Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Behaaloscha |

Shifting Your Perspective

Pizza and Ice Cream is Not Enough

When our children learn about the *monn* in *cheder*, how its taste could be manipulated by thought, it sounds like a dream come true! The kids are drooling! Pizza and ice cream every day! What could possibly be better?

Yet in our parsha we read the actual reaction the *bnei Yisroel* had to the *monn*, "They wept and said: ועתה נפשנו יבשה אין כל בלתי אל המן עינינו, *Our life is dry; there is nothing but monn"*. How can this be?

The truth is we understand this all too well. Human nature is to focus on the negative. We are always focusing on what we don't have, and it makes us very unhappy.

Picking Up The Nonexistent

Unfortunately that's what we often do in a marriage, "Yes, my spouse has qualities, and it's certainly possible that others would appreciate them. In fact, I myself was initially attracted to her because of them. But what irks me is and what's really important to me is that one quality that she does not possess." And when that becomes your main focus, it becomes a very difficult and sad situation.

People will always be picking up on the one thing that's not great. Most often it is precisely because that's what's not there! If your husband has a particular desirable trait, you become conditioned to it, you don't notice it. It's only what he lacks that you tend to pick up on.

Natural Weaknesses

We all have weaknesses, and when we have to live with another person, we're going to have to accept their weakness. It's not about disregarding the weakness or pretending that it doesn't bother you. The other person's weakness may affect you and even hurt you, but you must accept that this is your spouse; it's part of his nature.

Now, just because a certain trait is part of your nature doesn't absolve you from working on improving it. But when your spouse has a certain problem; accept that it's simply natural. There are no ill intentions, it's just really very difficult for that person. It may not be so difficult for you, but for your spouse it could be something that will always remain challenging.

Acceptance is the Key

Let's say your wife has a problem with time management, you already sent her for therapy. She already attended a variety of courses and she has learned all about it. However, unfortunately, she's still having a problem with her time management!

So number one; It's just silly to hyper focus on the time

management issue, when your wife is really so much more than "a person who can't tell time". If you can taste everything in the *monn* will you insist on focusing on those onions and melons you used to get as a slave?

But aside from that, we should learn to accept another person along with their faults. If you're honest with yourself you can find a trait in yourself, or maybe even two, that probably annoys your wife. Of course you're a nice guy and try to go against your nature, but I'm sure here and there you slip up. Surely you wish your wife would stop getting so hung up about that one thing; you're a great guy after all. So it would be nice if you accept her as she is, with her faults as well.

Are You Sure You're not a Kohen?

There's another mistake people make and I have mentioned this in the past – assuming that if you'd care for me enough, then you would work on it. "I understand it's difficult for you, but what about me? Don't you care about me? Don't you realize how much you bother me when you come late?" It is important to realize that it's not a lack of feeling for you that's holding your spouse back from overcoming a natural weakness.

The Klausenberger Rebbe told this story about one of his uncles who was a rov before the war. For medical reasons he had to be in a certain city and his doctor happened to be a reform rabbi. This rov was friendly with the doctor, and when the doctor had his first son, a baby boy, he invited the rov to the pidyon haben and honored him to be the kohen.

Knowing that the doctor was Reform and perhaps did not realize that the kohen must actually be a kohen, descended from Aharon, the rov tried telling him as much. "Oh, no no rabbi, of course I know that the kohen must be a kohen!" was the "rabbi" doctor's response "but because of our *yedidus - friendship*, I'm asking you to be the kohen." You hear? I understand you're not a kohen - but for our friendship you should be one. Some husbands are like that - "I understand you're more of an introvert, but for my family you should be outgoing"...

Love is Not the Answer

You can love your spouse very much, but you love yourself too. Just because someone can catch a flight when it's necessary, doesn't mean that it is easy for them to be on time. I can actually do somersaults if I want, but I'm not going to do them every day!

