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RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

IS MY HUSBAND TOO HOLY?

The Kedushas Levi asks why the Torah says, "*Vayeitzei Yaakov miBe'er Sheva vayelech Charanah*." Since Eretz Yisroel is higher than all other lands, shouldn't the *pasuk* say that Yaakov went *down* to Charan? He explains that the greatness of Eretz Yisroel is its *kedushah*, and Yaakov Avinu took that *kedushah* along with him, maintaining the same spiritual level wherever he went.

Most people can't consistently maintain the *kedushah* of a particular place or time after leaving it. We may feel especially elevated on Yom Kippur, but we don't expect to live that way all year. When someone does manage to maintain that level, it's something to admire. Yet sometimes, instead of appreciating such a person, we almost expect him to "relax" a little and become more like everyone else. We may even view his continued commitment as unnecessary or excessive, simply because it's more than what we're accustomed to.

On the other hand, the Toldos Yaakov Yosef connects "*vayelech Charanah*" to *charon af*, anger. After fourteen years in the *beis medrash* of Shem and Ever, Yaakov encountered people who were not on his spiritual level. He had to learn to understand them and relate to them appropriately rather than expecting everyone to be like him. As elevated as his own standards were, he couldn't expect everyone else to live according to those same standards.

These two lessons complement each other. When we encounter someone whose standards are higher than ours, we should recognize and appreciate his commitment rather than expecting him to lower his standards to make us more comfortable. At the same time, someone who maintains a higher level must recognize that others may not share his sensitivities or abilities, and he shouldn't expect them to.

True greatness includes both the determination to maintain one's own standards and the understanding to respect those who live differently.

Parshas
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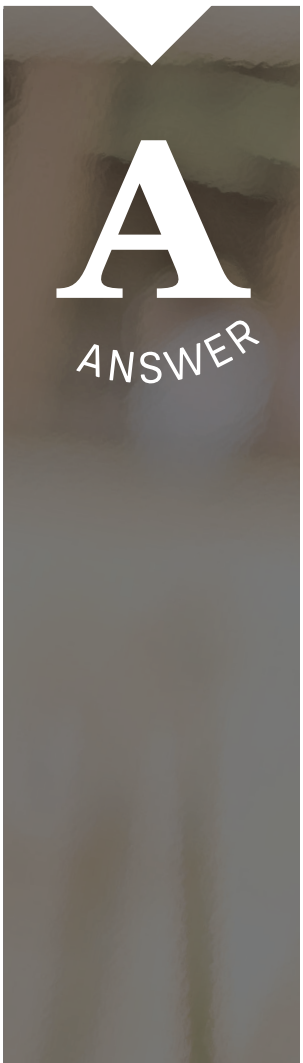
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I'm *Baruch Hashem* married to a very special husband. Besides being a serious *Kollel yungerman*, he is a *Yerei Shamayim* and very *"opgehitten"* in all areas. However, I often feel that this prevents us from having a close and emotionally intimate relationship.

Any conversation that has even a minor connection to our private married life makes him tense. For example, when I was expecting, I bought a Jewish book showing pictures of the baby's development in the womb. I was amazed at the *Niflaos HaBorei* and wanted to share my excitement with him. However, he preferred not to look at it because it might cause impure thoughts, although he said he would if I insisted. I respected his *Yiras Shamayim* and didn't insist, but I felt that I had no one with whom to share my excitement.

Sometimes I feel as though I'm my husband's *nisayon* at home. I was taught that a wife should ease her husband's *nisyonos*, but I sometimes feel that after dealing with the *nisyonos* outside, he comes home to another *nisayon*—me. When I ask whether he likes what I'm wearing, he becomes tense and explains that he's sensitive about these topics. The same happens sometimes when he wants to be close to me but it isn't our planned night. I used to dress up for him, but nowadays I wonder whether I'm making his life harder.

This affects our relationship, and I wonder whether this is really how things are meant to be. I'm happy to have such an *ehrliche* husband, but is this what Hashem wants? Isn't marriage supposed to be a strong, emotionally intimate relationship? How can I maintain that closeness while supporting his *Avodas Hashem*, and what should I do if something needs to change?



You raise an excellent question, and I appreciate how you recognize your husband's *Yiras Shamayim* while expressing what you feel is missing. These concerns may seem contradictory, but as *Yidden*, we're accustomed to reconciling things that don't naturally seem to go together. We balance *gashmiyus* and *ruchniyus* in our daily lives and reconcile many other seeming contradictions. Learning to balance different values is part of *Avodas Hashem*, and marriage is no exception.

