

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

HELP THAT HELPS

Parshas Bechukosai describes how Hashem gave us the Torah on Har Sinai, "between Him and Bnei Yisrael." The Ropshitzer Rov *zy"a* explains these words as hinting at the *rachmanus* Hashem has on His people, the Yidden, using the *mashal* of a father who has to chastise his son for a wrongdoing. A loving father takes care to protect his son from being publicly embarrassed, making sure that no one sees him reprimanding the child. Meanwhile, in front of others, he only speaks well of his son so that no one should guess that anything was ever amiss.

So too, Hashem sometimes has to chastise us for our wrongdoings, but the warnings He gives us beforehand and the consequences of our misdeeds are all kept private, so that the nations of the world should not gloat.

The Ropshitzer also notes that keeping everything just "between Him and Bnei Yisrael" enables Him to overlook some of our failings. Otherwise, the nations could claim that Hashem is *chas veshalom* not being consistent or fair. Meanwhile, in front of them, Hashem only sings our praises.

We must learn from this how reprimanding children should look. When reprimanding a child, we should never add shame to the punishment, and we must take great care to ensure that no one finds out that a child had to hear a rebuke or be punished. The same applies to teachers; even when a child misbehaves, he doesn't need to be rebuked in front of the class. Rebuking him in private will have the added benefit of letting the child know that you are making sure he won't be embarrassed before his classmates. Often a child will understand and appreciate the fact that you're concerned for his dignity even without it being pointed out to him.

It's also important to avoid issuing warnings about punishments unless we are sure we will go through with them. Often, a parent threatens a consequence for a certain behavior and later on, doesn't want to follow through because something changed in the meantime and the threatened consequence is no longer relevant or fair. A parent (and anyone, in fact) must be consistent, and only by having forethought can we prevent such things from occurring.

נתנדב לזכר ולעילוי נשמת
הבחור היקר
שלמה זלמן ע"ה
בן יבלחט"א ר' אריה ליב שיחי'
תהא זכרו ברוך

Parshas
Bechukosai
VOL. 6 | ISSUE 32



Lechavod Harav Gruen *shlit"a*,

I don't know whether this question is really suited to being answered in a public forum because it's quite private.

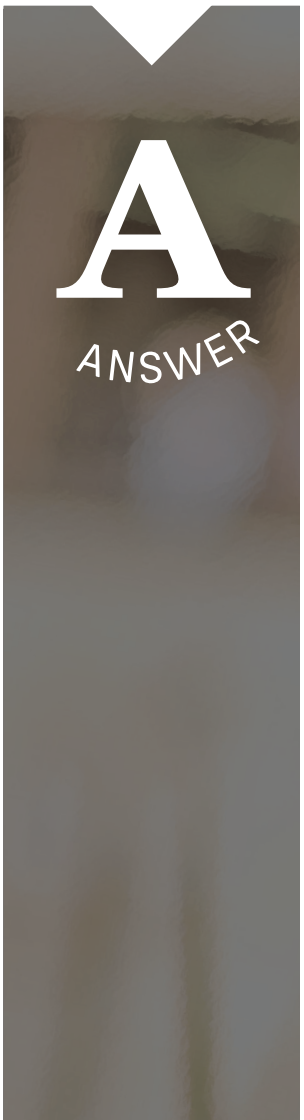
My sister got married a few months ago, to a "wonderful *bachur*" from a "wonderful home." At least, that was what we thought. The truth is that he's not nearly as chassidish or frum as my sister wanted her husband to be, but nonetheless, she has accepted that he is her *bashert* and that she will work with what she has. We all admire her tremendously for being so positive — but it doesn't end there.

Her husband grew up in a very unstable home where he was continuously physically and emotionally abused, to a severe extent, even continuing after he got engaged. He also had to witness his parents fighting between themselves, not just verbally... Understandably, this made a deep impression on him and now my sister has become his unofficial therapist.

She's barely just married and already has to deal with a depressed and demoralized husband and his awful parents, and she also has to drop her standards of Yiddishkeit from what she was accustomed to, from before her marriage.

How can I help her? Is that even possible, or do they need expert help? Perhaps you could help them, or is there someone you could recommend?

