

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

GIVING BY CHOICE

This week's *parshah* opens with Hashem telling Moshe, "Speak to Bnei Yisrael and have them take for Me an offering from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity..." Rashi points out that of the three types of offerings that contributed to the building of the Mishkan, this *terumah* of gold, silver, and other valuable items was the only one that Hashem asked for rather than commanding the Yidden to provide it.

The *Aron Eidus* notes that this is why the *parshah* stresses that Moshe was to first "speak to" the Yidden and inspire them with the greatness of giving and the immense benefits that would result from the Mishkan — first and foremost among which was having Hashem's open presence among them, constantly. Once the Yidden realized how much they stood to gain from the Mishkan, they would rush to give their precious items, and this is indeed what happened.

What is true of the great Mishkan is just as true of the miniature sanctuary of the Jewish home that each family builds and maintains. There too, if we merit it, the Shechinah will dwell. While marriage comes with a set of obligations as laid down in the *kesubah*, the real crafting of a holy dwelling-place for the Shechinah is based on voluntary donations, the gifts we give to one another not because we are required to, but because we want to.

Fulfilling our responsibilities forms the necessary foundation but a home cannot be built from duty alone. The feeling behind our giving is what gives the home its ambiance and when love and generous giving combine with these basic foundations, we can welcome Hashem into our homes each and every day of our lives.

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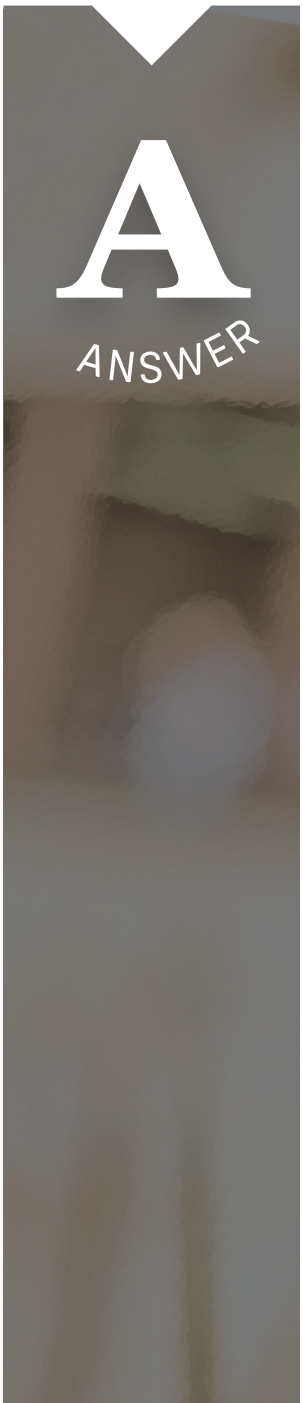
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you very much for your clear and balanced outlook on marriage and parenting. I enjoy listening to your TorahAnytime lectures very much.

My question is: My husband likes to unburden himself to me in front of the family or in private, about all his customers who (he says) are silly, annoying, talkative, drive him crazy, dishonest, etc. He tells me that it's cathartic (that is, therapeutic) to do this. I feel (and I've told him so) like I am the garbage dump and I am not interested in hearing negative speech about his customers. It produces an anxious and unpleasant atmosphere in the home.

Of course, things aren't better when I tell him that, and I am not perfect either. My children tell him they don't want to hear negative speech either. It doesn't help. What is my role as a wife? Am I obligated to listen to him? And how can I succeed in preventing marital and familial strife in this area?

Thank you.



It's almost always a good idea to try the direct approach to a problem first, which is why you didn't do anything wrong in telling your husband you don't appreciate his venting. Sometimes, getting someone to change a difficult behavior is as simple as asking for that change. Now that you've tried that numerous times and it hasn't worked, it seems that another approach is in order. After all, the famous quotation attributed to Einstein says that the definition of insanity is trying the same thing again and expecting different results.

I know nothing of your situation beyond the little that you write, but I hope that my suggestions will help others in similar situations, both husbands and wives who meet up at the end of a long work-day only to be treated to a catalogue of misery. This is very common. It could be a wife, frazzled at the end of a long day of dealing with small children whose husband expects a patient listening ear when he gets home; it could be a husband, exhausted after a long day of exertions who is greeted by his wife thrusting the baby into his arms and telling him what an impossible day she had.

