

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

SEEING THE FLAWS IN OTHERS

This week's *parshah* describes the process of purification for someone stricken with *tzara'as*. The Divrei Yisrael quotes his grandfather, the Rebbe R' Yechezkel of Kuzmir *ztz"l*, who explains what appears to be a puzzling aspect of the purification process with the help of a *passuk* from Yeshaya: I [Hashem] erased your sins like a thick cloud, and like a cloud have I erased your sins; return to Me [do *teshuvah*] for I have redeemed you."

If Hashem has already erased our sins, asks R' Yechezkel, why do we still need to do *teshuvah*? The answer he gives is one that we can apply so often in our own lives.

While we are entrenched in our sins, the *yetzer hara* blinds us as to what's really going on; so much so, that we don't even realize how far we have strayed and how badly we need to do *teshuvah*. It's only when Hashem redeems us from the *yetzer hara* that the blindfold comes off and we suddenly realize how terribly we behaved and how much mending we need to do — and then, we can truly do *teshuvah*.

Chazal say, "A person cannot see his own imperfections." Of course, we can see other people's imperfections all too well; just not our own. For the same reason, there's no reason to get angry when *other* people don't realize what *they're* doing wrong. It's only natural that they don't realize their mistake. That doesn't mean that they can't change — of course they can, and should. But when we look at others, we need to first understand that they can't see what we can — and we must acknowledge the same thing about our shortsightedness in regard to our own imperfections.

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Parshas **Metzora**

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I often listen to your *shiurim* and have gained a lot, both in *shalom bayis* issues and *chinuch habanim*. I'd be grateful if you could address my question.

I've been married for over 25 years and *baruch Hashem* we have good *shalom bayis*. There's just one issue that bothers me and has bothered me throughout the years, but now that the children are older and some of them are married, it bothers me even more as I can see the influence it has on them.

I grew up in a home where my parents were always thinking about how to help others. There were always guests in the house and my parents were always busy catering to people's needs, helping them out, raising money where necessary and so forth. My family is also very close and when my siblings married off their children, we all helped out as much as we could.

My wife grew up in a very different home, in a town where helping others just isn't the thing that's done. It's each man for himself and asking for help from others is seen as trying to take advantage. People don't help their neighbors much, and not even their siblings.

Recently, one of our children needed help with a certain issue and my parents and siblings did what they could and kept asking us to see how things were going. From my wife's side of the family, it was another story entirely.

My wife is a good person, and she is always learning books that encourage growth in *emunah* and *bitachon*, and she's also extremely devoted to our children. However, when it comes to helping people outside the immediate family, she has a real issue.

Now that my mother is elderly and needs help, it's become more of a problem because our family lives the closest to my parents and my wife has more opportunities than my siblings to help my mother out with shopping and cooking etc. But very often it happens that my mother calls and she simply doesn't pick up the phone, or she won't be around at a time when she knows my mother needs help.

This makes me feel really bad, and it's also a bad influence on our children, when they see that their mother doesn't want to help her mother-in-law.

I would like to bring up my children to value helping grandparents and others, and to see such opportunities for *chessed* as a huge *zechus*, but what I'm seeing instead is that my children just don't value this *mitzvah* properly.

I've talked to my wife about it, but she says she's just teaching our children not to be taken advantage of.

I know I can't make my wife change, and I do admire her for her positive qualities (for example, she runs the home really well), but how can I teach my children to be givers?

Another issue is that we have a few *bochurim* in *yeshivah*, and I feel that their attitude toward their *maggidei shiur* and the *hanhalah* is very *chutzpadig*. I had such great respect for my *rosh yeshivah* and I've instilled that in my sons, and they speak about him with great respect too, but when it comes to their own *hanhalah*, the attitude is totally different and I don't know what to do about it.

I would really appreciate your advice.

Thank you

A ANSWER

By way of introduction, I would like to comment on your mention of listening to my weekly *shiurim*. Even if we end up learning the same ideas over and over, listening to a *shiur*, even just for a few minutes, is enough to put a person in a certain frame of mind where he focuses on the things that are really important to him and gets the encouragement to keep investing where it matters.

