RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Ki Savo

Good Intentions Count

Towards the end of this week's Parsha, the Torah tells us that the curses mentioned earlier will be a sign for us through the ages, "*Because you have not served Hashem, with happiness and a glad heart*". Many commentaries struggle to understand why we are told off so sharply for something that is seemingly minor. Just for not serving Hashem with happiness, we will be cursed forever?

The Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Pershischa explains that the *passuk* is telling us not that we are being punished for failing to serve Hashem gladly, rather we are being rebuked "Because you have not served Hashem [and yet, you were] with happiness and a glad heart". It is understandable that sometimes a person lapses in his divine service, but how can he be happy while this is going on?? He needs to keenly feel the void.

If one is a true servant of Hashem he feels joy when serving Him and sorrow when he cannot serve Hashem properly. The Sefer Nachalei Binah explains that this is why Chassidim make a big deal of watching their Rebbe's Avodas Hashem. Not everyone is capable of serving Hashem passionately all the time "*b'chol levavo u'vchol nafsho*" like a *tzaddik* can. But when one travels to a *tzaddik,* and makes a big deal about the *tzaddik's Avodas Hashem* he is showing that he cares deeply about Avodas Hashem and wishes that he too can serve Hashem on that level. What is certain is that when we cannot serve Hashem properly, the very least we can do is feel bad and wish that we can serve him better.

In our personal lives as well, we are sometimes faced with criticism from our spouses or children, who feel that we're 'not doing enough' for them. Not always is it something that we can necessarily fix. It might be due to our nature, or an oversight, or lack of other options. Many people tend to get annoyed, "*Uch! What does he want from me now? I anyhow couldn't have done anything differently!*" Your spouse often does not need you to solve the problem; they just want to see that this lack bothers you, that you understand their frustration. Just listen and show that you care, so that your family members know that your heart is in the right place.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your amazing shiurim. I find them really helpful.

I very much want to go to Uman for Rosh Hashana, but my wife is being very difficult about it. Please don't tell me to stay home; as a Breslover this is very important to me. How do you suggest I go about this? Is there something I can say to my wife that will make her happy to see me off... and to welcome me back gladly?

Answer:

This is a fairly common question that I get asked often. People of many different communities want to travel to their *rebbe*, *daven* in a specific *shul*, or join a certain *kehilla*, and their wives are not happy about it. While my answer will be geared to this specific questioner, it can and should be applied to any similar situation.

This could be a sensitive, hot button topic for many, but before I address the question, I want to issue a disclaimer. I have BH been married for many years and I have never been home for Rosh Hashana. I always travel to Eretz Yisrael to spend Yom Tov with my Rebbe, sometimes for as long as two weeks. I hope this doesn't disqualify me from giving objective advice on the topic.

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To some people, traveling abroad for Yom Tov is a totally normal and expected part of life, while for others it is an absurd notion (see Sukkah 27b). I would like to present both sides of the argument, because I think that each party has something valid to say.

This husband wishes to travel to the *kever* of his Rebbe. This is not something he made up, and it isn't some newfangled trend. Traveling to one's Rebbe is mentioned in *sefarim* (such as in the Nachalei Binah quoted above), and going to Uman specifically has been done by thousands of Yidden for many, many years – often with *mesirus nefesh*!

There are stories told of *ehrliche yidden* who practically escaped from home against the wishes of their wives and family to be with their Rebbes over Yom Tov. While that is certainly not something I condone or ask you to imitate, it gives a certain perspective as to how important this has been to *ehrliche yidden* for generations.

Additionally, to many people, this yearly pilgrimage is their spiritual refueling for the year, and they feel like without it they would be lost. Going away for Rosh Hashana is such a common thing, that even many "Shana Rishona" men do it, and they consider it traveling for a *mitzvah* which is permissible.

Furthermore, many men leave their families for business all the time – sometimes it isn't even strictly for business, only business related. Shouldn't one's growth in *ruchniyus* be as valuable as someone else's money?