What both frequently have in common is the feeling that all their hard work isn't appreciated. The husband comes home feeling mildly jealous of a wife who, he imagines, has had a long, relaxing day on the couch with a magazine and no boss to answer to. The wife greets her husband while imagining how nice it would be to get out of the house once in a while and have some adult company and someone to praise her for a job well done, rather than children who notice little and undo much of her hard work.

Both want appreciation and both are using perhaps the least effective tactic to get it. Nonetheless, they persist because it's just human nature to need to vent, especially when one's day truly was challenging and frustrating.

It's rare for a person to be able to deal with everything alone; most people do need *chizuk*, on a regular basis. This is especially true for people who spend hours each day dealing with customers while having to appear cheerful and friendly, patient and helpful, even when those customers are demanding and impatient, annoying and full of complaints. They often feel the need for at least *somewhere* to kick off their shoes and say it the way it is, or at least the way they see it.

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Just as most of a wife's day at home consists of chores which she may not enjoy, most of a man's work-days consist of work that they would ideally rather not be doing. And when the husband is one whose day consists almost entirely of dealing with difficult people, this is his day — what else can he talk about when he gets home?

So, your husband is probably right when he tells you that it feels cathartic, or therapeutic, for him to unload his feelings when he gets home. Everyone wants to

feel validated and someone who deals with unsatisfied or demanding customers all day long certainly appreciates getting another perspective once in a while — that he's the normal one and all those "difficult" people are the troublemakers, rather than vice versa.

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You seem to agree that there is some therapeutic benefit to venting, but it's still hard to be on the receiving end on such a consistent basis; it's "obvious" that no one enjoys hearing complaints day and night, especially after making it clear that you're having a hard time dealing with it.

And yet, is it really so obvious? After all, what would you prefer? Would you really want your husband to take his venting elsewhere? Imagine how you would feel if your husband came home half an hour later every evening and, upon being asked why, told you, "At the end of a long day of work, I just have to tell someone how difficult it all was, and I know you hate hearing about it, so I call my mother to tell her instead."

The truth is that many wives deal with precisely this and they would feel honored to be the person on the receiving end of their husbands' confidences. You don't feel this way, so let's try to figure out why.

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Very often, people don't like hearing complaints as they don't know how to respond. Some worry that they are expected to find a solution to their spouse's problems and they don't have one ready. Others have no idea what their spouse wants to hear and so they feel that they're failing with the "wrong" response, especially when the complaints keep coming regardless of the empathy they try to display.

Sometimes, a wife who spent the day at home feels (perhaps subconsciously) guilty that her husband was out for long hours working to provide for her. Being reminded of that, loudly and heatedly, every evening makes her feel even worse, especially if she would like her husband to help her a bit at home and now feels unable to make demands or requests of him. Dismissing his complaints as so much kvetching calms her conscience a little, and if she's not the complaining type herself, she's even less likely to be able to understand why he can't just get on with it, as she does.

It could also be that while your husband expects your sympathy for his hard day, you don't get his whenever you complain about your own difficulties. Perhaps he shows no interest in what your day was like and no appreciation for the various challenges you face. And certainly it is frustrating that he continues with a behavior that you have told him multiple times you can't bear. He is effectively demanding that you validate his feelings while he refuses to validate yours.

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Given all that, are you obligated to continue listening and provide an empathetic ear? The simple answer to that is: No. The smarter answer is: No… but you might still want to, and there are good reasons why.

The most basic reason why is that your husband is going out every day to work for a living to provide for you and your children. He is deserving of your gratitude and appreciation (just as you deserve his, for building his home). If, for him, appreciation means that you patiently listen to his kvetching when he gets home, maybe that's something you'd like to give him, happily?

Maybe you'd even like to go further than that and actually pre-empt him when he gets home, welcoming him with a big smile, a hot cup of coffee, and a sympathetic, "You've had a hard day. Sit down and have a rest." It might just be that he'll feel less of a need to vent after being treated with such a greeting. Another option is to ask him if he's okay with discussing his day a little later, when the children aren't around. If he feels that you're genuinely interested in listening, the venting may be less intense once you reach that quiet time.

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It might also be that he still wants to vent. You should allow him to do so if that is what he feels he needs to do, and you most certainly should not rebuke him in front of your children, or, even worse, allow your children to speak to him disrespectfully. Even if he is speaking actual *lashon hara* about customers, using their names and describing things they did, there are still many ways of dealing with such a situation that don't involve treating him with disrespect.

