בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS MIKEITZ

THE PROBLEMS THAT CAN'T BE SOLVED MAKE YOU GREAT

The Yetev Lev gives a fascinating explanation for the *passuk* in Koheles (4:15): *"Ra'isi es kol hachaim hamehalchim tachas hashemesh* – I saw all the living who walk under the sun," to which the Midrash adds, "*Zeh Yosef Hatzaddik* – this is Yosef Hatzaddik." The Yetev Lev explains that there exists in nature a force that resists the sun's orbit, yet the sun constantly battles that resistance and continues to do its appointed task. This teaches us an important lesson. There will always be forces in a person's life – often within the person himself – that seem to be obstacles in his path to growth. His job, however, is to overcome those obstacles and continue doing what he's supposed to.

This idea formed the basis of Yosef Hatzaddik's life. His path was strewn with obstacles and forces that opposed him. He had to confront his brothers as well as Potifar and his wife, and he had much to resist in his *avodas Hashem* in general. This was Yosef's greatness. He was always determined to overcome the obstacles in his way, and he succeeded. Yosef epitomizes those who travel through life like the sun, constantly overcoming obstacles and continuing to do what they know they must.

The greatness of a person is most visible when he is confronted with obstacles and surmounts them. In my *sefer Mimtzukoseihem Yoshi'eim* I discuss at length the topic of *sheviras hateva*, overcoming one's nature, and there I devote a section to the greatness of Yosef Hatzaddik who exemplified determination to surmount obstacles, as many *seforim* discuss.

Dealing successfully with others is often difficult either because of the obstacles they present or because of our own difficulties. Lack of tolerance or uncomfortable feelings can get in the way of accepting another person. It's often not an option to remove or avoid obstacles, and in such cases, it's overcoming the difficulties that shows what greatness is all about. People sometimes go for therapy to try to figure out how to get rid of certain problems. It may never happen. Your spouse may have a certain tendency or characteristics that will always be bothersome to you. Greatness is about learning to tolerate, to accept, to work along with that which may not change, and overcome the challenge it presents.

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QUESTION

HELLO RABBI GRUEN,

I often listen to your speeches on Torah Anytime and I really enjoy them. I find them helpful and learn a lot. Thank you.

I'm trying to figure out what I need for my marriage now. I've been married for about eight months, and it seems to me that my husband's relationships with members of his family are unhealthy and do not have proper boundaries. Small things kept happening every now and then that I didn't pay much attention to. I also doubted myself, being a newlywed and definitely not an expert on relationships. I didn't know what was normal and what wasn't. However, things keep coming up and I'm pretty sure they're not healthy. The problem is that my husband doesn't see it like that and thinks they are just a close family. I feel like it's come to a point where I really resent his family and feel like I need to fight them to get to my husband. He in turn resents me and it's really affecting my *shalom bayis*.

I don't know where I'm supposed to start or how I should go about working on this. I think my husband is a really great guy; he's smart, I look up to him a lot and I really like him. I just want to address this and anything else that may come up right away so that we can build a healthy foundation for our relationship and our home.

I would really appreciate guidance on this.

Thank you so much!

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

As I mention from time to time, were questions to be sent in by the "other side" of the story, wondering what they can do about the difficulties their spouse is experiencing, I'd have quite a few suggestions. I wouldn't want anything I write here to be misleading.

I want to start off by saying that it's clear that there are situations and relationships that are not the way they should be, and they definitely do need to be addressed responsibly, but before that, without knowing much about your situation, generally speaking, there's nothing wrong with a man having a close relationship with his parents and siblings, and your view of the situation is very subjective. The way you relate to the facts depends on how you perceive them. If what you're telling yourself is: "He's obsessed with his family. He's always trying to please them. He keeps trying to find favor in their eyes," then that's how you'll see it and if you describe it that way to others, the listener might agree that there's something wrong.

Of course it's possible that your husband's relationship with his family isn't the way it should be, and I can't claim to know for sure that your perspective isn't correct. If you'll allow me to, however, I'd just question your perception, given that often, even when things are just fine, it can seem to someone that they aren't for all kinds of reasons – and I'll discuss some of the more common ones.

Some people feel uncomfortable when things aren't being done to their liking or with their consent, and in a close-knit family you'll usually

find that more people have a say and your husband will listen to opinions beyond your own. I don't mean to imply that you feel a need to be in control and see his relationships as a challenge to that, but it's something to think about.

Other people find such situations troubling due to jealousy – they don't want anyone else to have a close relationship with their spouse. Sometimes it could be a general jealousy of your spouse's family dynamics, especially if your own family isn't as close. It may bother you that other people's opinions are important to your spouse, maybe even more than your own.