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On the other hand, it is completely understandable for the wife to be ambivalent about being left alone – especially over Yom Tov. Many women got married without knowing this would be happening. And even if she knew at the outset that this was going to happen, she might not have anticipated just how challenging it would be. Caring for the children over Yom Tov all on her own and conducting solitary *seudos* might be more than she can handle. "Why does he have to go precise-

ly then", she might ask. Why can't he go over Yom Kippur when there are no *seudos* or on a regular Shabbos during the year?

Another common refrain is, "Hashem is everywhere! You can daven just as well in a local *shul*." Or, "If it's your spiritual fuel, then why don't I see any difference in your spirituality after you return?"

In this case she might also be bothered by the specific destination, and fear that others will judge her or talk behind her back that her husband left her over Yom Tov to go to "Uman".

Aside from whatever argument she's presenting, or any excuse she's offering, she might simply not like the idea of being apart from her husband over Yom Tov – and that's not necessarily a bad thing! In a way, it's nice to know how much your wife wants to have you around and grace important family *seudos* with your presence.

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And so, the arguments in both directions can fly back and forth. The bottom line is: this is normal. These are two regular people, who both have opposing opinions, and very valid arguments. Knowing that there are many people who deal with similar issues, while not a solution to your particular problem, can lower the temperature a bit. None of you are crazy for feeling the way you do.

Having said that, let's discuss what happens in a general situation where the husband and wife do not agree. This can come up, as mentioned earlier, in many different variations.

I believe there are four main points that come into play here:

The first thing is boundaries.

What belongs to whom in a relationship? In every relationship there is what's yours, what's the other party's, and then there are things that belong to both of you.

When I speak about this topic in a lecture I usually take my speaking engagements as an example. The audience and I are in a relationship of sorts. I speak, they listen. It is up to me to choose the content of my speech, what I should wear, and whether I stand or sit while I speak. The audience can ask me to do things differently to suit their preference, but they shouldn't demand or force me to do as they wish. Then, there are things that belong to both of us, such as the temperature in the room. Even if I would prefer to speak in a sweltering room, I should really check with the audience if they are okay with it, as well.

I also like to use the example of the wife who wants her husband to wear a specific style shirt that she likes. If he does not like it, she should certainly not try to force him to wear it. Arguments such as "*Everyone else is wearing it*" or "*I'm embarrassed by your other shirt*" are not justified, because the clothing he chooses to wear is his domain. Of course, if they can choose a design that they both like, they should totally do that. But one spouse does not have to abandon their personal preference just because the other spouse has an issue with it.

In the case of our questioner today, a wife cannot insist that her husband be at a certain location. Often, when she "does not allow" him to go somewhere, it is an infringement of his boundaries. If he wants to go to a place that is reasonable and not wrong or prohibited, especially something many find to be normal and accepted, regardless if her resistance is her opinion and taste, or what her friends will say, she really shouldn't try to impose her will on him.

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This would all be very clear cut if his choice of where to go is not imposing or affecting her, for example if it's a choice of two Shuls in the neighborhood.

However, in many situations when a husband chooses to go away – especially over Yom Tov – it most certainly does affect both of them. After all, the entire burden of the house and child care will fall on her shoulders when he is away. Because of this, it is incumbent upon both of them to find a workable solution.

A husband can't say to his wife, "Goodbye Charlie! This is my life and I get to go where I want. Figure it out!" As an equally responsible party, he needs to help her come up with a plan. Maybe he can take along some of the kids (like I do), or offer to leave her extra money for ready food so that she doesn't have to be so busy cooking. It might be even more helpful if he can come up with ways to make it easier for his wife by helping arrange for babysitters, cleaning help, or a place for her to be while he's away. He doesn't necessarily have to abandon his plans of going, but he does need to be considerate and not leave her vulnerable and helpless.