Furthermore, your children are certainly not in a position to be able to judge whether their father's frustrations are valid. In fact, neither are you — you don't really know what it's like to be in his shoes, day after day, enduring a job which seems to be giving him little pleasure, only to be told when he gets home that no one wants to know how much he is going through — for their sake!

After a long day of dealing with unappreciative customers, perhaps all he wants is to come home to someone who *does* appreciate him…

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Aside from trying to pre-empt your husband and give him the appreciation and validation he apparently craves before he even asks for it, perhaps you can expand on this idea throughout the day. You could send him off in the morning with a *brachah* for good customers, call him in the middle of the day to ask how things are going, and even add that you said a *perek Tehillim* for his *hatzlachah*…

You can, and should, tell him frequently how much you appreciate the efforts he makes to provide *parnassah*, even when it's hard and unfulfilling. You should also instill this in your children so that they come to share this perspective and admire their father, rather than despise him.

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You shouldn't expect your husband to stop complaining overnight after you start giving him validation and appreciation. The habits of years can take years to change. But you are not doing this to stop him from complaining. You are enhancing your appreciation of your spouse in order to

be a good wife, in order to do what any loving wife should want to — that is, build up her husband.

Therefore, while you may not be obligated to tolerate this, I'd suggest that when he does complain and vent, you should try and put yourself in his shoes and respond with genuine sympathy as well as encouragement. If he isn't happy with your attempts at empathetic listening, and even complains that you're not responding to him properly or saying anything helpful, you should ask him what he would like to hear instead. In fact, there's really no way you can know without asking (and he shouldn't expect you to be a mind reader).

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Once you've done all this, you can, slowly and gently, guide the conversation to more positive topics. You could ask him about the rest of his day, which is just enough of a hint that not absolutely everything was terrible and frustrating. Needless to say, no one should ever cut off their spouse with a dismissive comment such as, "You're always focused on the dark side of things!" or "You should thank Hashem for all your blessings rather than complain all the time!"

Some people are naturally focused on the negative and it is difficult to know how to deal with them — however, telling them how difficult they are to deal with is rarely the solution. What can help is being ready with more upbeat topics of your own to discuss, once your husband has got his frustrations off his chest. If relevant, you may even be able to bring your husband positive regards from his customers which will help to give him a more balanced perspective.

If, after all this, your husband is still complaining after twenty minutes and you feel that you just can't bear it any more, try to find a subtle way of escaping that doesn't leave him feeling deflated. Some wives are naturally gifted in raising other people's moods and find it easy to crack a joke that lightens the atmosphere, or change the subject in a way that doesn't invalidate others. And some wives are not. Regardless of what kind of wife you are, you should try your best to make your husband happy while remembering that you aren't responsible for his mood. If he persists in being a complainer even after you work on yourself to build him up, that is his problem to solve and not yours.

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Turning now to those spouses who are on the giving end of the complaints, I would just like to stress how very difficult it is to be on the receiving end. If there's a problem that needs solving, by all means share it and ask for suggestions. When all you want to do is vent, be careful how you do it.

There's nothing wrong with venting once in a while and it's far healthier to do so than it is to bottle things up. It's often healthier for a husband to vent to his wife (and vice versa) than it is to share things with outsiders (even a parent or sibling). So many spouses are needlessly hurt when they find out that the person they thought was closest to them has been pouring out their heart to another.

But before you open your mouth to kvetch, ask yourself what you are trying to achieve and whether there might be a better way to do so. Do you want appreciation? You could just ask for it. It can feel very unnatural but it's usually much more effective than complaining and hoping that the response will be, "Oh, you poor thing. You work so hard and go through so much!"

If all you want is a listening ear, tell your spouse that you don't expect them to come up with a magical solution that will make all your troubles disappear. Ask for permission to vent and when you're done, thank them for listening.

And then, change the subject.

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Building the Mishkan in the Midbar was based on both obligation and desire — both were necessary in order to create a sacred space where Hashem would dwell among us. Building a Jewish home is likewise based both on obligations and on voluntary acts of giving that are based on love and respect. And knowing the reward, being *zocheh* to Hashem's presence in our homes, is definitely worth the effort invested.



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