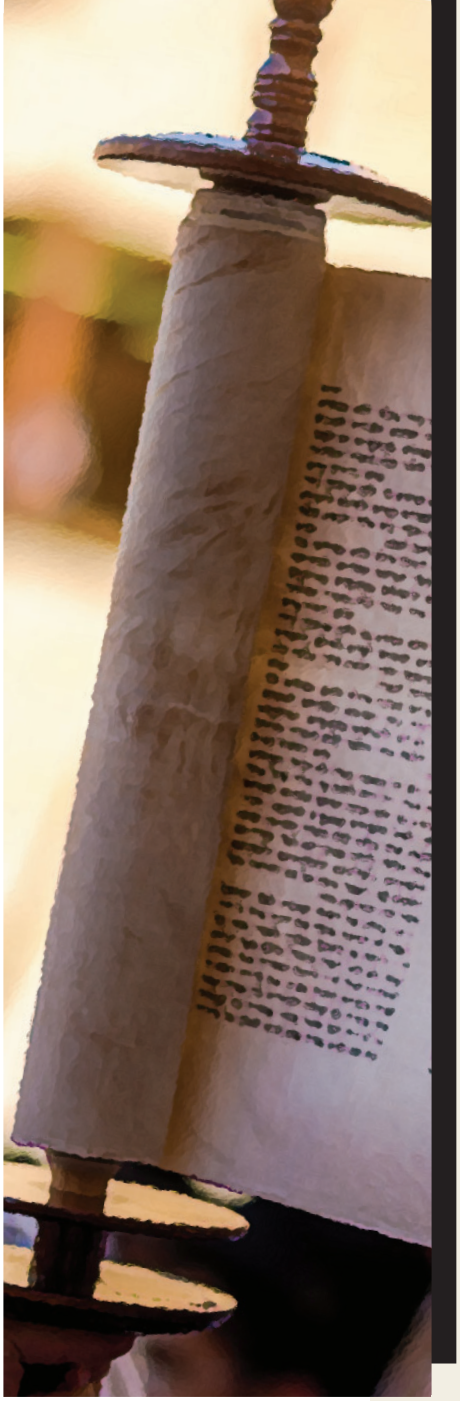


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

A SOFT APPROACH WITHIN FIRM BOUNDARIES

Parshas Matos opens with Moshe Rabbeinu addressing the heads of the shevatim, the roshei matos, telling them: "This is the thing that Hashem has commanded." The Imrei Noam notes that the use of the word "matos" hints at "matah," meaning "downward." There are two types of downward, he writes. The first is a removal of hashgachah elyonah, when harsh judgments are imposed and things really are hard, albeit always for a good reason. But there's another type of downward which can appear superficially the same, although in fact it is for the purpose of taking us up again. This too is "the thing that Hashem has commanded," and His hashgachah is present the entire time during a process that leads to our ultimate good.

The example the Imrei Noam gives is that of the sale of Yosef Hatzaddik by his brothers. Although it seemed like a terrible occurrence and one that spelled disaster for everyone involved, in the end it was a yeridah l'tzorech aliyah, and the means via which Hashem brought Bnei Yisrael into Mitzrayim and led them out again to receive the Torah.

Therefore, even when it seems like we are undergoing difficult times, we should thank Hashem for them with the understanding that they are taking us in the direction we need to go and are truly for our benefit — and one day, we may even merit to see how and why.

A similar idea is at work between parents and children, when children interpret their parents' smol docheh as being designed to punish them, as they aren't yet mature enough to appreciate the necessity of firm boundaries.

The truth is that the principle of smol docheh v'yeminah mekaraves exists in all relationships, even between spouses. While happily and willingly giving in to one's spouse is generally a wonderful thing, a marriage in which one spouse always feels obligated or pressured into backing down and giving in, lacks the appropriate boundaries and will almost certainly run into trouble.

Knowing how and when to defend one's boundaries and say "no" with respect and consideration is an important skill well worth mastering.

Thank you to

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וכל ההשפעו"ט

Parshas
Matos – Massei
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I would like to thank you for the amazing shiur you recently gave on TorahAnytime about healthy boundaries and about there not being a contradiction between caring for someone and still doing what they need to do for themselves. It was perfect timing for me and really helped me to keep myself confident and sure that what I was feeling is real.

