RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS SHOFTIM

THE TEN WORST REASONS FOR BEING UNGRATEFUL

A Jewish king is required to write for himself "*es mishneh haTorah hazos*." Rashi explains that this means two *sifrei Torah,* as a king is supposed to have one *sefer Torah* to keep at home and another one that he takes with him wherever he goes. The Imrei Chaim adds, based on the teaching of Chazal that, "*Kol Yisroel bnei melochim* — All Yidden are [like] kings," that all Jews should perform this *mitzvah* by making sure to live a Torah life both at home and when on the go.

In a certain sense, people encounter two different types of challenges in life. There are difficulties that come up at home and other types of hardships on the street. But we don't abandon Torah teachings when we step outside — we grasp hold of our "street Torah" and take it with us wherever we may be going. Some people do better off out on the street while others do better at home. Everyone needs *chizuk* in both areas, but some people need specific guidance in one area more than the other.

The *chassidah* is considered a non-kosher bird. It's called *chassidah* because it does *chessed* with its friends — but if so, why is it considered non-kosher? *Chessed* is a beautiful *middah,* but it seems that *chessed* that is only done with one's friends (and not even with one's family) is not much to be proud of.

There are people who are nice (or at least try to appear so) to people outside the family. With friends, acquaintances, and strangers they know how to be polite and gracious, and even appreciative or apologetic when circumstances demand. At home, however, they neglect their own families. That's not a kosher sign. Charity begins at home.

That's why a person needs two *sifrei Torah*, so that the Torah's teachings accompany us wherever we go, no matter whom we are with.

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QUESTION #1

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I listen to your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime and enjoy them immensely. I feel like I have gained a lot from your insights.

My husband makes it seem like he doesn't need compliments. However, when we have disagreements, he usually mentions that I don't recognize and compliment him when he goes out of his way for me, which he does often. Also, I am unfortunately not such a good communicator so complimenting does not come easily to me. I tend to communicate much better on paper. I know this is something I should work on.

My question is, how can I train myself to be more conscious about noticing and remembering to compliment my husband often enough so that he doesn't build up resentment?

Thank you very much.

QUESTION #2

HI RABBI GRUEN,

First let me thank you for your powerful lectures and educational guidelines. I and many others I know have gained in many aspects of life challenges.

I came across an article from the secular world that mentioned that because of the idea of equality between men and women, marriages have been negatively influenced.

The writer claimed that as a result of gender confusions, men are no longer the ultimate "givers" (*mashpia*) but are receivers as well. A husband may expect a compliment or a token of love from his wife and if he doesn't receive it, it may bother him.

He went on to argue that in real life, since the man is supposed to be the giver, he shouldn't expect anything from his wife.

I would like to hear your take on this, since you often discuss the idea of men who are feeling unappreciated and women who can't bring themselves to compliment or show appreciation to their spouses.

Thanks in advance.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I'll start with a short word to the husband who's looking to be appreciated, as this is a topic I recently addressed. There are ways to get what you need without becoming resentful or bottling things up. Be smart and learn to ask properly for what you need, to avoid both not having your needs met and your wife feeling confused about what exactly you are looking for.

Now to address the questioners:

There's a difference between *being* appreciative and *expressing* appreciation. Some people don't *feel* appreciation whereas others have a hard time expressing the appreciation they *do* feel. Sometimes we confuse these two groups, but each needs to be addressed differently.

Appreciation is fundamental to being a *mentch* but even more so for being a Yid. The word "*Yehudi* — Jew," is from the root word *"hoda'ah* — gratitude." The *Sefer Hachinuch* on Mitzvah 37, the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av v'eim,* explains that one of the purposes of this *mitzvah* is to teach us to acknowledge and repay all those who

have shown us kindness, just as we should recognize and appreciate what our parents have given us — the gift of life itself. Being unappreciative is despicable and demonstrates bad *middos*. By learning to appreciate what we have been given by our parents, we come to appreciate all that we have received and continue to receive from Hashem.

Appreciation has nothing to do with husband-wife, male-female, or giver-taker. Appreciation is one of the basic principles of Yiddishkeit, so much so that honoring parents is one of the Aseres Hadibros. It's also entirely human to feel the need to receive appreciation, whether you're a man or a woman. If it isn't forthcoming, as I have already mentioned, it's important to know how to ask for it in a healthy way, and how to react if your requests are belittled, *chalilah*. If anyone, spouse or not, responds to your reasonable request for a "thank you" with, "What, you need me to say it?" or any variation of the same, try to calmly reply, "Yes. I would appreciate hearing you say those words," and stand your ground.