Thank you



It's sad to read such a letter. What's sadder is that such situations aren't as uncommon as we'd like. I have published this letter exactly as it was written, because unfortunately, it could have been written by many people, and there are no identifying details.

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Feeling disappointed at who one's spouse turns out to be is so common. Certainly no one can find out everything before making a *shidduch*, and surprises are inevitable.

That said, it's definitely possible to ask questions that are more likely to get the answers one needs. Focusing on the family, the reputation, the *bachur's* intelligence and so forth is important — but so much more important is: Who is the *bachur himself*? Does he have good *middos*? Is he well-balanced? Does he know how to remain calm even if someone challenges him?

R' Yiddele Horowitz, the Dzikover Rebbe of Yerushalayim *ztz"l*, would say: "People are so concerned with the 'when, how, and what' that they forget to ask about the 'who'." It's wonderful if the *chassan* has learned a thousand *blatt* Gemara, and even more wonderful if his father has the means to support him, but often these things overshadow the inquiries about his character and basic *menschlichkeit*!

Menschlichkeit is so much more important than most people realize. Many of the problems that people identify in their spouses are simply the consequences of a lack of *menschlichkeit*, or to put it in contemporary terms, a personality issue. If someone has, for example, a stubborn and inflexible character, it will often color how they come across to others in all interactions, often without the people in their lives realizing exactly why they find that person so difficult to deal with. (In fact, Hagaon Harav David Shustal told me in the name of his father-in-law, Hagaon Harav

Shneur Kotler *ztz"l,* that the very first thing to look for in a *shidduch* is someone with an "easy nature.")

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Once a couple is married, however, acceptance is fundamental and crucial. In this case, the wife has accepted her situation and is determined to make the best of it, which is wonderful.

Unfortunately, other people in the couple's life aren't always as accepting. They can admire their relative who has "accepted this terrible situation" while not accepting it at all themselves. Parents, especially, may feel guilty about the part they played in the *shidduch*, which can make it much harder for them to accept the new son- or daughter-in-law.

Even when they don't spell out their feelings, the son or daughter (the husband or wife) may sense their disappointment, which will make it more challenging for them to see the positive in their spouse.

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Sometimes, even when a person wants to give *chizuk*, that too can make things harder or worse. Telling a sister or brother, "Wow, I could never do what you do," can sound like helpful encouragement, but it can also come across as, "Your husband/wife is so impossible that I know I would never be able to deal with such a person."

Even telling someone, "Wow, you're so positive" can be heard as, "How do you manage to be so positive in such a negative situation?" The person expressing their admiration only has the best of intentions, but they still have to be careful not to inadvertently paint the "difficult" spouse in bad colors. It's the subtle messages that need to be avoided, as they can really be damaging, even when this was far from the person's intention.

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So, what can the writer of this letter do to help? It appears that she's already been a listening ear to her sister, which is more help than she probably realizes. In many cases, people just want someone to listen with patience and understanding and this gives them encouragement when they know that they have someone who cares.

Rav Avigdor Miller *ztz"l* would say that often, people came to him for advice, but then didn't take the advice he gave them. Only later did he realize that they didn't really want advice in the first place. All they wanted was for someone to tell them, "Wow, you're so right…"

No one should feel discouraged at being "unable" to help. Often, just "being there," as people say, is enough. (If a person ever hears about genuinely abusive situations, the listener might be obligated to take action, even if the abused spouse hasn't asked them to do anything at all, but this is a delicate topic where personal guidance is needed before taking action.)

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Sometimes, however, a person really does want advice, and they're clearly asking for guidance or suggestions. It's important to know when you're not in a position to give it, and to recognize when you don't have the expertise to guide someone properly. Knowing how to step back and resist sharing unhelpful ideas is already a help.

You may want to refer your loved one to an expert who can be more helpful to them. Regarding "expert" help, however, I would just offer a word of caution. While I doubt that there are many therapists who intentionally wreck homes and marriages, there are many who do more harm than good by giving bad advice intended to "enable the wife to stand up for herself" or "get her to realize that she shouldn't let herself be treated like this…" While there are situations where people need to be protected from abuse, doing so in a way that just causes a flare-up and doesn't build a stronger marriage does more harm than good.

