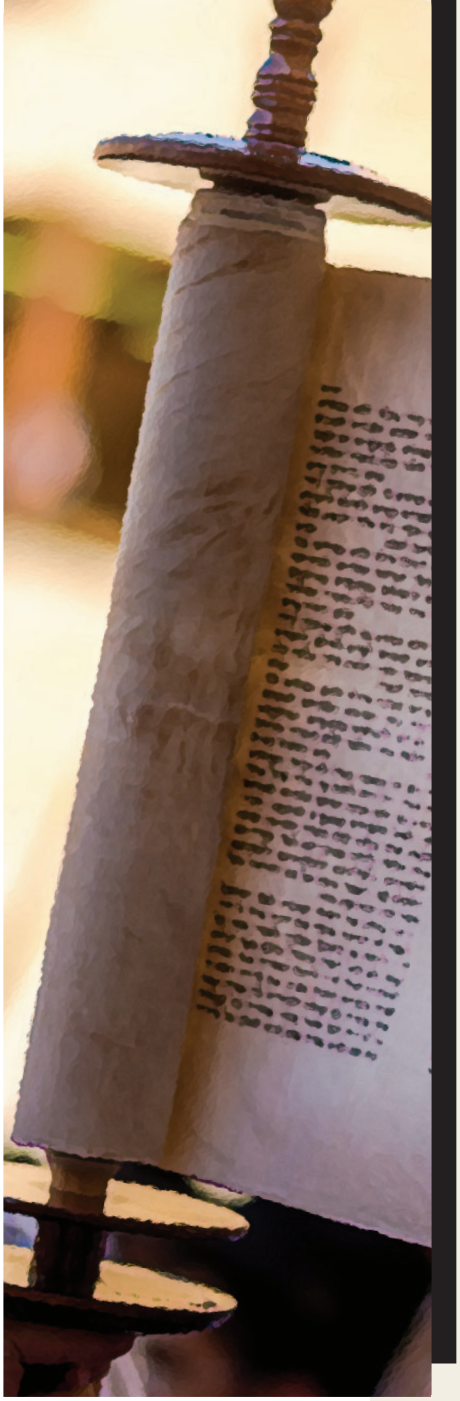


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

YOUR SPOUSE IS NOT AN OBJECT

As Yaakov Avinu prepared to encounter his brother after years of separation, he set aside animals to give him as a gift. The ***passuk*** tells us that "he took from what came into his hand a gift for his brother Eisav."

Based on these words, the Kotzker Rebbe ***zy"a*** delivers a powerful message for life. A person shouldn't just grab whatever comes to hand, seizing any opportunity that presents itself. Acting without thinking things through and assessing what is the right thing to do is likely to end up being "a gift to Eisav," something that awards a prize to the ***sitra achra*** and brings the person to spiritual or material ruin — or both. This can happen even if a person is certain that what he is about to do or grab is a ***mitzvah***. Without proper thought, it's easy to get confused and make bad judgments.

Relationships can be harmed and even shattered due to people failing to carefully consider their actions. Especially when it comes to the things in life we know are important and the people we care about most, it's essential to think things through properly. Any significant decision, any important encounter should be approached with the respect it deserves, which means investing thought and planning.

Taking relationships seriously doesn't mean that people need specialized training before getting married — quite the opposite. Everyone for whom the Torah is their guiding light has all they need to build a proper home, one of ***kedushah***. And yet, along with that confidence, one should never treat marriage lightly. Things don't just fall into place without effort; life doesn't just work out for people who approach it irresponsibly. When we make the proper preparations, however, and keep our true goal in mind, we can build edifices that will last forever.

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Parshas
Vayishlach
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I love the balanced way you respond to sensitive issues, and I have a certain issue where I'd appreciate your advice.

My wife is very attractive. I love it when she dresses up and puts on makeup (whether in or outside the home). She recently shared with me that there are certain things she doesn't feel comfortable wearing when we go out because she doesn't want to attract or tempt other men. I totally understand and support her decision not to wear things that will attract other people's attention, even if they are technically permissible.