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Many times, however, people don't express their appreciation not because they don't feel it, but because they have all kinds of misconceptions and blocks about getting the right words out. There are many possible reasons for why this might happen; here are ten of the most common:

1. Thinking that being thankful makes you appear weak and needy

This is a very common misperception and one that doesn't stand up to scrutiny. In fact, the more self-confident a person is, the more they express appreciation and gratitude (as well as other healthy feelings). People who are secure in themselves don't feel threatened by being on the receiving end of a favor. They recognize that Hashem made the world interdependent and that we *all* need each other. Confident people are grateful people. Even if you're only trying to appear self-confident, you can get used to thanking others.

2. Thinking that showing gratitude makes you indebted

Another common misperception which is also easily demolished with just a few moments of thought. A healthy relationship is full of give-and-take and ideally, the giving is motivated by a sheer desire to give, not a perceived need to "balance the books." But even if you were indebted to someone for their kindness, why should carefully avoiding saying "thank you" somehow excuse you from that debt? Did you really think that they weren't aware that they gave you something, and now that you're making them aware, they'll expect payback? Even if that were true, their lack of recognition doesn't mean you shouldn't be grateful. Perhaps being less grateful makes you even *more* indebted, but certainly not less. Sometimes it's the least you can do for having been a recipient of someone's kindness.

3. Thinking that thanking will stop the giving

Some people are afraid that as soon as they express gratitude, the other person will stop giving. They assume that the giver is only giving in order to discharge an obligation, and that once the recipient acknowledges the gift, the score is settled. While this could be true of some less-than-ideal relationships, in most cases, this isn't how give-and-take works. Especially within the family, people give because they want to, even if they have to as well. The "thank you" is the icing on the cake and far from discouraging further giving, it actually makes it more likely. (And even if that doesn't happen, and you're left needing or badly wanting more gifts of any kind, there are healthy ways to achieve that, without becoming an ungrateful person.)

4. Convincing yourself that the gratitude isn't really warranted

When people feel indebted (admittedly not a pleasant feeling), they may try to remove the discomfort by persuading themselves that really, there's nothing to be grateful for and the other person doesn't deserve a thank you (because they also gained from whatever they did; because "everyone does this anyway," and so forth). Usually, this is a big mistake, certainly when it comes to parents and especially when it comes to a spouse — and the person usually knows it, deep-down. Understanding that give-and-take isn't about repaying debts can help get past this, but denying the good that you have received isn't good for anyone. This also applies when a spouse gives to the entire family unit and the giving is taken for granted. Don't.

5. Rationalizing that showing gratitude "just isn't me."

But it should be. You should be able to appreciate other people. The Torah teaches us that we have to be grateful and it doesn't give dispensations for people who "just aren't grateful by nature." Learn how to become grateful — and you might be surprised at how good it feels. And while you're learning, you can even

tell your spouse, "It doesn't come naturally to me to express my appreciation, but I'm really working on it."

6. Giving up because "you just don't know how it's done and whatever I try feels weird"

Some people are uncomfortable expressing gratitude (which is normal), especially if they've tried in the past and feel they messed up for whatever reason. The way to address this is by easing into it gradually or looking for ways that are more comfortable. You could, for instance, try writing notes and leaving them somewhere your spouse will find them. Some people find it easier to give compliments in an intimate or more vulnerable moment. Whatever you decide on, remember that choosing not to express gratitude isn't an option.

7. Reasoning that "I already said thank you"

If you said thank you six years ago for something that's being done every single day, it could be time for a reset. Even if you said thank you yesterday for the supper your wife cooked, does that mean that her efforts today don't deserve gratitude? If you're worried that it will become ridiculous to say, "Thanks for supper" every single night, then provide some variety, and you'll find yourself noticing more details to be grateful for. "Thanks for cooking my favorite dish — it came out especially delicious this time." "Thanks so much for taking the time to cook soup. I know how busy you were this afternoon." When it comes to thanking husbands who come home after a long day of work, wives may have to be a bit more creative, but it can still be done on at least an occasional basis. "Thanks so much for keeping at a job you're not always enjoying. It's not easy and I really appreciate that you're so dedicated to the family."

8. Reasoning that, "I don't need anyone's gratitude, so why should they?"

First of all, everyone has different needs of all kinds, including gratitude. Even if you don't need to hear a "thank you," other people do. But all too often, the people who use this argument really do need the gratitude but are either unwilling to admit it or simply disconnected from their feelings. Learning to be vulnerable is a challenge in many relationships but an important one to face. Often, a person doesn't realize how much they're missing something simply because they never experienced (or allowed themselves to experience) having it.

