RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS TETZAVE

INTERFERING IN-LAWS: HOW TO GET PAST IT

In his *sefer Ohr Lashamayim*, Reb Meir'l of Apta writes something he heard from the Chozeh of Lublin in the name of the Rebbe Reb Zusha. Regarding the Choshen, the Torah states that it should be both *"ravua"* and *"kaful"* — both "square" and "doubled." The word "*ravua*" can also be understood as referring to the *middah* of *katnus,* signifying that a person should not make too much of himself. If this *middah* is then *kaful*, with double-intensity *katnus*, a person will be true to himself. From here we learn the key importance of humility, as the Rebbe Reb Zusha promises that the more humble a person is, the more he can feel assured that he won't end up fooling himself, because this is the correct way in which to serve Hashem.

A well-known story attributed to Reb Yonasan Eibeshutz illustrates this point. Reb Yonasan once overheard a man *davening* fervently: "*Venafshi ke'afar lakol tihyeh* — May my soul be like dust before everyone." A short while later, the same man was offended when he wasn't given the *aliyah* he wanted. When Reb Yonasan pointed out that he had prayed to be like dust, the man retorted, "When I *daven,* it's between me and Hashem, but with that guy…??"

It's usually less of a challenge to be unassuming and even critical of oneself, than it is to accept the criticism of others. It's normal for people to justify their own behavior and assume that "the other guy" is the one at fault. But if a person works on being genuinely humble, he is less likely to fool himself and blame others when the real faults lie far closer to home.

Being humble and unassuming makes a huge difference when it comes to getting along with others. The company of someone who doesn't have an inflated self-opinion is always more pleasant than that of someone who thinks he's the cat's whiskers. Even if a person is only headed in the right direction and hasn't actually reached a level of true humility, if he realizes that one of his objectives is to avoid fooling himself in a given situation, this can still be helpful. A person who is trying to overcome his innate bias will be open to asking others for their opinions, and hearing from a third party can reveal the flaws in a line of thinking *even* if the person is convinced he's right.

Humility is not an easy *middah* to work on.

A *shadchan* proposed a *shidduch* to a *bachur* who was getting on in years. He became very offended. "A person of my caliber and greatness, and *this* is what you have to offer?"

The *shadchan* timidly suggested that perhaps the reason the *bachur* was having such a hard time finding a *shidduch* was because he was so full of himself. The *bachur* shrugged and agreed to try working on it. A few months later, the *shadchan* returned and suggested the same *shidduch* again. The *bachur* stared at him. "I don't understand," he said. "This wasn't good enough for me *before* I worked on my humility — now that I'm humble, how could you even think of suggesting it?"

Some people simply have a hard time seeing past themselves.

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I listened to your class titled, "How do I get past resentment towards my mother-in-law" and found it insightful. I hope you can take the topic to the next level to help me out. First of all, my mother-in-law's interference has had lasting effects on our family. For example, she pressured us to give one of our children a name I dislike very much (after her relative). Naming after relatives isn't a strong *minhag* in our family but was something she wanted. Many years have passed since but it still bothers me that my child has a name I strongly dislike and I feel resentment daily because now we are stuck with the name.

Second of all, you discussed changing your behavior even if you don't feel you're past the negative feelings. The problem is that I am so resentful that any interaction with her, such as calling her to say hello, makes me so upset that for some time afterwards I have a hard time being a pleasant person for my husband and children and anyone else I am interacting with.

Thirdly, my mother-in-law continues to interfere in our lives but my husband feels we should leave things as-is, so it looks like I will have to learn how to live with this in my life and in our home. I hope you can help.

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

It's quite common for a person to read an article or listen to a *shiur* about a certain issue and appreciate the advice given — until the issue becomes personally relevant, and suddenly, the advice doesn't sound quite so appealing. This is something I've encountered more than a few times, when someone thanks me for giving them clarity on some matter and then follows up with, "but I wonder what you would say in my specific case…" when there is actually nothing so very specific about that case at all.

As I'm sure you have figured out yourself, dealing with a question in the abstract and with logic is very different from dealing with the same question when a person is emotionally invested. When you listened to my class, you appreciated the idea of getting over resentment, but now that you face it in your own life, you're realizing what many others have before you: It's not at all easy to implement this advice when your emotions are involved.

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The example you present is about resentment over naming a child. The first thing I would advise, for the future, is that you discuss this with your family's Rav. The clarity he can provide on the question of whose input you allow will make everyone happier. Sometimes, it might be wrong for someone to tell you what name to give your child. It might also be wrong in some instances for you to be stubborn about not giving a certain name. Consulting Daas Torah can help clarify all the various aspects of the situation and enable you to feel comfortable with your decision.

Regarding the name that has already been given, however, what can be done other than find a way to come to terms with it? You don't *have to* move on, but that does seem to be the only other option, aside from

stewing in resentment, which can't possibly be a good alternative. Your emotions around this problem are real and I'm not invalidating them. But Chazal teach us that there is a prescribed mourning period after which it's time to stop crying and learn to move on, and this advice would seem to apply in your situation, too, where the problem is not one that can be fixed.

I understand that it doesn't feel good to have "had to give a name" in the first place. Stewing in your feelings over this isn't going to help anyone, however. Resentment, as the old quote says, is like swallowing poison and hoping the other person will die.

