RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH

WHEN OPINIONS DIFFER

When Yaakov Avinu heard that Eisav was coming to "meet" him with an army of 400 men, he davened, asking Hashem to save him. In that *tefillah* he said, "*Ve'atah amarta heitiv eitiv imach* – and You said, 'I will surely do good with you.'" Rav Yechezkel of Kuzmir teaches from this *passuk* that if a person thanks Hashem for the *heitiv*, the good he has already received, Hashem will respond, "*Eitiv imach*," I will continue to do good with you. It's easy to complain and even to justify doing so, but if we seek out the good and thank Hashem for it, Hashem will shower us with blessings and show us just how much good He can really do – a limitless amount.

Anyone interested in the topics of *shalom bayis* and *chinuch* probably has a wife and children. That's already a tremendous blessing. When we focus on expressing gratitude, we can bring so much more blessing into our lives.

This can be applied to our relationships as well. If there's anything in your relationship that can use improvement, something you want someone else to do, first look for the good. Tell your spouse or child what you already appreciate. Often, the response will be *"eitiv imach"* with the person doing even more of what you praised.

At times this may seem counterintuitive. People are often worried that if they compliment someone, they'll be conveying the message that things are good enough already and that there's no need to try to improve anything. But that's not what usually happens. Generally, people respond to praise and compliments by wanting to earn more of them from the person who showed appreciation. So give your child a compliment and make him feel so good about it that he'll only want to please you more. The same applies for spouses. You can still clarify at times what changes you'd like and if there's something additional that you'd appreciate. Just make sure to never negate the genuine compliments you have already given, and certainly don't conclude every expression of praise with a "but."

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN

This isn't the first question I've sent you – in the past, I've appreciated your feedback. If I may, I'd like to ask a combination *shalom bayis/chinuch* question.

My husband and I have been B"H blessed with two small children. My husband is a wonderful and kind husband and father. However, there's a recurring issue that bothers me. Although we both seem to agree on what reasonable nutrition for our children is, practically speaking, that's not what happens.

Here's an example: If my husband watches my son in the morning, he'll give him a cookie or rugela before breakfast. He told me that this began because my son was waking up in a bad mood and this was the only way he could find to calm him down. My son is not a good eater and it frustrates me that he fills up with treats. Later, he's not hungry for a normal breakfast. I keep telling myself that our *shalom bayis* is more important than our children's nutrition, but it doesn't always work to ease my emotions. I try to ignore these things, but I find myself getting upset all over again.

Recently, my son started getting two rugelach and my husband had some explanation, but I got really upset. I tried talking to him to understand where he was coming from, and to share how much this bothers me. Whenever we discuss it, he always says that he would like our kids to eat healthier, but there's always a reason why it doesn't happen. If my husband watches the kids for a few hours in the afternoon, they'll often end up just snacking all day and not eating anything healthy. He usually explains that they were too much for him to handle and this was the only way he could deal with them, or that they refuse to eat regular food. Another thing that bothers me is coming home to find that the baby's diaper hasn't been changed for a while, which also makes me frustrated.

I know that B"H these aren't critical issues but at times, it's enough to make me feel very irritated with my husband and distanced from him, which I really don't want. I also don't want to feel like a controlling wife who needs to monitor every detail in my home, but at the same time I don't know how to make peace with all the things that are bothering me. I want to feel close to my husband and not constantly irritated. What can I do? If you have any ideas to share, I would greatly appreciate it.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Firstly, I want to commend you for noticing and pointing out that your husband is a wonderful and kind person, which is so important for keeping everything, including your complaints, in context. Just to rephrase: Your wonderful and kind husband occasionally parents in a way that you don't appreciate. As you said, it's not a critical issue and your *shalom bayis* is more important – however, it's still well worth addressing, as it will enable you to all be happier going forward.

On the surface, this looks like an interpersonal problem, but I'd like to suggest that this could be more of a personal issue. To illustrate what I mean, let's take a different example. Imagine a father who's frustrated at the number of times his wife is on the phone when she's watching the children. *He* always gives them his undivided attention, but she doesn't. All the same, he knows that although she has a different style and attitude than he does, the children's needs are taken care of. So he understands that he shouldn't make a big issue over it, but it still bothers him a lot. Many such situations are similar; logically, you know it's not worth making a fuss over it, but emotionally, it's hard for you to back off. What should you do?

This is a really good question, as it highlights the difference between problems that should be sorted out between people, and those that are within us to solve alone. It's not easy to work on yourself and become more tolerant of the way other people do things. Even after receiving clear guidance on how to work on something within a relationship, it can still be hard to implement it, and even harder to feel good about it, especially when there's no quick fix.