9. Rationalizing that the other person "doesn't (seem to) need or appreciate my gratitude anyway"

This could be true, and I'll address those rare cases below. It's more likely, however, that the other person is just clumsy at showing what your appreciation really means to them. Maybe they have an issue with showing vulnerability and admitting that this was what they were waiting for. Look for signs such as a quick smile, or even the other person going out of their way to do the same favor again. In some cases, the other person is too discouraged, exhausted, or suspicious to take your thanks seriously (rightly or not). Don't say to yourself: "Well, I tried, and it didn't work, so that's that." Try again, but try something different. (And try to figure out whether they might have actual grounds for being suspicious of your motives — and address that.) Come up with more creative ways of saying thank you, or show your appreciation indirectly. If you're being genuine, the other person will generally sense it. (And if it's you wondering whether the other person is genuine, give them the benefit of the doubt. Don't respond to a "thank you" with, "You don't really mean it." That's terribly hurtful, and how can you possibly know that you're right? Instead, be gracious. "You're very welcome!")

10. Feeling resistant because "okay, I got something, but it isn't enough/what I wanted"

Did the other person maliciously set out to give you something they knew you didn't want to receive, or to only partially satisfy your needs? Most of the time, that's not the case. So, the person was trying to give, but they aren't great at it, or only did what they were capable of doing (which perhaps wasn't enough for you). Maybe they assumed wrongly that you wanted a certain thing done a certain way. Maybe they tried to get it right, but fell short. But they had the right intentions, and that alone makes them deserving of your appreciation.

Appreciation is basic. Expressing it is mandatory.

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But shouldn't marriage be based on unconditional giving, without anyone expecting or needing appreciation?

A relationship is based on giving, which of necessity means that someone has to receive — but it's not *about* receiving. Being a man doesn't mean you should never be on the receiving end. Besides, Hashem, the ultimate Giver, commanded us to be thankful to our parents so that we should learn to be grateful to Him, whether

we're male or female. When we express our gratitude to Hashem, does that make Him a taker? Of course not — and similarly, when a husband "takes" gratitude from his wife, he doesn't become a taker either.

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As mentioned above, in the majority of cases, people are very appreciative of our efforts and gratitude, although some people find it hard to express it. What about the minority of cases where we're unfortunately dealing with someone who isn't grateful? Should we carry on giving, beyond what is strictly necessary, regardless?

According to the Steipler *zt"l,* based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 92), it is forbidden to have mercy on a person without *daas*. In this particular case, someone "without *daas"* isn't referring to a young child (or other person with limited understanding) who doesn't comprehend the difference between right and wrong and is certainly deserving of our giving. Rather, the person without *daas* in this instance is someone who doesn't have enough wisdom or humility to acknowledge what he receives and be appreciative of it. He has enough *daas* to recognize his needs, but he feels entitled to everything he receives and it never occurs to him that he should be grateful. Worse still, he downplays what others give him and actually despises them for what they do for him.

It is forbidden to have mercy on such a person. The Steipler lists five reasons why one should never go above-and-beyond for someone without *daas*:

1. He'll assume he should be getting even more.

2. You would be enabling a bad *middah*.

3. The person may repay you with bad to "prove" they don't owe you.

4. You will end up full of resentment toward that person.

5. You will only encourage him to demand more and you'll never be able to satisfy him

While those without *daas* seem incapable of being appreciative, they often know all too well how to demand appreciation for even the tiniest thing they do for others. If you find yourself in such a situation, you may need professional guidance. It's important to note, however, that although seemingly over-the-top demands for gratitude can be an unhealthy sign, at other times, they're the result of genuinely feeling unappreciated, and this should be addressed.

Thankfully, most of the people in our lives are *baalei daas*, people with whom we can have a normal, healthy relationship. And relationships can always — and should always — be improved, even if they're already "good enough."

In cases where *shalom bayis* seems to have stalled, or even if things haven't reached that stage, I often advise people to ask their spouse for small favors, for things that won't cause resentment and aren't likely to be turned down, simply to create the opportunity for expressing gratitude. It's so important for us to enhance our awareness of all the good that we receive from those closest to us, especially as recognizing it is often much more of a challenge than recognizing the good we receive from strangers.

Don't ever give up on reaching the ideal of selfless giving. Your efforts in this area are likely to make more difference to your relationship than anything else.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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