This is important to remember because often, along with all the disappointment people have in their spouse's not being able to do this or that for them, they also carry the pain of "My spouse doesn't really care about me". "If she would really care for me, she would change"... So it's important to remember that you can love someone very much but if you weren't born a kohen; don't officiate at the Pidyon Haben.

Will He Never Change?

Some people are afraid that if they accept their spouse's weakness, it will never improve. But in reality if your husband is a habitual latecomer, you have two options. Keep harassing him, keep mentioning it and ensure both of you are aggravated. Or, just accept that this is who he is.

Some people say, "What do you mean? Is this what I'm going to deal with forever?" This week, I heard this from somebody. "You mean I'm going to have to deal with this forever? I can't handle it!" And the answer, unfortunately is, yes, you may have to deal with this forever. That's what acceptance means. It means shifting your focus, forgetting about this one problem and seeing your spouse for who he or she really is: a wonderful person with a multifaceted personality!

I'll let you in on a little secret though; when you really accept someone, and you show them enough understanding and true acceptance, it makes it easier for them to change. I'm not guaranteeing that it will happen overnight. The words "I accept" are not a magic spell that can influence your spouse's behavior. But chances are that if you're ready to work on yourself to be more accepting, your situation will change.

Codependency

Occasionally someone will tell me that they understand and accept their spouse's difficulty. "But he needs to change because I care for him

so much". If his problem only affects him, and it doesn't affect you, why do you want him to change? Are you really completely altruistic? Often people with codependency issues will convince themselves that they're not being affected, when in fact they're being affected in a very big way.

If there is something about your spouse's nature that affects you, you don't have to just accept it. You should work on it; but work on what affects you. A very important distinction has to be made. You accept that his nature is to be a certain way, but you can also accept that you are bothered and hurt by it, and *that* is something you can try to improve.

Chinuch: He's More than Just a Sloppy Kid

This is so important in parenting; learn to accept your children and their natural weaknesses! I'm not saying that you should stop waking your son up for minyan because it's naturally hard for him to get up in the morning. But make sure your son doesn't feel he is inherently flawed just because he has this one difficulty.

So often you see parents who label their children; this one is the sloppy one, this one is always fighting… We must remember to focus on their natural strengths just as much as we focus on their weaknesses. Yes he is sloppy, but he is always the first one to share his snack, he always volunteers to help. Yes she is always fighting, but she is great at schoolwork and has a terrific singing voice. Of course middos are more important than school and singing. But while I wouldn't be so concerned about your daughter scratching her sister when she's thirty five, if you crush her self-esteem now, it will quite likely leave its mark past the age of thirty five as well.

So let's learn the lesson from this week's parsha; we can have everything and still feel we have nothing. While we tend to focus only on what we don't have, it is in our best interest to notice what is right about our spouses and children and accept what is not so great.

-Q&A-

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

Question: Lately, my ten year old daughter has been getting into the habit of doing things that are somewhat inappropriate. Nothing extreme, but she'll stand in front of the mirror and dress or arrange her hair in a certain way, and then ask "Totty do I look cool? Do you like the way I look?" What would be the best way for me to react?

Answer: Many parents would instinctively attack their daughter "You don't look cool at all! It's disgusting! What's with tzniyus?!" But that's just self defense, it's not chinuch. If your daughter grew up in your house, she knows what you do or don't approve of, no need to worry. On the other hand you shouldn't approve of it either. After all she's dressing in a way that goes against the rules of this household.

So how about a third approach? How about giving a neutral response? How about smiling, giving a hug and saying "I love you". Or, if that wouldn't work you can say "I think you're a very beautiful girl". Notice, that you didn't answer the question, beautiful girl has nothing to do with the way she's dressing right now. And if she persists and she says, "But, Totty, does it look cool?" "I don't know. Totty's not so into the cool. Totty loves you no matter how you dress." That's a much healthier message.

Don't attack a child who's looking for negative attention. Don't encourage negative behavior. There's always the middle road of giving a healthy personal message that doesn't crawl into all the nitty-gritty of dealing with something that you're not happy with.

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