My difficulty is that my wife also wants to keep the same standard in the home because she doesn't want our sons to see her look this way.

I want to have some opportunity for my wife to dress the way I would like. However, the kids go to sleep very late and I'm not going to ask my wife to change into something special at that point at night, because when I've asked her to do that in the past, it led to an argument.

How would you suggest we navigate this situation?

Thank you very much!



My first suggestion is one you are actually doing already in part, and that is appreciating the good qualities you see in your wife. The fact that she takes great care not to dress in a way that could have harmful consequences is a great ***zechus*** for her. It's wonderful that you respect and admire her for this.

It also seems from what you write that your wife has struck a healthy balance and that you continue to find her attractive at home. Certainly, a wife should make the effort to be attractive for her husband; the Torah tells us that having a nice-looking wife is one of the things that brings a man happiness and peace of mind. When the Jewish women brought their copper mirrors to be used in the construction of the Mishkan, Hashem Himself told Moshe Rabbeinu to accept the gifts as their use by the women to beautify themselves for their husbands was considered holy.

Too often, unfortunately, women dress up to go out and either don't bother or refuse to make the same effort for their husbands at home. In truth, they should be making much more effort at home. It's also important to stress that while a woman certainly has the right to dress in a way that she herself enjoys, she should also have in mind her husband's preferences. We should all take others' preferences into account whenever possible.

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The question arises when her preferences and his diverge — what happens then? This appears to be what you are asking: You would like your wife to dress a certain way for you, and she objects, which has resulted in enough discomfort for you to shy away from asking her again. Why did she object?

We can perhaps try turning things around in order to illustrate the point from a different angle. Allow me to use a ridiculous example, one that isn't necessarily comparable to your situation.

Suppose your wife has a penchant for clowns and loves going to the circus. However, the circus doesn't come to town so often, so she had an idea: Once the children are in bed in the evening, you will dress up in a clown costume, just for her. Naturally it wouldn't be appropriate for you to appear so silly in front of your children, but once they're asleep, why not make her happy if this is what she wants?

As I prefaced this, I'm well aware that this is not a direct parallel. Nonetheless, it does illustrate the point I'd like to make, which is that demanding (or even sometimes asking) a spouse to dress a certain way runs the risk of objectifying them for one's own pleasure.

Of course the specifics matter, and therefore, before going further, I would like to take issue with one thing you write, which is that "wearing things that will attract other people's attention" could be "technically permissible." If a woman wears something or dresses in a way that is alluring, chances are that it is not "technically permissible" — it is ***assur***. There may exist what are considered grey areas where there are differences of opinion, but while it's not clear from your letter what exactly you would like your wife to wear, asking her to wear items that she feels are not ***tzanua*** is usually wrong.

That aside, demanding of anyone that they wear any specific item of clothing because "that's what you want" is also coming dangerously close to controlling them. There's nothing wrong with liking certain things, and even asking for them, but expecting others to cater to one's desires on a regular basis (and certainly, demanding it) is unfair and even damaging to a relationship. While your wife's acquiescence might satisfy you on some level, it would do nothing to enhance the emotional connection between husband and wife, and most probably, it would actually harm it.

A husband (or wife) may certainly make the occasional request for something that would mean a lot to them, but even then, one must keep the ultimate goal in mind. If either spouse gets the impression that they are being used for the other's pleasure, what will be achieved?

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At the core of your question is how to find the right balance between wanting your wife to appear attractive to you, and demanding that she style herself a certain way for your pleasure. It seems that you do find her attractive, but you would also like her to dress and look a certain way, for you. At the same time, you appreciate the qualities in her that are holding her back from dressing and looking that certain way. In most such cases, you can't have it both ways.

I understand the balance you're looking for. Nonetheless, it seems that you will have to make a choice between having a wife who is sensitive to her appearance and to the importance of ***tznius*** to the point that she is careful to hide her beauty from others, and having a wife who is willing to objectify herself for someone else's gratification (even when that someone is her husband). You may have to decide which you prefer.

