RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Chayei Sara

The Making of a Gracious Host

In Parshas Chayei Sara, we learn how Avraham Avinu sent Eliezer to select a kallah for Yitzchok. The Torah tells us that Eliezer asked Hashem for a sign so that he would recognize Yitzchok's destined shidduch.

Some *sefarim* question why Eliezer asked Hashem for a sign. Eliezer was the *doleh umashkeh mitoras rabo,* he was the chief disciple of Avraham's teachings. Could it be that he was lacking in Emunah?

The Shach al HaTorah explains that Eliezer was certainly great in Emunah and he wasn't dabbling in superstitious "signs". Eliezer was being pragmatic. He understood that a *shidduch* candidate for someone from Avraham Avinu's home, must have certain qualifications in order to fit in. He didn't make a pact with Hashem that the right girl will do and say certain things. He was looking for specific things in a girl that would indicate she is worthy of becoming a part of Avraham Avinu's family.

Avraham's home was built primarily around *chessed* and *Hachnasas Orchim*, so Eliezer was looking for the traits that would signify a gracious hostess. The Shach enumerates seven traits: the girl would need to be generous, patient and tolerant, clean and neat, efficient, intelligent, of gentle speech, and with the ability to graciously welcome everyone.

When we think about it, those traits were not just necessary for someone coming into the exalted home of Avraham Avinu. When we are looking for *shidduchim* for our own children, we might want to keep these traits at the forefront of our list. Actually, all of us, men and women, should strive to attain these characteristics. But this is definitely not limited to handling guests.

It's important to add that some people are really nice and welcoming to guests and visitors, but when it comes to their own family members they completely disregard and disrespect them. When your spouse or child sees you interact better with others than you do with them, it can be really hurtful. You might find it helpful to tell yourself that "today" you will treat your family like guests. It might not help for the long term, but it might put you in the right mindset and set you on the path to marital harmony and inner peace. Whether we are constantly welcoming guests or not, we need them to properly manage a household and relate to our immediate family.

With that, let's look at an email I received this week:

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen, I enjoy your weekly shiurim very much and they have greatly enhanced my life.

I was wondering if you can help me clarify the parameters of a healthy relationship. My wife and I are married for over 8 years, and we have a wonderful relationship with good communication, B"H.

Over the last year, my wife has befriended a woman from a different city who's a bit older than her. She talks to her on the phone a lot, several times a day, and they have a very close relationship. She vents to her, tells her about her day, and even things that she would've called me up to tell me, she tells this friend first. My wife is plagued by uncertainty whether such a friendship is right, and is wondering why she feels so close to this woman.

I like the fact that she has such a good friend. Our relationship has never been better, and I don't see that this should, in any way, have had any adverse effects on the relationship between the two of us.

I was wondering if this relationship is considered healthy. I would very much appreciate to hear your take on this.

Answer:

Thank you very much for reaching out with your query.

Relationships, whether the marriage relationship or friendship, are very important and they should not be mutually exclusive. Friends can be married to people other than their friend and spouses may have friends other than their spouse.

Since I'm addressing the question in a public forum, I will explain what a healthy relationship is in general. That way, I am hopeful that others who find themselves in somewhat different situations will also be able to derive benefit, and I hope you will gain some clarity as well.

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A healthy relationship has these five characteristics:

1. Give-and-take: A relationship should be a two-way street. Sometimes there's a mentor/mentee relationship, in which the give-and-take is a

bit less balanced, but in a normal relationship between friends, one should never feel like they are always the one on the giving end. One should also not be made to feel that what he/she has to offer is not accepted. Each of the parties in the relationship should be giving and receiving in a mutual manner, and relatively equal amounts.

2. Boundaries: How often do they talk to each other? Is there an option to say, "I cannot talk now; I need space."? The topics of discussion need to be appropriate, and respectful of each other's privacy. The frequency needs to be within a normal range, not seven times a day for one month and then never the next month. Phone calls should not happen at abnormal times or times when either of them needs to be available for their families.

3. Dependency: One's health or happiness must not be dependent on another person. Neither of the parties involved should feel like they *must* have the other for survival and if a day goes by without them talking to each other, anxiety or other symptoms set it. Similarly, if one feels like they *have* to be there for the other person who depends on them and lean on them, that would make it a codependency - another unhealthy dynamic.

4. Logic: There has to be a sensible explanation for why the two are friends. If there are drastic differences, such as age, demographic, lifestyle or belief, it is possible that it is stemming from an unhealthy attraction and it is not a healthy relationship.

5. Inclusive: A healthy relationship never contradicts existing relationships, especially those that are centrally important, such as marriage or parental relationships. It should also not be a cause for dropping other friendships. If one person says that they will only be friends if the other drops other friendships, it is a red flag and the relationship should probably not be pursued.

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In a marriage it is perfectly okay for a spouse to have close friends outside of the marriage. It should not only be 'tolerated', it should be *encouraged*. However, the marital relationship must always come first. The friendship should never stand in the way. Generally, if the friendship keeps to the five guidelines listed above, it should not be a problem.

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If a husband or wife feels threatened by their spouse's close friendship, it's something to think about. If it violates one of the above guidelines it's very possible that the concern is legitimate. If not it might indicate a problem with the spouse who feels threatened, not with the friendship. If you feel that your spouse prefers his/her friend over you, instead of blaming the friendship, think whether there might be something that the friend is giving your spouse that you have not been giving them.

Maybe their friend is less judgmental, more validating, or more understanding? Sometimes, it might be helpful to brush up your listening skills and then you will notice that your spouse seeks out your counsel and company more often.

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Many people don't know this, but marriages need to be balanced, too, not just friendships.

Of course, spouses have a much deeper connection than friends and some more emotional enmeshment is allowed for. But there still needs to be a healthy balance and a trusting environment. By giving each other space and supporting each other's choices, as well as being there for one another, your home will be the place where both of you feel happy and content.

I hope this outline was helpful in helping you and your wife assess the situation at hand and deal with it responsibly.

All the best, **Rabbi Shimon Gruen**

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