

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

DON'T WAIT TO BE ASKED

Parshas Vayishlach opens with Yaakov Avinu about to encounter Eisav decades after fleeing from him to save his life. As he approaches his brother, Yaakov davens to Hashem, asking, "*Hatzileini na miyad achi miyad Eisav*—Save me now from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav."

In his *sefer Imrei Pinchas*, R' Pinchas Koritzer *zy"a* discusses Yaakov's fear and cites the *Toldos Yaakov Yosef* who brings the Baal Shem Tov's explanation on these *pesukim*. Referring back to Avraham Avinu on his journey to Mitzrayim, he describes Avraham's sudden fear that he will be killed and notes that the fear only appeared when his thoughts were confused by the realization that Sarah was a beautiful woman. This realization caused him to be afraid, and it was the fear itself that he was afraid of. As long as Avraham Avinu had no fear, the Mitzriyim had no power over him—but once he became afraid, they did have a certain power over him, and this is what happened with Yaakov as well.

Once the fear entered his heart, Yaakov realized that it was possible that Eisav would be able to kill him, and so he davened to Hashem that he be saved. *Lehavdil*, one of the presidents of the United States said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." When fear exists in a relationship, it influences the ways in which people behave to one another, and sometimes, it's this underlying fear that needs to be addressed in order to solve the more visible problems.

Are you afraid of your spouse? Is your spouse afraid of you? It could be fear of being vulnerable, or fear of making a mistake; fear of expressing yourself, or fear of not getting it right. How did this come about? Perhaps, if you address the fear itself, you'll find that there's actually nothing to be afraid of, and you'll both be happier, closer, and more connected.

This week's essay is dedicated in honor of

Dovid and Mimi שיחיו

לרגל אירוסיהם למזל טוב בשעטו"מ

יה"ר שיהיה קשר של קיימא וירוו הוריהם נחת מהם לאיושט"א

Parshas **Vayishlach**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen, thank you for your *shiurim* which contain many powerful messages.

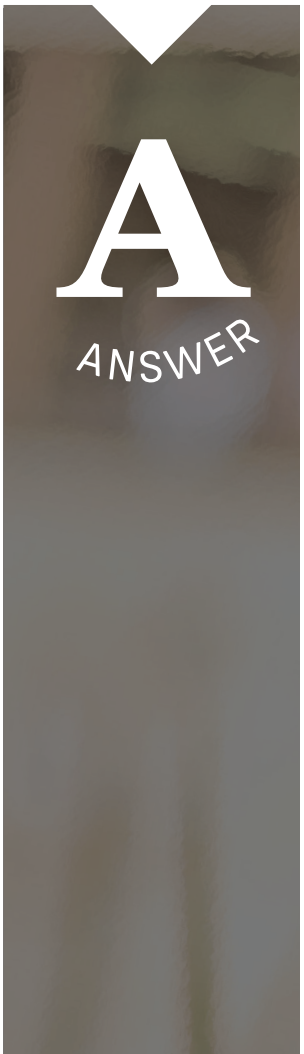
I got married just over five years ago. I have a wonderful husband, and sometimes I wonder how I was *zocheh* to such an amazing husband.

What I would like to ask about is this: Whenever I ask my husband for his advice or for him to decide something for the family, he never answers. It's like he doesn't have any opinions of his own. For instance, I might ask him whether we should go somewhere during Chol Hamoed, or invite guests for Shabbos, or something related to *chinuch*, and he just doesn't answer. This bothers me because I feel that he is the man of the house and should be the one to decide.

On the other hand, there are times when he does say what he wants and has a firm opinion, and I know I should accept it and agree, but I don't always. For example, if we traveled to the States for Yom Tov, he wants to come home long before the new *zman* starts so that he has time to get over his jetlag beforehand, but I want to return as late as possible.

Could it be that I'm squashing his attempts to be the man of the house and it's my fault that he doesn't express his opinions?

Thank you



The timeline isn't entirely clear from your letter, but it sounds like you're describing a situation in which somebody who used to express opinions freely and openly no longer does. You also seem to be aware of the possibility that you're partially responsible for this situation having surfaced, and are willing to consider the likelihood that you're squashing your husband's attempts to express himself and be taken seriously.

I don't know if your self-critical or self-doubting attitude is accurate or exaggerated, but whenever dealing with an issue, it's always good to consider how you may be contributing to it, even if it seems to be someone else's problem. If only more people would be as self-aware as you are; self-awareness is a huge part of addressing issues responsibly and resolving them sooner. So many problems are left unresolved due to people's resistance to accept the idea that they may have been contributing to the problem, and in this way they absolve themselves of being part of any solution. With that said, let's delve into the specific issue you mentioned.

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Expressing opinions is something most people have no trouble doing. From when children are old enough to have an opinion about any given matter, they're usually very ready to express it. But some people are more expressive than others, and this can leave more forthcoming people wondering why some people rarely express their views.

Is it possible that some people just don't have opinions? Is it because they're simply less passionate about their opinion? Is there something making

them feel too uncomfortable to express their opinions openly? Do they have some kind of weakness that prevents them from communicating their feelings clearly?

The answer could be all of the above, none of above, or a combination. Some people are by nature very easy-going and genuinely don't mind whether, to give a simple example, they are served meat or chicken at a *chasunah*. They don't mind whether guests are coming for Shabbos or not; they are quite happy going on a trip during Chol Hamoed but they're also quite happy staying home.