So, what can you do? The first step is simply acknowledging that you can't change certain aspects of the situation, such as your child's name. This isn't easy, but it will enable you to shift your focus, away from harping on your resentment and toward asking Hashem to give you the ability to find a way forward and make peace. Pretending that there is a magical solution while calling your child "sweetie" or some other term is only going to keep you stuck.

In this particular matter, it's clear that matters are irreversible. However, I'll just note here that in many areas of life, a person needs to be very honest with himself when assessing whether "accepting Hashem's will" is really just a way to justify laziness or fear. Sometimes, things can be changed, but we're too hesitant or fearful to put in the effort. If that's truly not the case, however, then we need to aim to reach the level of acceptance that comes from our *emunah* where we *know* that if that's what Hashem made happen, regardless of who it seems caused it, it must be for the best. Sometimes, with the passage of time we'll find out why things had to be a certain way. There are many stories of people who gave a certain name to a child and it was only because of that name that a certain *shidduch* was able to proceed. Very often, however, we don't ever find out why things are good and why they had to happen that way, and then, we have to simply accept those things without understanding why. (And we do believe that aside from everything being *bashert*, names are given with some element of *ruach hakodesh*, and without going into detail regarding how this works, once a name has been given I think it should help you feel more comfortable to accept that nothing ever happens by mistake.)

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Most of us are actually familiar with a similar idea, from the way we relate to young children. Often, we expect children to "get over" things that bother them, things that seem trivial to us. On the one hand, treating children's issues as petty and minor because we see things differently from an adult perspective is wrong. "Little" things are allowed to mean a lot to a child, and as parents, we should try to comfort our children over their losses and disappointments, even if we know that objectively, they're quite trivial.

On the other hand, as adults we know that eventually, our children's perspective will change and mature and they won't always be as upset about the collapsed Lego tower as they are today. And the same is true for us in our adult lives. Things that seem hugely important can and do fade over time. Recognizing this, even though the issues haven't faded yet, makes it easier to come to terms with them.

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A couple once went to see the Kozhnitzer Maggid with a very important question. They couldn't agree on the *minhag* of the proper time to serve kugel at the Shabbos *seudah*. The husband thought that the kugel should be served before the cholent; his wife insisted that the right time was after the cholent. The Maggid's solution was for them to serve two kugels, one before and one after the cholent. For each of them, the kugel served at the "wrong" time would be considered a "shalom bayis kugel."

What always struck me as interesting was that the holy Maggid, who was on such a lofty level and barely had any connection with this world and its trivialities, didn't simply tell the couple to get over it and stop being busy with nonsense. Kugel may seem trivial. But each person evaluates trivialities differently, especially when they're personal. The Maggid taught them (and us) a new perspective on kugel.

On a similar note, Chazal instructed men to sharpen the knives before Shabbos. Some explain that this is to ensure that the challah slices easily and neatly — because otherwise, there could be problems in *shalom bayis*. Really? Would someone actually get upset because their challah slice isn't pretty? Yes! They may not be right for being upset. But Chazal still told us to sharpen knives because what's small in our eyes might

loom large for others, and we must learn to take other people's feelings seriously.

So the husband should sharpen his knife. At the same time, the wife should learn not to become upset about how her slice was cut. We each have our own work to do.

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And now for some creativity... A certain *adam gadol* I know is often asked for advice regarding naming children. Often, when a person is unsure about naming after a grandparent for whatever reason, this *gadol* will advise the person to give the name while having in mind that the child is actually being named after someone else entirely. Meanwhile, all the concerned relatives are happy, and the parents won't be left with hard feelings. You can't change your child's name, but maybe you can change who you feel she's named after. Using a nickname you like could be another option.

But I feel that what's most important in this question and other similar ones is the issue of resentment. The fact that you are stewing in your difficult feelings is not all down to her. While it's normal and natural to feel offended and hurt about all kinds of things, the extent to which you allow your emotions to control your reaction is largely up to you. Part of the work you may need to do could be learning how to get along with your mother-in-law, how to avoid being controlled, how much attention to give her, how to make her feel good. But some of the work may be about learning how to calm down and not taking things quite so much to heart.

You write that you become so upset after talking to your mother-in-law that you have a hard time being nice to your husband and children. You know that it's a problem but you're justifying it because it's *her* fault. That's not a good reason. You cannot use your mother-in-law as an excuse to abuse the people around you. And if you do, it's not her; it's (um, how do I say this nicely...) you!

If you realize that your mother-in-law puts you in a bad mood, that's great self-awareness. But it has to move on to the next step — what *you're* going to do about it.

And there *are* things you can do. Maybe you can ask your husband for more validation and encouragement regarding dealing with his mother. You can learn more relationship skills to improve your communication. Maybe you can learn how to give her the kind of attention she needs. Perhaps you need to learn how to set boundaries respectfully. There's usually no need to run away from the relationship.

Your mother-in-law shouldn't control your life. But you shouldn't control your spouse's life either. Don't try to limit how much your husband talks to his mother or what she's allowed to tell him. If you insist that your husband does what you want, you're also being controlling.

Remember, it's your mother-in-law, but it's your husband's mother. The person you're committed to has a relationship with her. That's reason enough to take this very seriously.

Hashem should help you get things right, make everyone around feel good, and feel good while doing so as well.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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