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I'd like to highlight some of the points you made, as things sometimes resonate more when you hear them from others. Both you and your husband, like most parents, agree that snacks and cookies are not the best options for children. Nobody thinks children should eat junk food instead of chicken and rice. The question is what to do when children start to kvetch, beg, or misbehave.

Some people are more self-disciplined than others, and find it easier to stand on their principles. Often children know that (for example) once Mommy says no it's no use begging her for nosh, but if they beg Totty hard enough, he'll give in. Your husband's not giving it because he *wants* to give it, or believes it's right to do so. It's just the way he is.

Looking at it this way, you can see that you and your spouse aren't necessarily in disagreement. It's just that you may have different natures which means that you express the same ideas in different ways. Taking the example you've given, it's also important to remember that while it's not a healthy choice, and can even cause an upset stomach and bad habits, nobody ever died from eating an extra cookie (of course we're not discussing compulsive eaters or those with eating disorders). And while a baby can develop a rash from a dirty diaper, it's *still* sometimes better to let it go. I once gave a *shiur* at the Keiravtuni Shabbaton on "The 10 Biggest Mistakes People Make in a Marriage." One of the ideas I elaborated on was that sometimes, even when a problem is genuine, it's still better to look the other way, and this could apply to what you describe too, especially if, as you mentioned, your *shalom bayis* is somewhat at stake.

I was recently involved in a *shalom bayis* issue that developed over an extra dose of Tylenol. One parent wanted to give another dose of Tylenol and the other parent felt it was too soon. It's obviously important to take care of our children's health, but this really wasn't anywhere near a life-or-death situation. It's so important not to get stuck on minor details, as important as they may seem at the time. I like mentioning the disclaimer on a car's door mirrors: "Objects in (the) mirror are closer than they appear." Within our homes it's often the opposite – things appear closer and more important than they really are. Of course, if a parent is being grossly irresponsible then you have an obligation to intervene, and no amount of "*shalom bayis*" considerations override the personal safety of your children. With minor things, however, keep reminding yourself that it's really not such a big deal. And if you're not sure how to assess how important an issue is, look for outside advice.

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You're not always going to agree with or think along the same lines as your husband. I assume there are areas where he feels *you're* in the wrong, but as you said, he's wonderful and kind and maybe that's part of why he doesn't mention them.

Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. One of your husband's strengths is being kind, taking care of the children, and being a warm and loving father. That's beautiful. Emphasize it. Appreciate it. Focus on it and sideline everything else. And if his weakness is giving an extra cookie, then that's just his weakness. Maybe he should be doing something about it, but meanwhile, maybe you can accept this weakness. Acceptance is one of

the biggest keys to *shalom bayis*. Trying to weigh the dirty diapers and cookies against your *shalom bayis* isn't ultimately going to be so helpful, but learning to accept will.

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Now let's address the practical aspect. You've already tried telling your husband how much these issues bother you, and it hasn't helped. You can try accepting the situation and see how that goes. Or you can try communicating in a different way, making sure you don't get angry at your husband or give him the impression that you don't trust him, which is very hurtful. Unfortunately, this is something I often see spouses do, with one constantly checking up on the other: "Are you on the phone? What are you doing with them now? Are they okay? Is everyone happy?" Take a deep breath, and ask yourself if just perhaps you're being a bit over-protective, or too insistent on having things done your way for no good reason. Of course if there are genuine grounds for concern that your spouse is being neglectful or abusive, that's something else entirely, but that's not what we're talking about here. If your spouse agreed to let you take off the afternoon and look after the kids, be grateful, not harassing.

Another common stumbling block I encounter is the justification of "But it's our kids," even though it makes no sense to say "it's *our* kids, so *you* have to do what *I* want." If a mother tries to dictate how the father takes the children to shul or how he learns with them because "it's our children," then she's either missing the definition of "our" or hoping that he'll miss it. Of course, you can and *should* politely discuss things and share your opinions. But you shouldn't try to *control* how your spouse relates to the children (unless, of course, the relationship is abusive).

The truth is that the way your husband deals with the children when he's taking care of them should be mostly his choice. If you can discuss it nicely with him and tell him that you would appreciate him not giving them too many rugelach, even though you really do understand that it's not easy to keep them calm and content without them, and that it would mean a lot to you if he tried his best, that's wonderful. And if he ends up giving them only one cookie instead of two (or even two instead of three), you can tell him how much you appreciate it.

If you make your husband feel good about his efforts and show appreciation, it may lead to more of the results you're hoping for. And it may not. He might still remain the type of person who gives snacks and junk food to keep the atmosphere calm. And you may just have to accept that (although limiting the amount of snacks you have in the house could help). But making your husband feel good about his role in parenting in general will get you further in your *shalom bayis* and *chinuch*, which as you yourself write, is what you know really matters.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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