In most areas in life, improving or declining is a gradual process. The Chazon Ish would say that when a child *R"l* goes off the *derech* it can look like an overnight transformation — one minute he was doing fine, the next he was gone. But it isn't really like that at all, the Chazon Ish said. It was a gradual process of no longer investing in learning, no longer exerting oneself to daven or do *mitzvos*, and slowly, slowly, the *yiras Shamayim* eroded until one day, the transformation was so deep that everyone could see it. The same is true with, for example, couples who had been investing a lot in *shalom bayis* because of issues they had, but when I meet up with them a year later, they tell me that things went downhill since. The only reason that happened is that they stopped investing.

Often, people tell me that they can already predict what I'm going to answer to a question because they're accustomed to the way I address issues. I'm happy to hear that I'm being consistent and that my words are having an influence on people, to the point where they are learning the ideas which they can slowly apply on their own.

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One of the topics I do keep returning to is the differences between spouses, and reaching a level of acceptance. It is extremely common for husband and wife to have very opposing natures in at least one area, so common in fact, that it would be strange to find a couple who are similar in every respect. (As the saying goes: If two people who are just alike get together, one of them is unnecessary.)

If you ask any husband or wife: "If your spouse went away for a month, would you do anything differently at home?" the answer will almost always be, "Yes, plenty of things." That's both expected and normal. The challenge of adapting to another person isn't always easy or even pleasant, but it's absolutely normal and to be expected.

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Another area where many couples get stuck is attributing problems to a spouse's family and surroundings as they were growing up. The husband asking the question seems convinced that his wife's nature is due to her upbringing. This is a very common misconception, and also a common cause of problems.

When we see a person not as a personality in their own right but as the product of their upbringing, we often blame their parents for their issues. This can seem reassuring, because we then assume that with a bit (or a lot) of effort, we'll be able to erase the parents' influence and mold the spouse into the person we want them to be (or who we think they "really" are). In reality, however, the spouse is a fully-formed person and their upbringing wasn't nearly as influential as we might think. It's not possible to change them by "erasing" outside influences — in fact, it's not possible to change them (directly) at all.

Of course a person's surroundings and family of origin have a large impact on the way they grew up. However, a person also has a certain innate nature which steers them to grow up into a certain type of personality, regardless of who their parents are.

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Portraying the parents or in-laws as the source of the problem is also a bad idea in general, as it is likely to cause unnecessary and painful rifts within families. These days, it's so "popular" to blame parents for all issues experienced by children, and therapists will often go so far as to advise adult children to break off contact with their parents in order to solve the problems they are experiencing with their own children. It's hard to see how this wouuld be productive in any way.

Of course no parent is perfect and all parents make mistakes, but focusing on what we can do in the future is going to be a lot more helpful than focusing on the past mistakes of others.

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To be sure, it's much easier to focus on other people's faults than on the things we ourselves need to fix. The Imrei Chaim of Vizhnitz would say that he couldn't bear to see people wasting hours and hours — if only they would at least give those wasted hours to him. But then it occurred to him that he could make better use of those few unused minutes he still had left, instead of focusing on other people's wasted hours... As for us, even if we truly have less to fix than other people, we can still accomplish more by focusing on our own defects rather than those of others.

All of us have areas where we could use improvement, and before we start judging others for their weak spots, it would be a good idea if we could first take a good look at ourselves. Unless you're looking at something intolerable and damaging, it's often best to look beyond another person's weakness. Part of marriage is accepting that each spouse has different strengths and weaknesses, and being okay with that. You can still look for ways to improve things, but just as you know how to accept yourself regardless of the things you know you should do better, you also accept your spouse with their areas that need improvement.

With no intention of turning the tables, I'll just offer a theoretical perspective of how this may look from the other side. In this particular case, the husband mentions that his wife regularly learns *sifrei emunah u'bitachon* and that she is a very devoted mother. It could very well be that the wife is stronger than her husband in these areas. Perhaps the husband would do well to learn some of the *sefarim* his wife learns once in a while, too. Perhaps, the father is very devoted to the *mitzvah* of *chessed*, so much so that his children would like him to spend more time learning with them — but he's always busy with other people. Maybe, his wife has a point when she says that she's teaching her children not to let people take advantage of them.

Again, I don't intend to condone any spouse doing the wrong thing, but more often it's a matter of perspective, and it's important to be able to say: "I'm okay with my wife being this way — after all, I have my own issues that I need to deal with."