Another point to consider is that this husband can now expect his wife to take a few days off from the home as well sometime, when she feels the need, or has sisters going together on vacation - of course after making sure the kids are taken care of, just like he did.

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One should not hold back from bringing up and assertively discussing something they want to do because they are afraid their spouse will retaliate. Very often, when a spouse is controlled, it happens because they were afraid to speak up for themselves one time too many. But you should definitely be mindful of how your choices affect your spouse, and find a solution to any problems that may arise.

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The second thing to consider is timing.

Even though a husband might not need his wife's "permission" to go, he still needs to let her know his plans and discuss it with her beforehand. You can't just call her up on the way to the airport and expect her to be fine with it.

Find a calm moment to broach the topic with her, and tell her how much it would mean to you if she supported your plans. Don't bring arguments or proof from

sefarim why it's something you *have* to do. This type of persuasion hardly proves effective. Talk about "yourself" and the reasons why *you* feel like you should go.

Some people need lots of time to process things, while others will freak out if they hear about it too early. Choose your timing – and your words – wisely!

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The third thing is to be understanding.

Just like you want your wife to understand your position, take the time to really listen to her side of the story, as well. Don't get stuck on how you think she *should* be feeling. If your wife gets the feeling from you that you think she's crazy for even considering not being on board, she will automatically put up a much stronger resistance.

Empathize with her difficulty and realize that it really is not easy for her! When she sees that you really understand her struggle - and this is no game, do it sincerely - she will be less inclined to fight with you, especially when she sees you honestly trying to help her out by offering her ways to make it easier for her.

Another point is to sincerely appreciate her sacrifice. Even if you don't think of it as such, understand that to her it very much feels that way. Don't take her acquiescence for granted!

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And finally, the entire background needs to be considered.

When I receive a question, I don't get much context and only know what I'm being told. But the surrounding details, the ones I'm not being told, usually make all the difference.

Whenever a question about a technicality comes up, it is often not about this one thing. There could be an easy, straightforward answer to the question, but what is the context? How does this couple normally get along? Are they connected to each other? Do they usually help each other out and support each other?

When you want to be able to properly communicate with your spouse, you need to make sure that you have a platform for such a discussion. If you don't feel comfortable having such a conversation, it could be a sign that your relationship needs some work. It doesn't mean that it's your fault or that you don't have a healthy marriage, but this is certainly something you want to establish so that when scenarios such as these come up, you have an easier time getting through to each other.

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It's also important to evaluate what the background of your request is. What is your relationship with this *kehilla* or *rebbe* or place you want to visit? What is your wife's perception of it? Does she feel like it competes with her for your attention, or that you care more about them than about her?

Before I got married, a very smart person told me, "Shimon, you're a *chassid* and you're about to get married. Remember this one thing: Anything challenging or unpleasant should not be quoted from the Rebbe. The Rebbe should always be the good guy! The Rebbe should be your family's guiding light, a source of inspiration, blessing and growth, not of restrictions and negativity."

Finally, think about the background to your request. How long are you planning to be gone? How are you going to pay for this trip? These are all big parts of the question which may not be as simple as anything I mentioned earlier. If you're being unreasonable in one of these areas you can surely expect resistance!

Here's another question: Are you really a Breslover *chassid*, or do you only play the Breslov card when it comes to traveling to Uman for Rosh Hashana – something that you know bothers her?

Make sure that the entire background is reasonable and justified and makes sense for you, for your home, and for your specific situation.

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In summation, while you should definitely not allow yourself to be controlled and your boundaries need to be respected, you have to be mindful of when your decisions impact other people. When they do, it is up to you to find a way to make it work for both of you. You also need to choose your timing wisely, as well as be genuinely understanding and empathetic to your wife's position. And finally, work on the overall relationship so that you have the strong background to be able to work out issues such as these.

Last but not least, you should merit a Shana Tova, wherever you may be on Rosh Hashana of this year!

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