Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Vayera |

Respecting the King

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH: RESPECTING YOUR SPOUSE

In this week's parsha we learn about the marriage of Yitzchok and Rivkah. It pays to study this relationship so that we can learn lessons and apply them to our own relationships. So we will begin by looking at the very first meeting between the bride and groom. When Rivkah caught her first glimpse of her husband-to-be she had an extreme reaction which the passuk (24, 64) records: ותרא את יצחק, ותפל מעל הגמל –"She saw Yitzchok and fell to the ground".

So the meforshim explain, that Rivkah was gripped by awe, by the aura of Pachad Yitzchok- that fearsome yirah that surrounded him. And she was so affected that she fell to the ground in fright!

And this first encounter between Yitzchok and Rivkah shaped their relationship. In all the years that they were married, Rivkah always accorded Yitzchok the greatest respect. She differed with him on many points in raising their children, most significantly on the proper attitude towards Esav. Yet she never argued with him, and never contradicted him. She always spoke to him with only the greatest respect. This is the lesson we must learn from our parsha, the great respect a woman must have for her husband.

WHAT IS RESPECT?

Now, respect goes both ways, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 76b) says that part of the recipe for וידעת כי שלום אהלך, part of the recipe of good shalom bayis is: המכבדה יותר מגופו –when a man honors his wife more than he honors himself. So it's not just the woman who must honor her husband, a husband must honor his wife too. Any relationship really, must be founded in mutual respect if it's going to work. If two people are to work together, they must be ready to respect each other's opinions, and to take one another seriously.

So while it's true that a husband must respect and honor his wife, we do find in the Torah a certain obligation on the wife to honor her spouse more than the obligation that we find for the husband. For instance we know that once a woman gets married she is absolved from the mitzvah of kibbud av; she now has a mitzvah to honor her husband. While it is also written על כן יעזב איש את אביו ואת אמו ודבק באשתו "A man should abandon his parents and cling to his wife". Still, halachically he is bound by the mitzvah of kibbud av. I know that some may take offense with this kind of talk, but it can't be helped, this is what the Torah says.

EARNING RESPECT

Now, it bears mentioning that a husband should make sure that he deserves respect. Yes, a woman must respect her husband, but don't make it hard for her! Behave in a way that makes it easier for your wife to respect you. A woman must always respect and honor her husband, whether he deserves it or not. But as a husband you need to realize that your actions do affect the way your wife looks at you, and respects you.

NOT JUST FOR NEWLYWEDS

This type of respect that we're discussing is a lost art in the 21st century, nowadays everyone is equal, there is no hierarchy, and there are no boundaries. Children tell their parents what to do, students tell their teachers what to do, and so the world moves on. But we have to know that it's not true. Not everyone is equal and not everyone is on your level. So while your closest relationship is with your husband, he is not your friend; there needs to be a certain kavod, a pachad yitzchok.

This is not a kallah class, but what can I do? This is what the Torah says. It's unfortunate that these things are only mentioned in Kallah classes and then forgotten about. At the kallah classes you learn that you need to respect your husband, but then you hear, "We're a team, let's do this together!" But it's important to remember that you're not a team. You are two individuals who are connected on a very deep level. But not on every level.

When it comes to marriage, there is a certain special feeling, a certain sacredness that comes when the wife shows complete respect for her husband. It is no longer a regular relationship, it becomes a marriage. And the benefits come back to the wife!

BECOMING A QUEEN

A great man once told his daughter "Treat your husband like a king, and you'll be a queen". The Menoras Hama'or actually quotes a midrash that states a similar idea: שצותה חכמה אחת לבתה כשהיתה מוליכה לבית בעלה, אמר לה, בתי עמדי לפניו כלפני המלך ותשרתהו, ואם תהיי לו אמה, הוא יהיה לך עבד ויכבדך כגבירה, ואם תתגדלי עליו, יהיה לך לאדון בעל כרחך, ואז תהיי בעיניו נקלה כאחת השפחות. –A wise woman was leading her daughter to her husband's home, to get married. So she told her "My daughter, treat your husband like a king; act as if you're a servant-girl and do all of his wishes. If you act like his servant, he will serve you! And he will honor you as if you were a noblewoman. But if you will boss him around, he'll turn around and show you who is boss, and then he'll treat you as a mere chattel!"