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That said, there are still ways to improve the situation even when husband and wife remain very different people. The basic idea is to focus on the good rather than criticize the difficult.

What this means in practice is that the husband should make a big deal out of his wife's positive qualities. A wife who regularly learns *sifrei emunah* certainly deserves a compliment once in a while; a mother who is devoted to her children deserves praise for this. It doesn't matter whether it comes naturally to her or not, or whether she needs to improve in other areas.

Furthermore, if she ever does help the mother-in-law, that should really earn her a lot of praise, especially as it's definitely something that doesn't come naturally to her. Although the husband may see it as a given that family members help each other all the time, his wife's perspective is different. If his family isn't appreciative enough simply because they take the help for granted, this could be a factor discouraging her from offering her help, and so when she does help out, it's that much more significant.

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Sometimes, people only give compliments with an ulterior motive, when they want something in return. People deserve to have their good deeds noticed regardless of whether you would really prefer them to be doing something else. Even if the wife doesn't become any more helpful as a result of being complimented, her positive actions should still be recognized.

Refraining from complimenting and only focusing on what one's spouse doesn't do is likely to create very bad feelings of resentment and make the criticized spouse feel judged and looked down on. Naturally, this may only make the situation worse.

In general, a person who subconsciously senses that people are trying to get them to change will resist those efforts. Giving them the feeling that they're accepted and that their good deeds are valued is much more likely to improve the situation.

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The questioner also expresses his concerns about the *chinuch* of his children. Here, too, accepting the situation together with his and his wife's areas of weaknesses is probably the best strategy. As mentioned, many people would be *mechanech* their children differently if they were doing so on their own (*chas veshalom*). Luckily we aren't doing this alone. Part of having *emunah* is accepting that we have to adapt to the spouse Hashem gave us and recognize that although we may think we have the right answers, so do they — and maybe they're even right.

However, the father's concern is at least partially misplaced, because *chinuch* isn't about forcing our children to act in a certain way. There is of course a time and a place for parents to give orders and demand certain actions or behaviors. But *chinuch* is about teaching by example — and if the father truly values *chessed*, then this in itself will influence his children, even if the mother has different priorities. It's about promoting *chessed*, talking about it with enthusiasm, at the Shabbos table or anywhere else, and instilling a pride in doing *chessed* in one's children.



Sometimes, it takes years to see the influence our *chinuch* has on our children. Sometimes we never see the fruits of our efforts. Nonetheless, *chinuch* isn't just about results.

It's also important to realize that forcing children to focus on a certain *mitzvah* can backfire and cause them to actually resent that *mitzvah* later in life. Clearly this is contradictory to *chinuch*.

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With regard to the question of respect for *maggidei shiur*, naturally chutzpah cannot be condoned. Even if *bochurim* see their *maggidei shiur* acting in ways that seem unworthy of great respect, they must still be taught that despite appearances, their teachers are older and wiser in so many ways.

One idea that could improve matters is telling your son how much his *maggid shiur* enjoys having him as a *talmid*, and even that he called to ask if there's anything he can help with. It's often only emotional difficulties that make it difficult for a *bochur* to show respect, and giving him the sense that his *maggid shiur* cares about his welfare can go a long way to improving the relationship.

It would be nice if you could get the *maggidei shiur* to be more careful with how they behave, but that's often not an option. The *tzaddik* R' Yiddele Horowitz of Yerushalayim would jokingly quote the *maamar Chazal* that says that someone who casts doubt on his rebbe is like someone who has doubts about the Shechinah, and he would then ask: If so, wouldn't it be better to convince the Rebbe to act as he should and earn the respect of his *chassidim*? He answered: Yes, ideally, but it's usually easier to convince hundreds of *chassidim* that the Rebbe is perfect, than it is to get a Rebbe to admit that his behavior needs improvement...

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Chazal tell us that people have an inherent problem with seeing their own faults. However, we don't *have to* look at other people's faults. We can instead focus on their strong points and give them the praise they deserve, and remind ourselves that we have plenty that we need to fix in ourselves.

When we build homes filled with acceptance and appreciation, *be'ezras Hashem* we will have the *siyatta diShmaya* to raise our children to have *yiras Shamayim* and to value Torah and *mitzvos*.

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