It's a big mistake to see such a person as "less-than" in any way. On the contrary, it's a big *brachah* to have a spouse who is so easy-going and undemanding. But sometimes, people assume that if such a person isn't bothered by an issue that they themselves are bothered by, it must mean that they don't understand how terrible it is, for instance, implying a lack of intelligence or values. What they don't realize is that we're all bothered by different things and to different degrees. It makes no sense to demand of someone that they care about the same things we care about, or want the same things that we want. They just don't, and that's completely normal. It's sad when people misinterpret this lack of passion as a problem, or worse, that they take it as a personal slight when someone is less passionate about something they feel is important or significant.

Most often, having a spouse who is less opinionated is actually a gift. Such people find it easier to let things go and as a result they get stuck less often. I would like to reassure the writer that it's definitely normal to have a husband who doesn't mind how you do most things. Appreciate it, because as much as you think you would find it easier to live with a husband who freely expresses his opinions, you have no way of knowing how you would react. Possibly you would feel just as (or even more) challenged dealing with a husband with strong feelings on many issues. The husband you have, aside from being predestined as your custom-made soulmate, is perhaps even practically the best possible spouse for you, and learning how to approach this challenge is what you need for your own growth.

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That said, of course there are also people who don't express their opinion even though they do have strong feelings on the subject in question. Many times, they're afraid of expressing themselves, usually because of what happened last time they tried. "Of course I didn't tell you I don't want guests on Shabbos. Last time I started to tell you, you got really mad and yelled at me."

It doesn't sound like this is the case here, although it's possible that if you think into it, you'll realize that this could apply to some extent. In such cases, instead of wondering why someone isn't more expressive, it's a good idea to consider the idea that it may be in your hands to change things, and that until you do, you may truly be "squashing" their ability to have a say in the way things are done.

There is also another point worth addressing here, and that is the self-critical idea you mentioned: "I know I should accept [what he says] and agree." It's a mistaken conception that wives always have to "agree" with whatever their husbands say. You don't always have to agree with another person. What you *do* always have to do is relate to them respectfully and learn how to communicate. At times, you may also have to give in and accept that not everything will go your way. But trying to be completely submissive often doesn't work, and in practical terms, is often a cause for frustration and resentment. If you consistently make sure to avoid "squashing" the other person, you'll probably end up feeling pretty "squashed" yourself.

There are ways to disagree with respect—and there are also ways to agree in a disrespectful or unpleasant manner. If you tell your husband, for instance, "I really want to stay on in the States for another few days, but if it's so important to you to leave earlier, I guess I'll do it for you," then you're only creating bad feelings in both of you and achieving nothing. Saying instead, "I understand why you want to return home earlier. I really enjoy the time with my sisters and parents, so maybe we can compromise, and I'd really appreciate it," will be much more effective in creating good feelings. In fact, a husband often doesn't even need or want his wife to agree with him at all times; sometimes he just needs to feel heard and have his feelings taken into consideration and then he'll be fine reciprocating.

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Aside from these considerations, all husbands deserve respect, and unless there is a specific reason not to agree to something your husband wants, if he does want something particular then that's a very strong reason for a wife to comply. This isn't because

he should be allowed to control his wife; it's simply the way to show him respect and build the proper relationship between the two of you.

How can a wife show her husband respect by complying with his wishes if he doesn't state his wishes? That's a problem very young couples might have, when they don't know each other so well. But by the time three, four, or more years have passed, you should know more-or-less what your spouse likes and doesn't like, and you don't have to wait to be told.

This is part of what *chochmas nashim bonsa beisa* means—the wisdom of a woman builds her home. You don't have to wait for your husband to ask for something; you can preempt him and give him what he desires without first being asked.

If there are *shalom bayis* problems, with serious disagreements and conflicts between spouses, then this may not be the right way to go about things. However, the wife writing this letter describes her husband as a wonderful person and she clearly sees herself as very fortunate to be married to him. If so, why wait for him to ask for something? She could actively seek out ways to please him.

With *kibbud av v'eim*, there's an actual *mitzvah* to fulfill the request of one's parents, so one could make a case for not preempting their requests. However, with one's spouse there's no such consideration. Although it's not realistic to expect oneself to become totally selfless and just keep giving without getting anything back, there's no reason not to do so once in a while.

It's also possible to give to another person even without their knowledge and strengthen the relationship in that way. I remember the story of a couple who immigrated after the war and money was very tight. Both husband and wife worked, and the wife also took care of the house, but when the husband realized how hard the wife worked to clean, he insisted that he would find the money each week to pay for a cleaning lady, and he did.

Weeks went by and the house was sparkling clean, and the wife praised the cleaning lady for her skills. After a couple of months, however, the husband had severe financial difficulties and didn't even have enough money to cover the bills. It was then that his wife presented him with an envelope full of ten-dollar bills... the money that had been given to the "amazing cleaning lady" who kept the house sparkling clean, who was none other than his wife.

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To summarize, if you have a husband who doesn't often express an opinion, first eliminate the possibility that he's not expressing himself due to the way you've reacted in the past when he did. Then be grateful that he's not demanding and look for ways to please him even if he doesn't ask you for anything. Over time, you may find that he begins to open up a bit more about his preferences, once he sees how seriously you're taking him and how much you would like to know what he likes and dislikes.

Small investments in taking the time to figure out what your spouse enjoys and would appreciate usually bring large dividends in a positive relationship that involves giving in both directions. Hashem should help that all of us should seek to understand each other, give to one another, and appreciate one another.



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