

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

TELLING THE TRUTH

Parshas Vayakhel opens with Moshe Rabbeinu gathering Bnei Yisrael together and introducing the donations that would be required for the building of the Mishkan. A few *pesukim* later, Moshe Rabbeinu again addresses the entire nation with the words: "This is what Hashem has commanded to say..." Rashi comments, "*Li leimor lachem*," this is what Hashem commanded *me*, to say to you.

The Medrash explains that after the episode of the *egel hazahav*, the golden calf that Bnei Yisrael contributed to, the Yidden were despondent and desperate to find some way to atone. And yet, what could possibly atone for such a grave sin? But Hashem had foreseen that they would sin, and had created an opening for Moshe Rabbeinu to plead for them — and this is what is being referred to now.

Moshe Rabbeinu told Bnei Yisrael: Yes, you sinned, but you only made that mistake because the first of the Aseres Hadibros — the Ten Commandments — was given in the singular form: "I am Hashem your G-d, you [singular] shall not have other gods..." Although Hashem was referring to the entire nation, you understood it as referring only to me. Therefore, now Hashem is commanding me to tell you of a way to achieve atonement, by contributing to the Mishkan.

Throughout the Torah we find Moshe Rabbeinu trying to put the Yidden in the best possible light and interpret their actions in the best possible way — to the extent that he asked Hashem to "delete me from Your book" if Klal Yisrael could not be saved. Of course Moshe also rebuked Klal Yisrael many times, but it was always with understanding and great effort to rectify the situation.

We must learn to apply this in our own relationships — with our spouses, children, and others. Even when a rebuke has to be given, it should be accompanied with understanding, caring, and a genuine attempt to make things better.

Some people mistakenly believe that between a husband and wife, there is no place for rebuke of any kind (as the well-known phrase about a wife not being her husband's *mashgiach* illustrates). Should a husband or wife really not care about the level of *ruchniyus* of their spouse? Are neither of them ever allowed to mention anything unpleasant? Clearly the real question is how to address problems that arise — which should not be ignored.

Hashem created people in such a way that we care about each other, and within marriage, each spouse has a responsibility to the other when it comes to both *ruchniyus* and *gashmiyus*. One of the things we can learn from Moshe Rabbeinu is how to fulfill that responsibility in the best possible way.

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Parshas
Vayakhel
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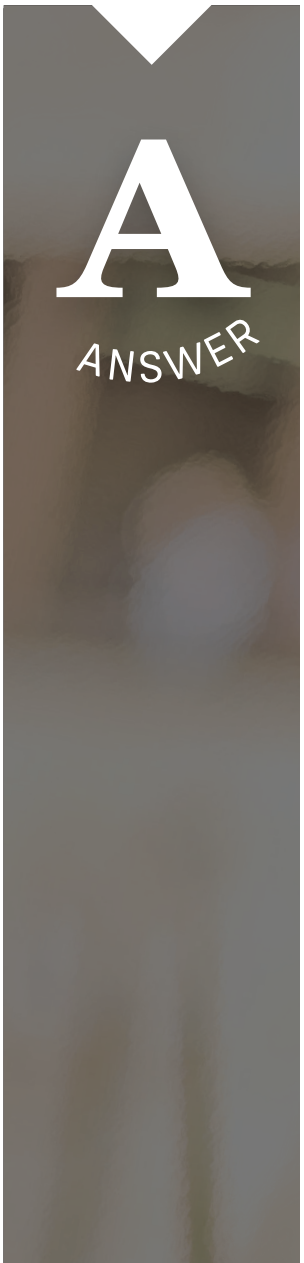


Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Recently I overheard a group of friends sitting around and chatting about how they aren't entirely truthful with their wives. They were talking as if it's normal for husbands to feel a lot of pressure from their wives, as if they're always on stage and have to perform, to give the impression of doing the right thing, even if this leads to them not being honest about what they do or think or believe, because they know their wives won't be happy if they find out the truth.