By contrast, a real expert will help a wife — and certainly a wife such as the one described here, who really wants to build her home — to use creativity and wisdom to improve the situation, to work with what she has, and with time hopefully be able to build something beautiful.

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When a couple does need and want help, there are different opinions on whether they should go to someone together or separately. There's generally no black-or-white rule that will always hold true, but I do want to point out something that is often overlooked. While problems have to be aired in order to be addressed, there is often no need for one spouse to hear the other complaining about all the "terrible" things they do.

Just recently, someone told me about a counseling session he went to with his wife. Out of consideration for his wife, he didn't go into detail about their problems, but his wife did not have that level of sensitivity and she went into great detail, in his presence, about everything he "did wrong," all the things she was upset about — and he was left extremely wounded. I'm not sure why it's assumed that being in the "safe zone" of a therapist's office will protect people from leaving with hurt feelings.

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In many cases, if one spouse approaches the situation with a healthy attitude and seriously seeks to improve things, there's no need for both spouses to go for help. It's enough for the proactive spouse to seek out helpful advice, learn practical ways to improve the situation, and gain the *chizuk* he or she needs.

Often, it's better in such situations to not even mention anything about the "help," so as not to draw attention to

"how hard it is for me to deal with you..." Again, there's no rule that works for everyone, but often when dealing with someone specifically difficult or emotionally unstable, a spouse will be best off addressing this on their own, as long as it's done with care and a real desire to improve things.

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The writer of this letter mentions how her sister has had to adopt lesser standards than she would have liked. This is certainly a challenge, and one that many couples face. It's important to involve *daas Torah* when addressing the general situation and also specific questions — a rav who knows the family and can guide them according to their individual needs.

While extreme situations must be addressed by a competent *daas Torah*, in general, it is the wife's *mitzvah* to adopt her husband's *minhagim* and general way of doing things. This should, in general, be dealt with between husband and wife; everyone else should have absolutely nothing to say on the topic.

When a woman is doing what she needs to do, it's so important to avoid making her feel like a second-class citizen within her family. Not only is this harmful, but it also denigrates her very real *mesirus nefesh* in putting her own desires and perhaps even needs aside in order to build a Yiddishe home.

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Not long ago, I unfortunately heard of two separate cases of couples who got married only to have their hopes and expectations dashed by reality. In one case, the *bachur's* family hid a certain problem he had, although they "compromised" with a "lesser" *shidduch* and he ended up getting married to a girl with the same problem.

The *kallah* was, quite naturally, very upset at having been tricked. Instead of making the best of things and trying to accept that Hashem put her in that situation, there were terrible arguments and recriminations and eventually, they were divorced.



In another, very similar case, a couple got married and the husband discovered that he had been tricked over a very significant issue. However, he made up his mind that he would accept the wife Hashem had sent him and work hard (and in this particular case, it meant working *very* hard) to build a wonderful home regardless. He was able to make her feel like the person he wanted her to be, and he was *baruch Hashem* successful!

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Rav Kantor *ztz"l* once related how a certain person once came to his *shiur* and asked an excellent *kushye*. "What an amazing question!" he responded. "*Mamash* like Rabbi Akiva Eiger!"

A few days later, the man came to see Rav Kantor. "Rebbi," he said. "I want you to know that I threw out my television."

"Wow. What made you do that?" Rav Kantor asked.

"I realized that I can't be Rabbi Akiva Eiger and have a television set in my home..." he replied.

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While Rav Kantor didn't mean to actually compare him to Rabbi Akiva Eiger, he must have expressed himself genuinely enough for the person to feel special and want to live up to what someone else saw in him. It would be wonderful if we could give every Yid such a feeling, but especially when it comes to our spouses and our children, we should always be searching for their good points and focusing on them. When we to need to mention things that need correcting, do it calmly, in private, and with sensitivity and acceptance.

B'ezras Hashem we can all learn how to emulate Hashem's *rachmanus* on us, and bring tranquility into all of our relationships and be zoche to build homes where the Shechinah can enter and reside.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BECHUKOSAI 5784

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