From your letter alone, I can't determine whether your husband's sensitivities are entirely reasonable or whether some may be excessive. That would require a better understanding of the situation, and if you have concerns about particular behaviors, you can certainly discuss them with a Rav or someone knowledgeable in these matters. For our purposes, however, I want to focus on some general principles that may help you understand the situation and approach it more constructively.

What Is Extreme?

Generally, extremes are not good. If someone understands *ruchniyus* in a way that prevents him from maintaining a basic, healthy relationship with his spouse, that would indicate a misunderstanding of what *ruchniyus* requires of him. On the other hand, insisting that a spouse participate in everything and anything, without showing consideration for personal sensitivities and values, is also unreasonable.

You mention that your husband preferred not to see the book unless you insisted, and that you respected his preference. That's significant. He didn't make an absolute demand, and you didn't force him. If he were refusing basic closeness or consistently resisting reasonable requests, or if you were imposing your wishes on him, we would be discussing a different situation.

It's important to acknowledge that between extremes is a broad range of normal and reasonable behavior. What seems extreme to one may be reasonable to another.

There is a story about a woman who complained to the Ahavas Yisroel of Vizhnitz that her son had become a *chassid*. He was getting up early, immersing in a cold *mikvah*, putting on *tefillin*, *davening* at length, and learning. To her, these behaviors seemed bizarre, and she was distraught.

The Rebbe reassured her that he did these things too, and that it was all normal, to which she replied, "Of course, but the Rebbe does it for *parnassah*. My son means it for real!"

We should be careful before calling something extreme simply because it differs from what we're accustomed to.

Higher Standards Come With Sacrifices

There are many levels of *Yiras Shamayim*, and higher standards sometimes require sacrificing things that are otherwise normal and enjoyable. While we know that Hashem comes first, both in our personal lives and in marriage, determining what He wants in a particular situation isn't always simple.

Should a husband spend more time learning or helping at home? Should he maintain a particular *chumrah* when it inconveniences his family? Should a woman adhere to a standard in *tzniyus* that her husband doesn't appreciate? We cannot assume that every personal standard is necessarily what Hashem wants, but neither should we dismiss someone's sincere commitment simply because it's unappreciated.

Let's use a *Kollel* lifestyle as an example. A couple who chooses it may accept less financial comfort, fewer vacations, and less flexibility because they value something else more. Of course, this depends on what they agreed to and can reasonably manage. But it's a choice, and generally, something will have to give. Similarly, everyone wants a husband with real *Yiras Shamayim*, but not everyone always appreciates what that involves. I've encountered situations where a wife prepared something special, only to discover that her husband wouldn't eat it because of his standards in *kashrus*. Her disappointment was understandable, but his standards were also part of the person she married.

Interestingly, we find a related idea in the *halachos* of marital obligations. *Chazal* establish different obligations according to a husband's occupation and circumstances, including a particular standard for a *talmid chacham*. The Raavad explains that a woman's satisfaction is influenced by what her husband can provide according to his circumstances. At the same time, the *poskim* discuss whether a husband may adopt the standards of a *talmid chacham* without his wife's agreement when that was not his previous lifestyle. Sometimes there is a difference between marrying someone with certain circumstances and having those circumstances changed afterward, while in some areas we assume that a woman wants a husband who's even more pious [see Chasam Sofer Y.D. 149].

I don't mean to imply that a husband may impose whatever standards he wishes, nor that your husband's sensitivities can't make certain aspects of married life more difficult. But expectations and satisfaction are often influenced by what we understand our circumstances to be, and your husband's standards aren't necessarily unreasonable or something that should be lowered.

You Are Not His Nisayon

You write that you sometimes feel like your husband's *nisayon*. I don't think that's accurate at all, as I'll explain, but it reminds me of a cute story, so I'll take the liberty of sharing it.

I was privileged to have a very close relationship with Reb Menachem Mundrer *z"l* of Yerushalayim. He welcomed all kinds of people to his table and had extraordinary patience. Once, a particularly disruptive guest disturbed the entire *seudah* until even the Rebbe told him that if he didn't stop, he would have to leave. The guest responded, "Rebbe, what's the problem? *Ani hanisayon shelcha!* I am your *nisayon*!" The Rebbe accepted the reminder and found the patience to accommodate him.

But no, I don't think that describes your situation at all. Your husband may find certain situations difficult, even when they're perfectly appropriate within marriage. And that doesn't mean *you* are his *nisayon*. *Halacha* requires married couples to observe certain restrictions under particular circumstances. This doesn't make the wife herself a *nisayon*; it means certain situations require care.

