RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Vayakhel Pekudei

Finances and Earners

In this week's Parsha, the *passuk* tells us that the women donated their jewelry and valuables towards the building and beautifying of the Mishkan. Many *meforshim* ask the same question: As per *halacha*, a woman does not have ownership of her belongings and valuables. How, then, were they able to donate any of it? Technically, it wasn't theirs?

There are many answers. One of them is that the reason a husband owns all of the couple's assets is so that he can provide for his family, as is his *halachic* obligation. However, because in the *midbar* sustenance was provided via the *mann*, the men did not have this obligation, and so their wives owned their assets and were able to donate towards the *mishkan*.

The Seforno explains that this is why the men came along with them, to allow the donations. The Chanukas Hatorah derives from the Possuk that the women were earning more than their share and were allowed to donate. But these are just a few of many explanations. There's actually a sefer that quotes twenty one different answers to this question!

What's interesting is why all of these explanations are necessary. After all, we are talking about the Mishkan – Hashem's home! *Everyone* wanted to donate to that! Why would women be any different? But the Torah states that a woman is not to donate from her belongings because they do not belong to her, and the Torah doesn't change with emotion or passion. All of the *meforshim* were searching for a viable explanation because it was not enough that every thinking person understands why they would want to do it, and it was not acceptable to assume that her husband must have allowed it.

This teaches us a very pertinent lesson. The Torah delineates an exact way for us to conduct ourselves in every aspect of our life. It doesn't change based on what we think or feel; it has all been mapped out and can be explained by Daas Torah if necessary. But we can never use the Torah as a stick to justify actions that feel good to us but are against *halacha*.

We always need to keep in mind that the Torah way is the best way and the only way.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband gets very offended when I say anything about our difficult financial state. He takes it very personally and gets defensive. He tells me that when there's money he will let me know and I should stop telling him what I need.

Is this something a wife is not allowed to discuss with her husband?

I'd appreciate any clarity or advice. Thank you.

Answer:

A woman *can* discuss anything with her husband, so long as they adhere to the guidelines of proper speech. The question to consider though, is *if* it should be said. There are often things that are better left unsaid.

This is not to imply that you should dismiss the option of discussing something important to you. Most often there actually is a way to say it right. But before discussing how to say something one important question to ask is: Is the topic you want to discuss going to help either of you in any way?

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In your case it would be helpful to try to understand why your husband is getting so offended. Imagine if your husband regularly critiques your food. About once a week, he will comment that the meat is rubbery, the potatoes are oversalted, or the soup is cold. Wouldn't that offend you terribly? Cooking for your family is part of what you do as a wife and mother, and I'm sure you try your best to do so admirably. Yet here is one of the people who should be benefiting from your efforts, and he is finding them lacking. It can be very discouraging and hurtful! Now, what if he keeps justifying his criticism by explaining how he simply wants you to do a better job, and that he means your good as well?

It is every man's obligation to provide for his family, and a vast majority of men take this responsibility very seriously and personally. When you imply that he isn't doing a good enough job or that the results of his efforts do not live up to your expectations, of course he gets insulted and hurt! Many men identify with their ability to provide for their families, even if perhaps they shouldn't.

You can say that men have good reason for mistakenly making their financial status a big part of their identity. You often might find a person whose opinion wouldn't matter at all, but once he makes a couple of bucks, he is suddenly consulted by all and sundry and awarded the greatest honors. Money

talks, as they say, and the lack of it can be a very painful burden for a breadwinner. That is why he needs his wife to be ultra-sensitive about it as well.

Aside from failing at achieving what seemed so important to him when unsuccessful, there's more to it as well. When a person struggles with *parnassah*, it has a deep effect on his self-esteem. As he winds up his *tefillin* after davening and watches his friends rush out to work, he has nowhere to go. When he tries calling his brother and he doesn't answer because he's busy, he feels his lack yet again. This messes with his self-worth to the point where he finds any statement that only smacks of dismissiveness of his opinion, even when the discussion has nothing to do with money or business, extremely offensive. He might overreact to the tiniest bit of criticism or disagreement, with people left wondering where they went wrong, or what was nasty about their comments.

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Another thing that you should consider what his negative reaction really says about him. It may not say that he's a difficult person or an unreasonable person to discuss things with. If you would have been discussing the Middle Eastern political affairs with your husband, he probably wouldn't have had such a strong reaction. Bear in mind that his getting hurt is a good sign. It is seemingly indicative that he feels a sense of responsibility and is aware of what he needs to do.