So you don't become a queen, by being the wife of the king. Only if you act like a servant of the king will you become a queen. If you truly treat your husband like a king, then he'll treat you like a queen. And make no mistake, of course, if a husband honors his wife, she'll honor him back as well. But there's no question that the way of the Torah is, that the woman should be subservient to her husband.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE KING

A husband is specifically instructed not to take advantage of his wife, not to exploit her ולא יטיל אימה יתירה בתוך ביתו" – "He shouldn't promote excessive fear in his home". So while a woman should respect her husband, and more than respect him, also have an element of fear, of ותפול מעל הגמל, her husband should not take advantage of this situation and intimidate her.

The Rambam writes: וכן צוו חכמים על האשה שתהיה מכבדת בעלה יותר מדאי, ויהיה עליה מורא ממנו, ותעשה כל מעשיה על פיו, ויהיה בעיניה כמו שר או מלך, מהלכת בתאות לבו ומרחקת כל מה שישנא. –"A woman must respect her husband more than what is expected, and she should act like she fears him". She should do everything as per his requests, and she should view him as if he's a king or an important government official. She should do everything that she knows he likes, and keep away from anything she knows that he dislikes." וזה דרך בנות ישראל ובני ישראל הקדושים והטהורים בזיווגן, ובדרכים אלו יהיה ישובן נאה ומשובח. –"Such is the way of the holy sons and daughters of Israel in their marriages, and in this way they will find happiness together!"

PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS

I repeat again, this is all not for men to act on. I spend so much time with men explaining to them their requirement to respect their wives. A woman shouldn't be afraid of her husband's reaction to something that she might do. But still a woman should know that if she desires a marriage which will be truly fulfilling, she must get to work on showing respect and honor for her husband.

Some people assume that when we use the term shalom bayis, we're talking about homes where there are problems. We're not. Once there are problems it becomes so much harder to respect someone. If the atmosphere is difficult and heavy, if there's fighting or silent treatment, it's almost impossible to start respecting someone then.

However sometimes these difficult situations come about only because someone wasn't treated properly. If your spouse was never respected, there will be bitterness in the marriage. And now it's not easy to respect him anymore. But חכמת נשים בנתה ביתה, there is so much that a woman can do if she's smart, resourceful, and determined to fix her marriage. Even though your husband is making it very hard for you to respect him, a great woman can always find a way to change the dynamic in her home.

HOW TO CONTRADICT YOUR HUSBAND

"I wish I could show more respect and honor to my husband, but there are certain things he just doesn't 'get'. What am I supposed to do when he behaves in ways that are damaging to the kids? Allow him to damage them?"

That's a good question, but we turn to Rivkah again. Rivkah disagreed with Yitzchok on Esav's superiority. But she didn't argue with Yitzchok in any way. She didn't do anything that would detract from Yitzchok's honor. She got what she wanted in a clever underhanded way. About the wise woman it is written ותשחק ליום אחרון – she has the last laugh.

And the reason is because פיה פתחה בחכמה, she doesn't open her mouth like a donkey. A wise woman knows when and how to say something, and that's what guarantees her victory, that's how she has the last laugh. Not by lording over her husband, no: ואם תתגדלי עליו, יהיה לך לאדון בעל כרחך. It doesn't pay to start bossing your husband around, ותורת חסד על לשונה the wise woman speaks only with kindliness, and that's her most potent weapon.