But the truth is that you can't make that choice for her — you can only make it for yourself. You can decide to focus on your wife's many good qualities and recognize that this particular aspect of her character that you currently find frustrating is coming from a very good and holy place; or, you can focus on this one frustration of yours and feel embittered and deprived, which will gradually erode your appreciation of her ***tznius*** and other ***ma'alos***.

Because this is such a sensitive issue, however, I very strongly recommend that you discuss it with your rav or ***moreh derech***. Sometimes, the ***yetzer hara*** convinces us one-hundred-percent that something we are determined to grab is essential to our wellbeing and even, a ***mitzvah***. It's only when we see things through the eyes of an objective third party that we realize that what seems so alluring, so positive, so beneficial will in fact only harm us and end up being a "***minchah l'Eisav***."

As a postscript to this letter, I would like to present another question that deals with a similar issue, one that many couples deal with.



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have been struggling in the area of intimacy for many years and particularly appreciate your explanations on why more clarity can't be given before the wedding. You finally afforded me a certain sense of peace as I accepted that no matter what we would have been told beforehand, it was the path we had to take (and still are taking).

Recently, we have been helped by several therapists who are both frum, but from more open backgrounds than us, so I am continuously plagued with doubts as to whether what we are doing is the correct thing, especially as you mention how important it is to follow the Torah's way and to strive for *kedushah.*

While I know that what we were doing in the beginning, which seems more pure and holy, wasn't right for us, I still feel guilty.

It seems like there's some invisible line between doing what needs to be done and taking it too far — but how on earth am I supposed to know where that line is?

You also stress how important it is to have a rav to discuss these things with, and we do have a rav — but I just don't feel comfortable discussing any of this with him.

I'd appreciate any insight you can offer, thank you

A ANSWER

When it comes to such questions, which so many people have, any insight I have to offer is not my own but only the Torah's. If I didn't have the Torah as essential guidance in this (and every other) area of life, I might well advise people very differently. But, because I am committed to the Torah path and trust in Hashem's wisdom, this is what I advise.

The Torah does have lines and they are not invisible — far from it. Knowing precisely where they lie is sometimes a mixed blessing. Within marriage, there are *halachos* and *chumros*, and sometimes, the *chumros* protect us from stepping over the edge into territory that is actually forbidden. All the same, treating everything as either black or white has its own set of disadvantages, as a person who finds it challenging to maintain a certain *chumra* which he mistakenly believes to be non-negotiable may end up giving up entirely.

The key to your question (and those of so many others) seems to be your need to find a rav with whom you can discuss this. I understand that it isn't always easy — but then, discussing similar issues with a doctor isn't always easy either, but we accept that sometimes it has to be done. You might find it easier if you remind yourself that any question you ask has likely been asked by hundreds of people before you. There's really nothing to be ashamed of when one is only seeking to do *ratzon Hashem*.

Even when you get clear guidance, it might not remove your sense of guilt, however. The conscience has been described as a Jewish "invention" which it might well be — what is certain, however, is that a person who knows he is doing wrong will never truly feel at peace with himself. This is what often forces us back onto the right track.

In most cases like yours, guidance is all the more essential as what is right to do today may not be right in a month or a year from now. There are times when *chumros* should indeed be set aside, sometimes permanently but more often temporarily. In order to know what and when, you do need the guidance of a Daas Torah (and not a therapist, even a frum one).

But you're not entirely correct when you write that I "mention how important it is to follow the Torah's way and to strive for *kedushah*." Following the Torah's way and striving for *kedushah* is not just important — it's essential. If we aren't striving for *kedushah*, then what *are* we striving for? There's no such thing as an aimless person, only a person who hasn't bothered to clarify which direction he is going in.

Only when we focus on our ultimate goal and keep that goal constantly in mind do we stand a chance of success in building a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*. That success depends on choosing between compulsive grabbing of whatever looks attractive at the time, and leaving the ephemeral and illusory pleasures of this world for Eisav.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYISHLACH 5786

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