

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

UNCONDITIONAL RESPECT

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem sends Moshe Rabbeinu as His *shaliach* to redeem Klal Yisrael but Moshe protests that due to the exhaustion of the Yidden, they won't be able to accept his words.

In his commentary, the Sfas Emes explains that there were three ways of looking at the situation. From the objective perspective, one could say that Hashem's command is absolute and no excuse is accepted for not obeying it unquestioningly. From the completely subjective perspective, the Yidden could excuse themselves with the justification that they are so broken by years of slavery that they find it impossible to obey and should be understood.

Moshe Rabbeinu chose the third way, the way of a true leader, and accepted all the blame for any lack in the Yidden upon himself. "Perhaps Bnei Yisrael will not listen to me," he tells Hashem, "as I have a speech defect." If only I could present things better, he is implying, I would be able to speak to the hearts of the exhausted Yidden and convince them that they are capable of obeying Hashem's command. If they don't heed my message, then blame me, the messenger.

So often, a spouse in a challenging marriage sees him or herself as doing so much more than their spouse. Many people see themselves as having to put up with so much more than "should be." It's easy, in such situations, to excuse oneself from fulfilling the underlying obligations of marriage and justify lack of respect or consideration.

Moshe Rabbeinu teaches us that as much as there may be mitigating factors, the right approach is to say: "Perhaps I'm part of the problem, and by addressing what I'm doing wrong, I can improve things."

When we encounter difficulties in life that cannot be blamed on anyone, it's relatively easy to admit that we have fallen short in our *avodas Hashem*, deserve the consequences, and should immediately do what we can to improve matters. Within relationships, where it appears that there *is* someone to blame, admitting one's own part in the issue is much harder. Nonetheless, with the right guidance it can be done and even the most difficult situations can be improved.

This week's essay
is dedicated

לע"נ
**ר' יצחק ב"ר
אברהם דוד דוב ע"ה**
יאה"צ כ"ב טבת

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your insightful Torah classes. I really enjoy the way you present everything in a logical, easy-to-understand way. However, after listening to your class on surrendering in a marriage, I found myself strongly disagreeing with what you said.

You prefaced your comments by saying that you "didn't mean to be disrespectful or dismissive" but that is how you came across, and I was left feeling very hurt, as my situation is a bit similar to the one you were describing. I feel that until someone understands the pain of being in such a lonely marriage, it's easy to tell a wife that "you need to respect him," but respect isn't a button you can press. You also suggested that if such a wife would only treat her husband nicely, it would make a lot of the issues better, but it's just not as simple as that.

Like most girls, I got married prepared to give my husband so much respect and to treat him as a king. I was taught that a wife must follow her husband and subject herself to his wishes and be *mevater* on her own, etc., which is, of course, proper with a healthy spouse. However, when a husband treats his wife horribly, puts her and everyone else constantly down with rough language, and does whatever he wants without taking her needs in consideration, those ideas don't work, and she finds herself slowly losing her respect for him.

My husband is far from abusive — he's just very thoughtless and blunt, and lacks social skills and self-awareness. He has very poor *middos*, makes no effort to improve them, and doesn't behave like a *mentsh*. His whole family has similar issues (which he realizes). In fact, many of his family members are worse than he is.

But he refuses to go to therapy and I have gone myself, to learn how to accept the situation and work with it. Over the years I've learned how to protect myself and how to put my foot down strongly when I really need something. Even though it doesn't feel good being a "bad wife," at least I'm not bitter at not having my needs met. I've also been very firm about the kind of language I won't accept, which has made him tone it down a bit, but it's also led to me losing respect for him and feeling like his mother. I know my situation is quite complicated, so I just want to focus on two concerns:

Firstly, hard as I try, I have close to zero respect for him. I know that sounds terrible, and if you have a year to listen, I could give you examples and stories of horrible times when I've been mistreated, which has made me lose respect. I fully understand him and don't blame him for acting like his parents, but all the same, I don't really understand why he can't change. And I just don't know what to do about not being able to respect someone who doesn't deserve my respect. It's not about the way I act — it's the lack of any feeling of respect for him. Over the years I've had to teach him so much about how to treat a wife and kids, and yet, even today, it's still basically a choice of be quiet and get treated horribly, or put down your foot, explain why he can't behave that way, and be treated better but lose respect for him.