And some people feel intimidated by their spouse's family. A young woman can be intimidated by her in-laws, but it could be due to her own insecurities. Whatever the reason, this can make it harder for her to accept how close her husband is with his parents and other relatives, and this could make her want to close off and go off on her own.

These are all common feelings and nothing to feel bad about, but it's good to be aware that feelings don't always reflect the way things actually are, and it takes an awful bit of vulnerability to admit that this could be the case.

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With that said, I'll now address your question in the light it was presented, assuming that your perception is largely accurate. Even then, it's still important to acknowledge that your husband could still disagree with you. He may see things differently and he's allowed to have a different opinion on what healthy boundaries are. Of course there are situations where something is clearly wrong, or even dangerous, and if you suspect this may be the case you would do best by consulting with *da'as Torah*. In general, however, remember that it's okay if you and your husband have different opinions about what healthy relationships should look like, and this isn't all that different from any other area of dispute where as nice as it would be if you agreed, inevitably there are conflicts and this may just be another one of them. I'll expand on this below, but meanwhile, keep in mind that disagreeing occasionally isn't catastrophic, even if you don't enjoy the experience.

Disagreements become a problem, however, if they begin to damage the actual relationship. I once heard someone frame this very clearly: There are people who "would like their spouse, if only…" and others who "like their spouse, and…" There's a difference. In the first instance, the "issue" may end up displacing the "liking" you have for your spouse. In other words, you end up feeling that you can only like your spouse if the issue disappears. If, on the other hand, you "like your spouse, and…" it means that you are aware of the situation and want it to change, but your love for your spouse doesn't depend on that happening. It's usually in your own hands to decide which approach to take.

In general, issues that come up shouldn't disturb your actual relationship. Even if you're right, and even if he's doing the wrong thing, you should try your best to compartmentalize: deal with the issue, but don't give him the feeling that you like him any less or have less respect for him. Perhaps the fact that you're having a hard time liking him because of this is part of what's making him run off to them even more. This brings me to the next point…

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Think about why he's gravitating to his family. Perhaps it's simply because he has a nice, healthy relationship with them, as we said before. But even if you're correct and the relationship is unhealthy, what is he looking for there? What is this relationship giving him? What does he get when he calls them? Is it a sense of being respected, or simply a good feeling that you could give him too? Try it. You don't have to "compete" with anyone, but often the situation is ready-made for you, and it's up to you to deal with it correctly.

Another question to ask yourself is whether your husband could be running away from something that's going on in your marriage. Is there negativity in your home? It's important to try to find out what he's looking for and to provide that for him.

Aside from that, he might need them anyway, as blood is thicker than water, and family is important. This is aside from the fact that his relationship with them at this point is a lot older than his relationship with you. You can't dictate his feelings for his family. Neither can he dictate how you should feel about them. But the better you feel about his family,

the better he may feel about you. If you belittle your husband's family or don't respect them enough, he might take it personally, and it probably won't accomplish what you hoped it would.

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I hope none of this made it sound like you can't address what's bothering you with your husband. You may still want to and probably should discuss how you feel with your husband. But do it right. Don't attack him or his family. Talk about *yourself*. Use phrases like, "I feel," "I would appreciate," "It would mean so much to me," or "I would prefer..." Be specific. Ask nicely and express exactly what it would mean to you "if we had more time together on our own." Or tell him that you'd appreciate or would feel better "if we discussed these things between us first, as it can be hard for me to tolerate when you share more with them than with me."

It's also important to avoid generalizing the issue and portraying it as much more fundamental than it probably is – which will only make it appear harder to solve. Don't talk about the principle of the matter and don't try to convince him of how "wrong" it is, and definitely avoid expressions such as, "but everyone knows..." and the like. These things don't help.

You should also be careful to stress that you're not telling your husband what to do, and to make sure that your tone of voice reflects this. Especially with such sensitive and personal topics, pick a time and place that isn't intimidating.

And if you want to score a few extra points in your communication, be brave enough to admit to your husband that you could be wrong, and it could be your own insecurity making you feel the way you do.

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In general, try to avoid seeing relationships as competitive. Your spouse's relationship with his family doesn't have to detract from his relationship with you. The same applies to his relationships with his friends or workmates. If you become insecure every time you see him in a healthy relationship with someone, and you come up with all sorts of reasons why it's unhealthy or infringes on your relationship with him, that in itself can be unhealthy.

(That said, if you have genuinely looked within yourself and come to terms with your own role in this issue and you *still* feel that you are dealing with something beyond the ordinary, don't hesitate to reach out and consult with a competent *da'as Torah* who can guide you according to your individual situation.)

As I noted above, without hearing the other side of the story I can't possibly assess the situation accurately. However, in general, when we let each other breathe and respect each other's boundaries, while overcoming our own inner obstacles, we can achieve the happy marriage relationship we're striving for.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!