Your husband seems to recognize your wishes while explaining his own sensitivities. His discomfort with particular situations isn't necessarily a rejection of you, and it shouldn't be allowed to affect the rest of your relationship.

What Creates Emotional Closeness?

Your desire for a close, emotionally intimate relationship is legitimate. Some mistakenly dismiss physical closeness as unnecessary, while others postpone it until they feel emotionally connected. Both approaches misunderstand its role. Hashem created marriage so that physical intimacy helps produce emotional closeness. The purpose is to help create genuine love and connection. Once the basic closeness that belongs in marriage is present, more physical attention isn't necessarily what makes the relationship stronger.

Emotional closeness means having someone who cares about you, listens, wants to make you happy, and is there when you need him. Some couples share plenty of activities and physical closeness yet feel emotionally disconnected because they don't feel cared for or understood. Others have different interests and sensitivities but enjoy a strong emotional relationship.

Consider what is already present in your marriage. Does your husband care about you, listen when you need to talk, make time for you, and try to help? If so, you may

have more emotional closeness than you're recognizing. Sometimes we can strengthen that connection simply by making greater use of what's available, rather than focusing on the particular ways in which it is missing.

Another source of emotional closeness is admiration. You appreciate your husband's *ehrlichkeit*, but perhaps you can appreciate it in a way that brings you closer rather than primarily noticing where it makes life difficult.

I was speaking to a young man who struggled to appreciate certain aspects of his wife. When I asked about her qualities, he thought for a moment and said, "When I take myself out of the picture, she's amazing." If she were his neighbor, niece, or someone else's wife, he would be impressed by her sincerity, principles, and *ehrlichkeit*. But as his own wife, he focused on particular standards he wanted from her, making everything else harder to appreciate.

I've seen the same with parents who overlook a child's wonderful qualities because they're focused on a few disappointments. If that child belonged to someone else, they might be tremendously impressed. Our personal expectations can prevent us from appreciating what we see.

Perhaps you can try looking at your husband without first considering how his standards affect you. Here is a serious *talmid chacham*, an *ehrliche yungerman* who maintains his *Yiras Shamayim* even when doing so is difficult. How many people would love to have a husband with those qualities? Such thoughts and feelings may not cause difficulties to disappear, but genuine admiration can itself bring a great deal of emotional closeness.

Expectations and Communication

Expectations can become a major obstacle to happiness. A parent whose child has been waking up late for years may still hope every morning that today will be different, only to be disappointed again. Hoping for improvement is worthwhile, but when an expectation repeatedly produces disappointment without accomplishing anything, it may need reconsideration.

Similarly, there may be experiences you would love to share with your husband that he isn't comfortable with. Looking together at pictures of your baby's development might have been beautiful, but perhaps you can share that particular excitement with a sister or friend and find other experiences to enjoy with him. This doesn't mean giving up on closeness. Sometimes giving up on one specific expectation allows us to appreciate much more of what's available.



I also noticed that you don't mention whether you've discussed these feelings with your husband. Does he know that his sensitivities sometimes leave you feeling lonely? Does he understand that you wanted to share your excitement, not merely show him pictures? And do you understand what makes these situations difficult for him?

A calm conversation, without trying to establish who's right or wrong, may help you understand each other. He may be more willing to accommodate certain things than you realize, or understanding him better may help you accept some limitations. Either way, open communication can itself create closeness and prevent unspoken resentment from building.

Some difficulties have practical solutions: identify the problem, make an adjustment, and things improve. Others require more idealism, *ruchniyus*, and *emunah* and *bitachon*. Sometimes we need to consider what really matters, what Hashem wants, and what we can appreciate even when circumstances aren't exactly as we would prefer.

Someone once shared a nice thought with me. Imagine arriving in *Shamayim* after 120 years and being told, "Sorry, you went through the wrong door. You need to start again." Sometimes we think like that. Had you initially chosen the right door somewhere early on, you would have met different people, attended a different school, made a different *shidduch*, and lived a different life. It's almost laughable. We believe that Hashem guides our lives, including the people we marry and the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Of course, we can and should try to improve our situation within the circumstances Hashem has given us. But once we recognize that those circumstances themselves are also from Hashem, it becomes much easier to accept them and move forward with appreciation for what we have.

As we learn from Yaakov Avinu, maintaining a high level of *kedushah* isn't easy, and we should appreciate someone who is able to do so. At the same time, Yaakov himself had to understand people who weren't on that level. With reasonable expectations, open communication, and mutual understanding, there is room for genuine closeness alongside a strong commitment to Hashem.

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org