I've learned to let go and look away from any awful behavior or speech that doesn't directly affect me, but at the end of the day, it's so hard and so lonely to live with a husband who lacks empathy and lives in his own bubble.

I've tried making a list of his positive qualities and reviewing them, but honestly, I'm in so much pain half the time that it doesn't help. I know how important a healthy home is for the children and I so badly want to give it to them, so it really hurts me that my home is far from ideal.

Secondly, even though I've learned to accept his behavior, my kids are growing up now and hard as I try, some of them, especially the boys, have started mimicking his behavior, and this is the part that's killing me. I look around at other wives who have successfully lived with difficult spouses and I've noticed that very often, the children end up copying the bad traits of the problematic parent. My sons talk down to me the same way as my husband does and are also dismissive of other people in general. It frightens me to think that their wives might have to go through what I've been through with their father. As long as it was only me paying a price, that's one thing. But I feel like I'm being punished twice, with a difficult spouse and now with difficult children, and this increases the tension between my husband and I.

I'd be grateful for any advice. Thank you



I'd like to start by acknowledging that my approach can perhaps sometimes be interpreted as unsympathetic and dismissive of people's feelings. Empathy and validation are very important, but with time and space constraints, I often move quickly to practical steps to be taken. I understand that this can leave some people feeling misunderstood.

That said, there will always be times when people don't enjoy hearing what I have to say, and my aim is not to please but to help. Often, people find themselves a rav whose *shiurim* they appreciate — until he says something that personally challenges them. It's precisely at such times that what the rav has to say is important to heed. While many therapists are happy to take people's money and do nothing more than let people vent and then tell them what a *nebach* they are, that's not something I ever want to do. It may leave clients with a very temporary good feeling at being "such a victim" and "struggling in such terrible conditions" — but at the end of the day, they don't necessarily gain much from that feeling. And sometimes it's downright damaging.

Based on what you describe, you are certainly dealing with a very challenging situation. I'm hopeful that your purpose in writing to me was not simply to have me agree with you on that. I would be doing a disservice to you and to anyone reading this if I merely replied: "You're right. Your husband sounds like a problem and has yet to earn your respect." If anyone does turn to a rav or therapist for help in such a situation and their response is simply to validate their hard feelings and throw the ball into the other spouse's court, they should immediately seek better advice. Furthermore, if you're the rav or therapist being presented with such a situation and you can't see a way forward, refer the struggling spouse to someone who does see a glimmer of hope and has some practical and helpful advice to offer. Not everyone is the right *shaliach* for every case.

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You refer to the idea of a "surrendered wife" which is based on the book of that name. Interestingly, it has more recently been relabeled "The Empowered Wife," as many objected to the idea that a wife should ever surrender. While I'm not one to recommend secular literature, it is true that the underlying concept of surrender is a Jewish concept. Furthermore, the book was specifically written for situations such as the one you describe, where the husband appears very difficult to deal with. People whose husbands have wonderful *middos* don't usually need guidance on how to "surrender."

Respecting one's husband and deferring to him is basic to *shalom bayis*, and this applies also in marriages such as your own, though certainly you have a greater challenge in achieving this than do many other women.

You write that it's not a matter of actions but of feelings, but this is where I feel the need to correct you. Respect is something we show and give, not necessarily something we feel. It's actions, not putting on an act. You are not obligated to feel admiration for your husband but you are obligated to treat him with respect. This is similar to the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim*, where the *halachah* defines one's behavior toward one's parents and places far less emphasis on feelings of love or admiration for them.

Clearly I cannot assess from your letter whether you act respectfully toward your husband, whatever your feelings may be. However, it could be worth, just for a moment, setting aside your own feelings and trying to look at the situation through your husband's eyes. Do you think he feels that you treat him with respect? Do you think he senses that you despise him, or look down on him? If that's a possibility, how do you think that might affect his behavior toward you?

Even if you were the most disrespectful of wives, that would still not excuse your husband behaving abusively toward you. He, like you, is obligated to treat his spouse with respect, regardless. And it's true that even if you become the most respectful of wives, there's no guarantee that your husband will change in response. However, it is likely that some change will result, and that's something that you can work with.