I would like to point out a different perspective about one case you mentioned. You spoke about a spouse deciding by themselves when to go to a certain simchah, basically manipulating the other spouse into doing what they wanted since they knew that the other spouse preferred backing down, to starting a debate. I was once in a situation where my wife's relative was making a European-style chasunah with an hour-long break between the chuppah and the seudah. My wife felt that this was inconsiderate and decided that she only wants to go for the seudah, even though the rest of the family would be going to the chuppah too. I felt that it was their simchah and they had the right to choose when and how, and that I would be very uncomfortable being the only close relative not attending the chuppah.

I'm the one who drives, so I said very clearly that I have no problem with my wife going when she wants to — either she could come with me when I go for the chuppah, or she could come by taxi or bus whenever she pleases.

So, what I'm asking is whether it can be okay to do what you think is right in a case when your spouse thinks that it's really not right. And, to give another example: Can a husband make Kiddush and wash with the family when the wife wants to sleep in until after 2 or 3 on Shabbos afternoon?

Thanks for reading this long, rambling letter.



Essentially, your question is one about boundaries, an issue where a lot of people can use guidance. I devote an entire chapter to boundaries in my book, Get Along With Everyone, as getting this right is fundamental to any relationship, not just marriage.

Interestingly, believe it or not, most people actually find the concept intuitive and accept that it makes sense even if they, personally, don't like the implications in certain areas. And, although I often stress that the ideas I give over in a shiur are for the person listening to the shiur or reading the essay and shouldn't be given over to others, when it comes to boundaries, it's almost always beneficial for spouses to share the ideas freely, as long as there's a mutual understanding regarding applying those ideas.

Boundaries are not just a neutral topic — they also make many disagreements and conflicts become more neutral and less loaded, less personal and more about realigning in a healthier way. When people learn to respect others' boundaries, they often automatically learn to respect their opinions more, and find it easier to accept that other people do things differently and that's fine, and doesn't imply that anything is wrong in the relationship.

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In a nutshell, there are three categories when it comes to boundaries: mine, yours, and ours. This applies not only in marriage but also in work settings, or between neighbors.

Figuring out "ours" is usually quite easy. Within marriage, it means where one lives, anything involving the children, how to spend vacation, household purchases,

and more. (Knowing how to approach those categories isn't as easy and I'll get to that soon...) Figuring out where "mine" stops and "yours" starts can be a little harder, especially when one spouse protests: "But we're married!"

It's important to clarify just what lies behind that statement. Sometimes, it simply means, "Now that we're married, we should discuss everything together rather than making independent decisions without consulting the other spouse first." Generally, there's nothing wrong with discussing things and being open and respectful of each other's wishes. The problems only start when one or both spouses feel that they have a right to dictate decisions made by the other in areas that are not "ours" at all.

What underlies this attitude is not, "Let's discuss this," but rather, "Your decisions about what you wear / where you daven / what you do in your spare time etc. affect me, and therefore you should take my preferences into account."

People often don't feel comfortable with me saying it like it is, but more bluntly, what this means is, "You should do what I want, not what you want, because that's what I want and I don't like feeling uncomfortable. So, you should feel uncomfortable instead."

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In an "ideal" world, there would always be a way to make everyone comfortable, husband and wife would think the same way about every issue, and friendly discussion would always lead to happy resolution. In the real world, we often need to give in and respect others' preferences even when we don't want to (and that happens to be good for us).

There's a lot of focus on being mevater and the importance of it in relationships, and rightly so. However, there are also people who need to learn how to be a little more forthright and help others to understand that they are entitled to have their preferences respected too. Feeling pressured into always accommodating another is a recipe for resentment and a looming explosion. For the person too accustomed to getting their own way, this dynamic is also extremely unhealthy.

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Learning to assert one's boundaries can be challenging at first. It's important to do so with respect and without aggressively trampling on another person's feelings. While the final decision on what happens in "your" boundary area is "yours," that doesn't mean that you shouldn't invite your spouse to express their feelings and discuss ways to minimize friction.

And for the spouse, respecting the other's boundary doesn't mean that you must meekly accept whatever they choose to do without providing any input. You can certainly express yourself and ask to have your feelings taken into account to some degree, as long as you simultaneously make it clear that you respect their right to make the final decision.

