RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Shemini

Dual Characters

The *passuk* in this week's parsha says, "*And the swine, who has split hooves, yet doesn't chew his cud, is impure.*" The Tzemach Hashem Latzvi asks why the pig's split hooves are mentioned at all. The *passuk* should just have said that because it does not chew its cud, it's *tamei*?

The reason, he explains, is that the swine has a habit of showing off its split hooves, as if trying to convince others that it *is* kosher (Rashi, Bereishis 26:4) and this is part of the problem. When one is aware that he isn't kosher, that's a small problem. But when that same person tries to use the parts of him that *are* kosher to cover up the parts that are not, then it becomes a real problem.

There is a statement attributed to Reb Baruch from Mezibuzh: "I prefer a *rasha* that knows he's a *rasha*, to a *tzaddik* who knows he's a *tzaddik*". This is because a *tzaddik* who is so secure in his piety will never repent, whereas a *rasha* who is aware of his shortcomings, at least knows where he stands.

Sometimes it's actually the nice behavior and attitude someone exhibits in one area, that sort of makes them feel like they're "Kosher" and justified for behaving differently somewhere else. And sometimes this can even be done in two separate relationships, making it even more challenging, as I will explain.

We often hear of couples who have a disagreement; that is a completely normal part of married life. But when one spouse decides to express their upset by giving their spouse the cold shoulder or silent treatment, it becomes highly unpleasant. What makes it even worse however, is when the spouse who is in the process of expressing their being upset chooses to be as cordial and gracious as ever with others – in the presence of their spouse. For example, a wife who is seen yapping on the phone with her sister, while her husband - to whom she hasn't said a decent word to in two days - is sitting off to the side. Or the husband chatting animatedly with the neighbor while refusing to look his wife's way. The fact that their spouse is nice to others while reserving their mistreatment for them, is extremely hurtful. It is like the swine who shows off his kosher hooves while really being completely impure.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen

I have a question that's been on my mind for a while. Is marriage just about getting along with each other or is there a deeper love, more so than in other relationships? If yes, what is that love and how does one go about achieving it? Is it a must or just preferable and admirable for those who have achieved this level in their marriage?

Answer:

This is such a common question. Many people dream of an ideal marriage, where they will forever and continuously enjoy each other's company all the time, have a deep, intimate connection that flourishes and never falters. Then, once they get married, they are left wondering why they're not feeling this magic that they had envisioned.

Let us begin by addressing this from a Torah perspective. Right at the beginning, the Torah asserts that "*It is not good for man to be alone*". The Torah tells us that it is a *mitzvah* to get married, and by definition, that it is good for a person to have a spouse. The Torah also teaches us how this can be accomplished in the proper way.

It seems that in the secular world many believe that "falling in love" is actually the goal of relationships. As soon as the love is no longer felt, the entire relationship may dissolve. In a Jewish home, though, "love" isn't the goal in and of itself. The goal is to build a mishkan for Hashem. Now actually, love may come along with doing the right thing and following proper Torah guidance, and love between the couple is certainly an aid in building the mishkan. But love's purpose is only to build a home, not the other way around.

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I believe questions like these aren't caused so much by doubts about love, as much as uncertainty about expectations. Expectations are what does very much harm to relationships, although sometimes are actually what helps us thrive in them, so it's important as an introduction to try and set a realistic

outline for what a marriage relationship is and what it isn't.

Let's examine this through the analogy (as different at it may be) of someone starting a business. Every businessman that sets out on a new venture hopes that his business will be wildly successful and bring him enough money not just to cover his expenses, but also to be able to splurge on some luxuries here and there. He hopes to be able to have enough to share with others, while also wishing that he won't have to work too hard for it. Truthfully, there *are* businesses like that! And it is completely normal to want this for yourself and aspire towards it. However, every thinking person will understand that it isn't reasonable to believe that every business will work out that way. There are businesses that really struggle. Additionally, most people can understand that even though a business might not be instantly successful, it can still serve as a conduit for the *shefa* that might BEZ"H follow later on.