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Often, people have misguided ideas on what it means to treat one's spouse with respect. It doesn't mean swallowing hurt feelings and putting a brave smile on your face when being mistreated. It does mean always speaking calmly and respectfully, even when pointing out things that need to be improved. It also means recognizing that while your spouse may need to make changes in one area, you have other areas where improvement is in order. Virtually every issue can be discussed, given the right time, wording, and tone of voice.

It's very rare to find a situation where one spouse genuinely tries to treat the other with respect and to properly raise issues that need addressing, with no results. Improvements take time to manifest themselves, however. Change is usually slow and a lot of patience is needed, along with encouragement.

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You write that you sometimes feel like your husband's mother, and this is something that can definitely end up happening when we don't know how to communicate in a more productive way. It seems that what you've been doing until now is, essentially, treating your husband like a young child who needs to be taught how to behave and can't figure things out for himself. When you perceive him that way, it's only natural that you lose respect for him.

However, there is another way of perceiving him, and that's as someone who, like you, has challenges in life that he is learning to face. Making changes is hard, and no one wants to be told, when making the effort to improve, "Well, finally you

figured it out! What a shame I had to tell you so many times before you listened..."

People who become accustomed to being disparaged, even when they make an effort, are unlikely to want to continue making that effort when all it earns them is a sarcastic comment. Instead, admire your husband for being humble enough to accept the need to change and to accept it from his wife, no less, which isn't easy. This way, you're much more likely to make him want to keep moving in the right direction.

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In fact, you mention that your husband does improve his behavior when you point things out to him. That's something that needs to appear near the top of your list of things to admire. And it's great that you have compiled such a list. Even though it hasn't helped you so much to alter your feelings, just writing it and knowing there is something to write has probably made some kind of impact.

Now imagine yourself showing this list to someone who doesn't know you or your husband. Without your hurt feelings getting in the way, how do you think that person would respond? Would they also have "close to zero respect" for your husband? Next time you take out your list, try to look at what you have written there with an objective gaze. Sometimes, taking yourself out of the picture for a moment allows a more honest perspective to emerge.

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Looking at things objectively isn't easy, of course. However, when it comes to what seems like an overlap between *shalom bayis* issues and problems with *chinuch habanim*, it's vital to take a step back and compartmentalize. Certainly *shalom bayis* issues can contribute to *chinuch* issues if we aren't careful, but the link isn't as direct as many people believe.

In your situation, while it may seem that your children's behavior is a copy of what they see in their father, things are rarely so simple. You need to address their behavior — together with your husband — as an issue in itself, not a result of how you or your husband behaves. And you do need to address their behavior. You can't simply throw up your hands and say, "Well, of course they behave that way. After all, with such a father..."



Yes, parents are to a great degree responsible for their children's behavior. However, determining exactly in which ways they are responsible is not easy and not always productive. Certainly blaming problems on the other spouse is not going to improve either the children's behavior or the *shalom bayis* situation.

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You write that you have been to therapy to learn how to accept your situation, and that you are no longer bitter about your marriage. I wonder whether your therapist has inadvertently guided you to very much the wrong sort of acceptance, the kind that is born of hopelessness and resentment at having a husband so different from the kind of spouse you wanted.

The kind of acceptance the Torah wants us to have is, by contrast, based on seeing one's spouse as equal but different. Just as we accept our own flaws and try to improve, we can accept the flaws in our spouse and recognize and admire their efforts toward improvement. This isn't an approach of "poor me the unhappy victim," resigned to a life of suffering, but rather an acceptance that comes from understanding the other person's nature and challenges, even when they are so diametrically opposed to our own. This becomes possible when we look at the situation through eyes of *emunah* and seek out the ways in which being put in this situation forces us to improve our *middos* and turn to Hashem for help and clarity.

And as I started off, I hope you have not found my response too direct and demanding. I know that people looking for help are seeking more than sympathy. The insights you have and the willingness you have displayed in asking for help will, *be'ezras Hashem,* enable you to turn things around and improve your relationship with your husband immeasurably, to the point that you and he will be able to see each other with genuine respect and appreciation.

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