Once boundaries are clear, being flexible often becomes easier, and spouses start to appreciate each other more when they realize how much the other is doing for them when they don't have to. Being flexible is usually ideal as long as both spouses recognize it for what it is. And, when spouses are usually flexible, it makes it easier for them to, on occasion, insist on doing something the way they prefer even though they realize that it will make their spouse uncomfortable.

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Often, once "mine" and "yours" boundaries have been figured out, disputes in the "ours" category feel easier to resolve. It's inevitable that there will be differences of opinion, of mindset, even of standards. Part of being married is accepting the need to deal with such differences respectfully.

From my experience in working with people I have noticed three basic options for resolving disputes in the "ours" category: discussion, compromise, and outside involvement. Discussion and compromise are often preferable, where spouses reach agreement, or take turns on doing things the way each prefers, or find a middle way that involves both being mevater. If none of that works, they might have to enlist the help of someone objective whom they both trust, to size up the situation and recommend a course of action.

Though it might seem that going to the family chasunah you describe in your letter falls into the "ours" category — as it's the two of you who will be attending — it's not actually that simple.

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Ideally, you and your wife would discuss your plans and reach agreement on how to go together and both be happy with that decision. Since that doesn't seem possible here, we need to figure out whose decision this is to make. After stripping the emotions out of the picture, it may become clear that it's your choice when you go, and your wife's choice when she goes.

It's important to know that no one needs to justify the decisions they make in "their" category. It's perfectly fine to "just want to." You don't need to explain to your wife (or wait for her to agree) that it makes sense for you to feel embarrassed being the only person missing from the chasunah on the men's side. If it helps her to accept your decision, you can add that that's the way you feel, but don't give her the impression that you have to state your case

and persuade her that you're right. This isn't about right or wrong. It's simply about you doing what you prefer to do when you are entitled to do just that.

You can say something like, "I realize that you want me to go together with you. You'd like me to do what you want. Please understand that I want to do what I want. And you can go when you want."

Obviously, it is expected that you'll be considerate in providing her with a way to get to the chasunah that doesn't involve too much difficulty.

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The other example you give of fuzzy boundaries is a little more complicated, as your children are involved too. It's understandable that you, and they, are hungry earlier in the day and don't want to postpone the seudah until the afternoon. It's also understandable that your wife prefers that the whole family eat the seudah together.

I'll suggest some ideas which may or may not be applicable to your situation; either way, they might shed some light on how to approach these issues.

You can certainly suggest a compromise that isn't ideal for either of you but could prove to be a solution, something like eating at half-past-one, for example. You should certainly discuss the issue with your wife, stressing that you really want to eat together and don't want an outcome where either parent is missing.

But before doing that, you should break this issue down into its component parts to realize how everyone is being affected.



First of all, you and the children are going to be left hungry for hours if your wife's preferences are fully accommodated. That could mean too much snacking before the seudah and then, not eating properly at the seudah. It could mean cranky children and you having to keep them calm and happy while your wife is still resting. It will probably mean growing frustration and resentment on your part, which will make it hard for her to appreciate what you are doing for her.

Perhaps more importantly, if you simply give way here, she may never realize that you are going over and above and could come to expect that her wishes take precedence. That might not be so disastrous in this particular area (though the impact is not minor) — however, when it comes to larger, more momentous issues, if she similarly expects you to stand down and let her do whatever she wants and you simply can't, that will be crunch time.

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Many marriages experience friction simply because boundaries were never properly understood or respected. Once they are accepted, it can take time and considerable effort for spouses to adjust. This transition time is made easier when both spouses invest not only thought but also love and attention in making it easier for the other to come to terms with the new way of doing things. This is a time when yemin mekareves needs to be stressed at least as much as smol docheh, if not more.

Even when you do things "right," it can still be hard to swallow for the spouse who became used to getting their own way and feels entitled to that result. It can also be hard for the spouse who has always given in to learn to stand up for himself without being inconsiderate or aggressive. Both husband and wife should keep their focus on the bigger picture and the end goal, which is a marriage of mutual respect where they both allow each other to grow and thrive in the best way possible for the entire family.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: MATOS – MASSEI 5786

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