There are women who claim that their husbands don't care about *parnassah*. Let me assure you that most normal, healthy men care very much about providing for their families. It is possible that they are feeling so helpless and insecure about their lack of success that it's simply easier for them to feign nonchalance than to risk falling apart by confronting their real feelings. He might not be the most conscientious or diligent type, but he's certainly not feeling very good about letting you down.

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A man once came home from shul Friday night and mentioned in passing that all the little boys were dressed so well, and he was almost embarrassed by how shabby their son looked. Of course, he didn't mean to criticize his wife in any way, he was just casually mentioning his thoughts. Understandably, his wife got pretty worked up and defensive, arguing that she didn't have time to bother with it on theose short Fridays and had her husband been more helpful, she might have managed better...

This just goes to show how careful one needs to be when discussing something that implies someone's shortcomings or faults. You might not realize how wrapped inside your neutral-looking complaint is an accusation.

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WIth that said, let's move on. It is okay to share your feelings, and even your complaints and worries with your husband, so long as you are careful with the way you word it. Be very mindful not to imply that you think he is at fault. You can tell him in advance that you know how hard he's working and you're aware he's giving it his all, you just want to vent your frustration about the endless shopping lists, or the leaking faucet, or the broken crib. However, make sure that your stories don't carry a veiled accusation.

If he still doesn't take it well, despite your assurances, it might be best to refrain from talking to him about it for the time being. This is not because you're saying something wrong. It's because you're saying something that isn't productive and not being taken well.

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Here are several points you might find helpful to keep in mind when addressing topics like the financial responsibilities in your home, ideas that I've seen many make mistakes about, causing unnecessary aggravation on both sides:

1. Your husband has a responsibility to *try his best* to earn a livelihood. However, he cannot create his own success. The outcome of his efforts is entirely in Hashem's Hands. If he does try his very best, then no matter how much money ends up coming in, you cannot hold him accountable for it. All you can do is encourage him, support him, and reassure him that Hashem will help.

2. Your husband's obligation is to provide for your *necessities*. If you have food on your table, a roof over your head, and clothes for you and your family, then he may have very well done his share. Of course, you can ask nicely for extras and discuss your desires with him, but becoming accusatory or implying that he owes it to you so that you can compete with your neighbor or sister's standard, is out of line. If he's working hard, you can't demand of him to give up his hour of learning (or even leisure) to work harder to pay for your vacations or luxuries. If you have the means, then go ahead and enjoy it, but making your husband feel inferior because he isn't making as much money as the Friedmans or Kleins is really not nice.
3. If it's possible for your husband to do more, he will do so much more gladly when he knows that you support him, believe in him and appreciate his work. Knocking him will get you nowhere, fast.
4. Your husband might be very good at what he's doing and enjoying his work, even if the industry he chose isn't the most lucrative. Forcing him to switch jobs to something you think will net him more money, but which doesn't work with his temperament or talents, is counterproductive. Don't expect him to become someone or something he isn't.

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Pitching in to help with the family's finances is always an option, and if you are able to get a job or find other ways to supplement your income, that is wonderful. You have to remember, though, that the responsibility to cover your bills still lies with him. Sometimes, by assuming the entire burden of providing for your family to cover up for your husband's lack, you are doing more harm than good. Besides for possibly spreading yourself too thin, you are enabling your husband to stay stuck in his incompetence – even if it's just in his mind. If you must do this, do it very carefully.

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Of course if after all these ideas you feel there's a problem you're not able to resolve, there isn't enough money, your husband is not doing what he should, and you can't seem to discuss it in a way that's bringing the desired results, reach out to someone who can help you address this in a way that will actually bring the results you're looking for. You can't just justify violating the outline of proper communication, or doing anything else that can hurt your relationship, just because "you're right". Hopefully you'll be able to find the right Rov or other third party that can help you resolve this successfully.

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I can't end off without mentioning the True Provider and Sustainer. The Zlotchover Maggid was very poor and people came to him in Bais Hamedrash to tell him that his wife and children were crying of hunger and despair at home. "How can the Maggid be so calm here in Bais Hamedrash while his family is so distressed?", they asked of him. The Maggid, having done his *hishtadlus* for the day, responded, "Of course they're distraught! They are relying on me, a mere mortal, to provide for them! I am relying on Hashem, the Ultimate Provider, and so I can be calm, because He will surely help me."

It's crucial to remember that *parnassah* comes from Hashem, and all we must do is try our best. If you can be *mechazek* each other to trust that Hashem will take care of you, your lives will be much happier, calmer, and hopefully richer, in more ways than one.

With best wishes, Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYAKHEL PEKUDEI 5781

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