What I'd like to know is whether this is normal? Is it normal for a husband to think that he has to put on a show of being the most perfect and *ehrlich* husband, or should he be comfortable with who he is and not try to hide anything from his wife?

Thank you



Before I turn to the question itself, I'd like to comment on the use of the word "normal." So many problems in life and especially in relationships are caused by this idea of "normal." The truth is that everyone is different and every marriage is different; what's normal for one couple is very abnormal for another. It doesn't matter what other people are doing if it works for you. Trying to figure out what's normal and whether your spouse is normal will only lead to comparisons, jealousy, and heartache.

I don't think this is necessarily the most relevant place to address this, but hearing topics being discussed using this term makes me feel the need to point this out.

As to the attitude of this group of men, even if what they are describing *is* "normal," that doesn't mean that the person who overheard them should become like them. If he doesn't feel any need to hide things from his wife, what difference does it make if other people think it's normal? If an open and truthful relationship is working well for him and his wife, then that's wonderful, and neither of them should get stuck on whether that's normal or not.

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Another general point I would like to make is that it appears from the question that the discussion wasn't about how to improve *shalom bayis*, but rather, about how to fool one's wife and get away with it. Even if it is normal to be worried about what your wife thinks, that doesn't make it okay to be sitting and chatting about it in a lighthearted or, worse, mocking manner with a group of friends. It's bad enough if a person thinks that's a good way to build a Yiddishe home. It's much worse if he isn't ashamed of such an attitude to the extent that he's actually boasting about it and making fun of his wife's gullibility. If someone is having problems in his relationship, he should be looking for ways to solve them, not ways to belittle them and make fun of them.

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Finding it difficult to be truthful with one's spouse *is* a problem in *shalom bayis*, of course. Possibly it's normal to experience this difficulty, but that doesn't mean that it should be accepted as "just one of those things." Whenever a person finds it hard to be open in any relationship, he should try to discover why.

Sometimes, it's very simple: You're doing something wrong, and you don't want the other person — your spouse, or anyone else for that matter — to find out. Obviously, the solution is not to hide the wrong behavior even more effectively so that you can continue to do it. The embarrassment you feel should prompt you to do *teshuvah* so that you can resume being open and truthful.

Wanting to make a good impression on others is something Hashem ingrained in us for our benefit, as Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said to his *talmidim* before he was *niftar*: "*Yehi ratzon* that your fear of Heaven shall be as great as your fear of man." We see the same principle at work in the *mitzvah* of *yichud*, where the presence of a man's wife is a strong deterrent to him sinning despite temptation. Similarly, even the strongest internet filter isn't quite as good as something like Webchaver, where you know that someone else can see exactly what you were looking at on your computer. This is part of human nature and the way Hashem wants things to be — for our own good.

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From this we can understand that taking the opposite approach, and overcoming our natural sense of shame to tell a spouse about our sins, is often mistaken and damaging. A good wife should and will care very much if her husband acts wrongly, and chances are she won't simply accept or worse, condone his behavior if there is no desire on his part to improve his ways. His openness may be setting himself and his marriage up for a whole new problem of unacceptance, mistrust, long-term resentment, and disconnection. This is aside from the fact that simply "getting over the shame" can cripple him from overcoming the actual problem, even if his wife were to take it "well."

A person who finds himself slipping should harness the shame he feels to improve, so that in the future he no longer needs to feel embarrassment and can restore truthfulness and transparency to his relationship with his spouse. He should never try to overcome his sense of shame by laughing at how easy it is to convince his wife that there's nothing wrong, or convincing himself that it's "normal" to hide things from one's wife and that there's nothing in his relationship that needs fixing.

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In general, feeling unable to be open and transparent in a relationship is always a sign of trouble and of a problem that needs to be fixed. However, it doesn't always mean that the person who is hiding something is doing something objectively wrong.