By the same token, a person can and should dream of the perfect marriage. They need to keep in mind, though, that not every day will be exactly as he had dreamed and he should still continue to work with what he has towards the greater goal.

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What certainly won't be helpful is comparing your relationship to that of others. First of all, you never know what's really going on with a couple, even though they couldn't look happier. In fact, there are probably people who think that you and your spouse are the ideal couple! Second, even if that couple does live together like two lovebirds, you don't know how much effort they poured in to get to where they're currently at. It's also possible that they didn't! Maybe they were "born that way". In either case, it doesn't make a difference to you and will not help you in any way. So as bad as unrealistic expectations may be, they're actually worse when coming from someone else's perceived success.

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There are people who, because they have this perfect image in their mind, are never satisfied with what they have already achieved and are constantly chasing their phantom dream. Let's take the business analogy further: People like this are constantly closing down businesses or going from job to job because they don't feel ENOUGH satisfaction and fulfillment or they're not making ENOUGH money as easily as they would have liked. It's possible that they know of others who have that booming business or perfect job, but when you aim for perfection – and only perfection – you cannot enjoy the blessings you already have and you are stunting your own satisfaction.

On the other hand, a person shouldn't settle for a mediocre existence either. He shouldn't give up all hope and never try to make things better for himself and his marriage. That will only cause resentment, and even when opportunity will strike him over the head, he will be too entrenched in his misery to notice. That is a sad, unfortunate existence.

The thing to keep in mind is this: marriage is not always peaches and cream, but it *can* be! Sometimes that involves work on the part of one spouse or both, but the goal is to live together in harmony – most of the time, to resolve disagreements in a healthy manner, and to help each other grow into the best version of yourselves.

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Remember that there will be days when all you want to do is get through the day without a quarrel, *and that's okay*. Everyone goes through a rough patch here and there, and it's not the end of the world. The fact that you are

having a hard time does not mean that married life is always a struggle or that it has to be that way. As long as you keep your goal in mind and celebrate your successes – however minute they may be – it is a step in the right direction.

Your goal is to focus on your present and try to create a bright future for yourself and your family. The key is to see how *you* can take responsibility to make your life better. Don't wait around for anyone else to do it for you. Look around, see what you already have, and rejoice! Don't make the mistake of focusing on only what you're lacking or the parts of your life that aren't yet precisely how you would like them to be.

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I'd like to take the liberty to offer a rather impractical suggestion: It's okay if you decide that as long as you get along fairly decently with your spouse, you're good. Your marriage doesn't *have to* be more than a civil, courteous relationship. If it *is* anything less than that, make sure that there isn't anything that you are neglecting to do that could help improve things and bring it up to the next level.

Let's take it back to our business analogy one more time: Let's say the business we dreamed of building isn't turning out quite like we would have liked and we feel that it's because our partner isn't pulling his weight. We might become resentful at his laxity, especially when we see other businesses doing so well. Instead of thinking those thoughts, why don't we choose to be grateful for the things our partner did do. Let's decide that as long as he isn't challenging us or making things more difficult, he's a good partner. However, we can expect more from *ourselves*.

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We often expect perfection from others, while we give ourselves so much wiggle room and benefit of the doubt. But really, it should be the opposite.

Your spouse might not be everything that you imagined, but after all, they do tend to make your life easier and more pleasant. Your wife cooks your meals and cleans your clothes? Great! Your husband brings home a paycheck and reviews the Parsha with your sons? Fantastic! Anything more than that is a nice bonus. You on your part, however, should try to see how you can up your game and how you can be the spouse of *your* dreams.

It can sometimes be discouraging when we hear stories such as the one with Reb Aryeh Levine, who took his wife to the doctor and said "Our foot hurts". You might think, "If only my husband/wife said that about me!" But maybe you should be Reb Aryeh! You should try to tune into what your spouse is feeling or needs and try to be there for them. Don't give up on your dream of a perfect marriage and don't stop working towards it, but don't forget to take note of the blessings you already have.

Wishing you the dream marriage
and the good life,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: SHEMINI 5781

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