CHINUCH: RESPECT IN THE HOME

The element of respect in marriage is also essential for raising children. The respect that parents show each other, directly affects the upbringing their child receives. In order for a child to respect his parents, he must first see his parents respecting each other.

The problem is that some people have this wrong. Sometimes a mother will tell her child, "Look, I really think you deserve this, but what can we do? Totty doesn't let!" So this woman thinks that she's respecting her husband, and not only is she respecting him, but she's even telling her child that she is respecting the father's decision.

But the truth is that this method is just an immaturity on the parent's part. Instead of being firm with your child, you're blaming it on your spouse "I don't mind but Mommy would not be happy". Why are you looking for a scapegoat? If you respect your husband, or you respect your wife's opinion, and you accepted it, then the child should hear a unified message "Totty and I decided not to let", "Mommy and I are not okay with this". A child's environment is so much healthier. It's so confusing for a child when authority is split. "For ice cream I go to mommy and at bedtime I go to totty". It's extremely unhealthy for a child.

WHAT IS KOSHER?

I recently found out from a certain rabbi about a food that he never eats due to kashrus concerns. So I asked him what the issue is, perhaps I should take on this chumra as well. So he told me that he researched the topic well, and as far as he knew there was no issue with

this food product whatsoever. So why doesn't he eat it?

So he explained that his wife had decided that the kashrus of this food was questionable "so I don't eat it. It's not that I'm afraid of her, it's just that I want my kids to have a unified message. Totty and mommy believe in the same thing."

It's ok for children to know that their parents have discussions and they may disagree on certain topics. But they compromise and adopt one view, they have a consistent and unified front.

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Q&A

Please feel free to send questions on any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Q: My wife is behaving in a way that is not tzanua and I'm afraid to bring it up, I may just exacerbate matters by bringing it up. But it's wrong! How do I broach the subject?

A: If you read my books or listen to my lectures then you've heard this countless times. There is always a way to say whatever needs to be said. There is an appropriate and healthy way to say virtually anything. And if you don't know what that way is; ask someone. If you ask someone capable, you will always find a way to say whatever it is that needs to be said in a wise and respectful manner.

Generally the reason such a message is not accepted is because it is given over in a negative manner. Usually such a message comes along with an attitude of blame and criticism. There may be an underlying message that "what you're doing is no good, you're bad". The message may be laced with frustration, "I've told you already a million times".

When you say the same message without condescension, without underlying criticism, it's bound to go over well. If you stick to the topic, without bringing up anything else, and don't blame. And by the way you should validate her feelings, "I'm sure you never meant it in a bad way" [even if you're not sure]! And don't control her, don't wait for an answer, let it hang. Say your piece, and move on.

Baruch Hashem in the case of this questioner, I already know what the results were, as soon as the client brought up the subject to his wife in such a way, she said "Yes, it's difficult for me, but you're right, I'll try". That's all, victory! But some people aren't ready to accept that, some husbands in such a situation, shoot back "What do you mean you'll try?! This is important" Boom. You lost her. Don't do that, people need to work at their own pace, and as your wife she deserves the respect. Smile, and say "Thanks, I really appreciate that you're so accepting".

Chazal tell us כשם שמצוה לומר דבר הנשמע, כך מצוה שלא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע. Just as there is a mitzvah to give Mussar when it will be accepted, there is a mitzvah to abstain from giving Mussar when you know that it won't be accepted. Now most people don't understand this chazal, they think chazal are telling us, "If it won't work, don't say it". But no, chazal are telling us "If it won't work, it's an aveira to say it in such a manner!" if your words won't be accepted, you are humiliating Hashem by invoking His name in order for it to be desecrated.

So don't think, "Oh, it's a mitzvah I can say whatever I want". Precisely because you're dealing with a mitzvah you can't say anything you want! You don't want your wife to build up resentment towards Torah and mitzvos and so, when it comes to such a question you have to think carefully and choose your words wisely.

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call 718.841.6557 or e-mail rabbigruen@lehair.org
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