Sometimes, a spouse puts intolerable pressure on the other to act in a certain way or accomplish certain things, and seems incapable of understanding why this just can't happen. For example, a wife may expect her husband to learn for at least two hours every night at the end of a long day of work, because that's what her father did. She doesn't understand, and refuses to accept that her husband is just too exhausted and feels incapable of learning for more than an hour.

What she may not realize is that she is pushing him into a corner where all options appear bad. What should he do — stay out for another hour, drinking coffee with a friend, before coming home "after learning for two hours" — or come home and face the music?

Sometimes, husbands in such situations do try to tell the truth, and the response is so negative and critical that they make up their minds: Never again. Better to hide something than to risk a major argument. Sometimes this really is the right approach if the other spouse truly cannot or will not understand. However, it's important not to give up too quickly. Sometimes, using the right form of communication can help a spouse to see things differently.

It's usually after giving up hope for improvement that a husband or wife chooses a confrontational approach that is unlikely to improve matters. Coming home after an hour and telling one's wife: "Don't you realize how tired I am? I learned for an hour and you should be grateful for that. I have friends who don't even learn that much. And everyone says that it's normal to learn for no more than an hour," is very likely to result in an argument, with the wife strongly disagreeing and telling him what she thinks "normal" is.

But if he comes home and says, "I really admire your appreciation for my learning, and I understand how deeply ingrained it is in you, having seen that in your home while growing up. I would love to be able to learn for two hours or even more in the evenings,

but I'm just so tired at the end of the day, and you know I need a lot of sleep. I'm doing my best to utilize the time properly, and I hope you understand the effort I'm making," then he can rightly expect a much more positive reception.

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Speaking truthfully and yet not telling the whole truth is also sometimes a better option than believing that one has to be absolutely one-hundred-percent transparent. This is the interpretation of the Bartenura on the words of the *mishnah*, "*Al tarbeh sichah im ha'ishah*—Don't speak too much to your wife." If a husband was publicly shamed, it's a very bad idea (in general) for him to come home and tell his wife all about it, if it will lead her to see him in a less positive light.

Unfortunately, I know of several cases where people came close to destroying their *shalom bayis* because they mistakenly believed that they should tell their spouses absolutely everything, even when unnecessary.

The story goes that R' Naftali Ropshitzer would come home every morning after Shacharis and his wife would ask how the *davening* went. "Excellent!" he would say, every single day. Once, he explained why: "If the *davening* really was excellent, so much the better, and my wife will enjoy hearing about it. If it wasn't so amazing, then at least she will enjoy hearing that it was..."

Of course, the Ropshitzer Rov's wife wanted exactly what her husband wanted — to serve Hashem to the best of their ability. But every person with a wife who wants to build a Yiddishe home has been blessed by Hashem with a partner in life to serve Hashem, and if he chooses not to appreciate that, and instead to hang out with "friends" to laugh about fooling her, he is shooting himself in the foot, ruining the beautiful partnership from which he could have gained so much.



The Torah tells us that it's "not good" for a person to be alone, and that therefore, a man takes a wife to be his *ezer k'negdo*. If he merits it, she will be his "*ezer*," helping him to serve Hashem to the best of his ability. If he doesn't merit, then she will "oppose" him. On the surface, having a wife who argues with you and berates you appears to be worse than being entirely alone. But the truth is that everyone needs to be in a relationship where he feels a sense of responsibility and also a sense of shame if he strays from the right path. This is entirely good and for our benefit, because it can lead us to a path of *teshuvah*.

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The Imrei Chaim would say: If a person had to *bench lulav* and *esrog* at home, and eat the *kezayis maror* in shul, then he would buy the smallest, plainest *esrog* to be *yotzei* the *mitzvah*, and eat the largest "*kezayis*" *maror* he was capable of.

Having a spouse presents us with opportunities for *mitzvos* far greater than taking the *esrog* or eating the *maror* — *mitzvos* all day long and all year round. If we can learn to appreciate each other and aim to be truthful and open with one another, we will *be'ezras Hashem* be *zocheh* to build a Mishkan for Hashem's Presence in our homes.

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