls five minutes before departure to cancel. He has a perfectly reasonable explanation, and you can't prove otherwise. Occasionally, these things happen to everyone. But when it becomes a pattern, there may be more going on than unfortunate circumstances.

Others become emotionally invested in a particular story about themselves, seeing themselves as constantly struggling, mistreated, or unfortunate. An extreme illustration is factitious disorder, in which people deliberately create or falsify symptoms of illness. Their motives vary, but people can sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to maintain a particular narrative.

I'm certainly not suggesting your wife has such a condition. I'm illustrating how powerful emotional needs can be, and how seemingly senseless behavior may serve a purpose. Even if we suspect intentional behavior, we don't necessarily know why it's happening or whether the person is trying to hurt us.

What Not to Do

You ask whether you should fight for normalcy. My answer is no. Challenging someone who's emotionally invested in a particular explanation often creates more resistance and is generally ineffective.

Suppose a child insists he can't go to school because he doesn't feel well. You tell him, "You're perfectly fine. I know you're making it up." Now he has another reason to insist he's sick and prove his explanation legitimate. What began as a discussion about school becomes a struggle over whether he's telling the truth.

The same happens between spouses. You tell your wife, "I know you can cook properly. You did it yesterday when your mother came. You're ruining the food on purpose." What do you expect her to say? "You're right. I've been doing it deliberately all along"? More likely, you'll hear explanations and complaints about unfair judgment. The more you insist, the more she'll feel compelled to defend herself, especially if she's sensitive to criticism or struggles to acknowledge mistakes.

I discuss a similar pattern in my book ***Get Along With Everyone***, where people sometimes appear not to understand something that's actually quite clear to them. Trying to prove they understand and are just "playing dumb" usually accomplishes little.

I also wouldn't debate whether her behavior is normal. Is it normal to ruin food, spend hours cleaning without results, or refuse cleaning help? You can discuss these questions for hours and accomplish nothing.

Another thing I'd avoid is excessive negative attention. Sometimes people unintentionally reinforce the behavior they're trying to stop. If every problem becomes a major discussion and every failure receives tremendous attention, that attention may help perpetuate the pattern. We don't know whether that's happening here, but it's worth considering.

However, there's one more thing I strongly recommend avoiding, perhaps most importantly: Don't simply tolerate things that shouldn't be tolerated. Not challenging and not tolerating aren't opposites. You can do both.

Taking Care of Your Needs

You mention that your wife won't allow anyone to clean the house. That raises another issue beyond whether she cleans properly. If you live there too, and its condition affects you, why should you have no say in its maintenance?

I don't mean that a husband should dictate how his wife cleans or whom she hires. It's her home too, and her preferences matter. But respecting her preferences doesn't mean having no say in matters affecting shared territory and your basic needs.

Instead of arguing about whether she's deliberately doing a poor job, you can say, "I understand you've been trying to keep the house clean, and I appreciate your efforts. The current situation isn't working for me. I'd like us to find a way to keep things reasonably clean. If you can manage it, wonderful. Otherwise, I'd like to arrange some help or find another solution."

You needn't accuse her or decide whether she's capable. Simply address the practical issue.

The same applies to food. If it's unsafe, you certainly shouldn't eat it. If supper is consistently inedible, make other

arrangements without confrontation. You might say, "I love your cooking, and when it comes out well, I really enjoy it. When something goes wrong and I can't eat it, I'll get myself something else. Please don't take it personally." You're not punishing her or proving a point, just taking care of yourself.

I recently discussed a similar situation with a young man whose wife regularly prepared supper very late. He came home around 5:30, but supper often wasn't ready until 10 or 11 at night! Whenever he explained why this was unreasonable, they argued. There were always explanations, and he got nowhere.

Eventually, he approached it differently. He told her kindly, "I know you try hard to have supper ready, and I appreciate that. Maybe there are good reasons why it doesn't work out. But after a full day of work, I'm hungry. I need to eat around six. If supper is ready, I'll be delighted to eat at home. If not, please don't take it personally. I'll get myself something to eat, and afterward we can still enjoy our evening together."

Naturally, she wasn't thrilled initially. There were complaints and objections, but he didn't argue. He wasn't telling her she was wrong or demanding an admission. He simply explained what he needed and intended to do. Interestingly, supper began getting ready on time.

Not every situation turns out this way. Sometimes the other person won't change. But you've still accomplished something important: meeting your needs without constant fighting.

The same principle applies to cleaning. I remember a husband telling me his wife simply wasn't good at keeping the house clean. She had many wonderful qualities, but cleaning wasn't one of them. He didn't mind cleaning, having always been comfortable doing it, even as a ***bachur*** in the dormitory. He wondered whether taking responsibility for it would be reasonable.

I thought it was a perfectly good idea. Why not? If he doesn't mind and it solves a problem without conflict, what's wrong with that? Household responsibilities don't always have to follow preconceived expectations.

Perhaps you can handle some cleaning yourself or agree on bringing in help. I don't know enough to recommend a particular arrangement, especially if your wife strongly objects. But you needn't spend your life arguing about why something isn't getting done. Focus on finding a practical way to get it done.

The Problem Isn't the Relationship

When couples struggle with an issue for a long time, it can become the entire focus of their relationship. Everything revolves around food, cleaning, money, children, or whatever causes the difficulty. The husband comes home and notices what's undone. His wife sees him coming and prepares for another complaint. Soon almost every interaction revolves around the problem.

That's a terrible way to live. Even a real problem needing attention shouldn't become the entire relationship.

You mention that your wife is caring. That's important. There are apparently good qualities in your relationship, and I'd encourage you to appreciate them. Spend pleasant time together, express appreciation, enjoy one another's company, and strengthen what's working. This is especially important when you need to be firmer about practical matters.

Don't overlook other unaddressed difficulties either. Sometimes a couple focuses on one obvious problem while smaller, unspoken issues quietly affect the relationship. Addressing those may not directly solve the food or cleaning problems, but can improve the relationship and change the atmosphere in which they occur.

Of course, we shouldn't assume someone acts intentionally or dishonestly simply because their behavior doesn't make sense to us. People have limitations, make mistakes, and sometimes genuinely struggle with things we find easy. It's important to judge others favorably, even when addressing their behavior.

Ultimately, maintaining ***shalom*** requires both wisdom and ***siyata diShmaya***—knowing when to overlook something, when to speak up, and how to take care of our needs while continuing to build a relationship of love and connection.



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