RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Mikeitz

Biting the Hand that Feeds You

In Parshas Mikeitz, the Shevatim beg the harsh Egyptian ruler to believe them regarding their innocent intentions. "*No, Your honor*," they plead, "*Your servants merely came to buy food*." Rashi adds, "*Don't accuse us of being spies, for we are here to buy food*." Reb Mendele Lisker in Likutei Maharam asks the obvious question. How does saying that they came to buy food prove that they don't have evil intentions?

The Likutei Maharam explains this by showing us a Torah principle. We learn that Moshe Rabbeinu was not able to facilitate the first three *makkos*. He couldn't strike the water that had saved him as an infant. Even though the need is great, we may not hurt something or someone that has done us a kindness. Similarly, Elazar ben Aharon did not go to war against Midyan, because he grew up there. You don't go to war against your own people.

Now we understand Rashi. There was a famine, people were dying. There was no doubt that the brothers were indeed in dire need of food. The brothers were saying that by receiving this kindness from the Mitzriim, they are thus beholden to them and will never be able to do them any harm.

The lesson in this is so clear, yet so very difficult to implement. After all, where is the first place a person lets his guard down? Where does one allow his truest colors to show? In his own home. Whom does he direct his ugliest outbursts at? Sadly, those closest to him.

Whether it's a husband at his wife, or a wife at her husband, it is very common for us to hurt the very person responsible for making our lives easier and better. Of course, you might sometimes get angry or upset. It might even be justified! But you need to keep in mind that here is the person responsible for cooking your meals and washing your clothes or providing for you, doing your heavy lifting, and making you happy.

Later in our parsha the Shevatim wonder why misfortune is happening to them. They turn to each other and ask, "*Might this be because we failed to heed our brother's cries*?" The Shevatim firmly believed that they did the right thing by selling the young upstart. But what they regretted being harsh – even if it was the right thing – *to their brother*.

The wrongdoing might be terrible, and worthy of the harshest punishment, but a brother is a brother, a wife is a wife, and a husband is a husband.

Out of sheer gratitude to our nearest and dearest for doing what they do and being who they are, we must always make sure to remain thankful and respectful.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

As of late, my wife has been dividing the household responsibilities between our children. For example, each child gets a room that they have to clean up. I don't approve of it. I don't understand why she has to throw so much responsibility onto the kids and put them under so much pressure. She is home all day and should have enough time to do the chores herself. She does the laundry and the cooking, but she leaves all the cleaning to the kids – but even when they do get around to doing it, they don't necessarily do it right.

For example, today, before I left the house, I saw the kids' bedroom in complete disarray. When I asked my wife about it, she said that it is waiting for the kids, and when they get back from school they will tackle it.

It's important to note that this is something my wife saw her own mother do. However, since my wife is from the younger ones in her family, it could be my mother-in-law only started doing it later on. My wife now wants to implement it when she's just 30 years old. I also want to add that my wife sometimes doesn't feel well and has a young baby at home – so maybe this might be a contributing factor.

I want to know if this is normal, and if there's anything I can or should do about it.

Answer:

I will start by pointing out that your question doesn't come across as overly critical or negative. You seem to genuinely want to understand your wife, and you realize that this might be a result of her feeling overwhelmed by all her duties. This is a very important trait for handling interpersonal relationships. Before you get into a discussion with someone, you need to try to see where they are coming from and make an effort to understand their position. There are always two ways to look at the same thing.

Keep in mind that my response is based solely on your own testimony, and there's a good chance that when

I hear it from your wife, I would understand her position differently.

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I'll mention that I don't think you should see this as an all-or-nothing situation. While your wife may very well be overburdening the children, and wrongfully so, it's possible that it's not *as bad* as you think.

My point is that there might easily be a balance of your conflicting ideas and perspectives, somewhere you can meet at, without anyone winning or losing this "debate". Is it only the children's own room that she leaves for them, or the rest of the cleaning too? Is it all the cleaning in their rooms, or is it only the toys they can easily clean? Sometimes it looks more extreme from up close, and you might not see it objectively being that you're emotionally involved, whether due to pitying your children, or having been brought up very differently.

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Having said that, it is possible however that you are not exaggerating at all, and that it might even be worse than you think. There are some people who witness a situation that they don't think is right, yet they resign themselves to it. They figure that it's not their problem, so why bother getting involved? This is not always right. Children depend on both of their parents for protection and security, and if you feel like there is something of concern going on in relation to them, you have a responsibility to speak up. This should not be done aggressively or in a controlling manner, but in a smart and respectful way.

Keeping the house clean is your wife's domain, and she gets to do it her way. It's important however to remember that when you have an opinion on how things should be, you can't just dispense advice and bark orders. If you don't like her way, your best course of action might be to roll up your sleeves and do it yourself. There's a famous *vort* from Reb Yankele of Pshevorsk. He said, "Not only is folding the tallis on Motzei Shabbos a *segula* for *shalom bayis*; washing the sink full of dishes is a big *segula*, too."

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The next thing you would want to do is discuss this with your wife directly. As always, the time to do that is never in the heat of the moment or during a crisis. Find a time when the house is clean and calm and that is when you should broach the topic.

When you do open the conversation, never make it about "you vs. her". All you will accomplish with that is make her feel like she is under attack and put her on the defensive. Never, ever undermine or criticize her performance as a housewife. Show her that you understand how difficult it must be for her to do everything. Validate her struggles just like you did in this letter. You can even add that it would be so nice if the kids were able to pitch in a little bit, and that you agree that it makes sense to ask them for help. You can then add that at the moment it doesn't look like it's working very well. Do not make it seem like you think that the failure is in any way her fault. If you think something about the system is impractical, mention it as impractical on the part of the children – not a miscalculation on her part. Keep the conversation technical. What is

working and what isn't, and what the reasons for it might be.

You can then ask her how she thinks you can correct the situation. Listen well when she gives suggestions, so that it doesn't look like all you have is critique on her ideas. You can then suggest an idea of your own as well. Maybe suggesting a system of incentives and motivation, or the like, would be helpful. Whatever you do want to suggest, don't turn it into an argument; you are both discussing a mutual problem. After all, you both want to raise responsible and caring people, as well have a clean house.

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Throughout the course of the conversation, repeatedly offer to help her shoulder the responsibilities. That will make her much more receptive to hearing your suggestions.

As long as you stay respectful and kind, there is no reason to backtrack on your opinion or to agree with any specific approach. Just stay gentle but firm when you say that you still feel this is not an effective strategy. If she doesn't feel like you're criticizing her or blaming her, she will eventually come around.

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It's very important that you should keep her mother out of the discussion, and refrain from pointing out that her mother might have been wrong.

Additionally, this conversation should never happen in front of the kids. In fact, make sure to tell her that you will never bring this up in front of the children so that she wont feel like you're about to challenge her authority in the home.

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One of the best ways to demonstrate to your children that you're unhappy with the status quo is not necessarily by telling them what to do, rather to start doing what you think should be done. You might consider entering the kids' bedroom and start straightening up.

Then you can more easily ask them to help, or at least talk about how much it would be appreciated if they were more careful about keeping things neat. The children might follow your cue and take over, and if not, they may at least be inspired to do it themselves next time.

Wishing you Bracha V'hatzlacha, a clean home and good clean communication with your wife and children,

All the best,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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