Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Vayigash |

A Lion's Assertiveness

PARSHAS VAYIGASH: THE LESSON THAT SHOULD NOT BE TAUGHT

When looking for a life-lesson in this week's parsha, we need not look any further than the first word, ויגש. "Vayigash eilav Yehuda" –"And Yehuda confronted him". And the lesson we learn here is, the middah of Assertiveness.

Yehuda was standing before one of the mightiest men in the ancient world. The passuk says about Yosef- בלעדיך לא ירום איש את ידו ואת רגלו בכל ארץ מצרים. The great Pharaoh had bestowed upon him such immense power that no one in all of Egypt could lift his hand or foot to do anything, big or small, without Yosef's approval.

And yet, when Yehuda felt it was important, he summoned up the courage, and confronted Yosef for his unjust dealing with his brothers. He spoke up when necessary. And that is the lesson we will discuss today, the importance of speaking up.

However, as with any Torah-lesson, and perhaps even more here, the implementation requires much chochma. A lot of thought is imperative before putting this theory into action. Suppose someone who is a tyrant at home, came to this lecture… that's trouble! Until now, he might have felt a little twinge of guilt here and there, "Perhaps I'm making too many demands of my wife and children… perhaps I'm being a bit unreasonable." But now, he has a hetter! "Rabbi Gruen says that the Torah teaches us to be assertive, you have to say what you want!"

And so, although assertiveness is important, we cannot merely state "One must be assertive". This is a topic that needs to be explained at length.

STATING THE OBVIOUS

And so we begin; It might come as a surprise to some people, but usually the best way to get what you want… is to ask for it. Sometimes, people feel miserable in their marriages for the simple reason that they've never explicitly expressed their needs. This is such a tragic mistake! You didn't marry a mind-reader. Never assume that an issue will fix itself, and go away on its own - one day you'll wake up and the problem will have disappeared! If you want something, say something! Be clear about your desires.

Sometimes a husband or a wife has something that they very much want from their spouse, but they'll never ask for it. Then they'll carry around resentment about it for years. There are many reasons why a person wouldn't ask for something he wants. Sometimes one is ashamed to ask for something – it's below his dignity. Or sometimes a woman might say, "I shouldn't have to ask for it – he should know on his own! What's it worth if I need to ask for it?"

There can be many reasons holding you back from clearly stating what you want or expect. But whatever your reason, and however good it is; most of the time, if you don't ask for something, you don't get it.

THE WOMAN WHO IGNORED HER HUSBAND

Recently a yungerman called me up – he's hurt. Sometimes when he calls his wife, she doesn't call him back. She sees a missed call but doesn't return

it! Or sometimes he texts her and she doesn't respond. Doesn't she know that when someone calls you, and someone as important as your husband – you call him back?!

I asked him if he ever communicated this to his wife, if she is aware that he feels this way. The man was indignant. "Do I need to tell her?! Isn't it obvious that when your husband calls you, you call him back?"

But he wasn't answering my question. All I had asked him was whether or not he had told his wife what his expectations were. It's not a question of what is proper, of what is right, or what is wrong. And it has nothing to do with cell-phones! It is a simple question. You want something from your wife; did you tell her what it is?

Some people just don't return calls, they don't get around to it. It could be that she doesn't return her own mother's phone calls. It doesn't matter, we're not trying to understand her actions here. The point is, if you don't clearly state what you want, you may not get it. That's all. If this woman is the type that never looks at her missed calls or texts, then crying in my office, or even submitting a complaint with the justice department [because it's just not right!] won't help. But clearly sharing your expectations with her might accomplish something.

If you don't take your own needs seriously enough to express them, why should someone else take your needs seriously?

THE MAN WHO HAS NOTHING TO EAT

Or take another case I was involved in. A man tells me, "Every day, I come home after a day's work – and there's nothing to eat!"

"There's nothing to eat?!" I said, "Your wife doesn't cook dinner? The children go to sleep hungry?!"

"No, no no" he reassured me, his wife prepares dinner. Only it's never ready when he comes home from work, and he always come home from work hungry.

So I asked him the same question: "Did you ever tell her that you want to eat earlier, that you want supper to be ready when you come home?"

"Well, shouldn't she know?! Didn't they teach her? What do they teach at kallah classes these days?!"

It's very nice to launch an investigation into what Kallah-teachers teach, but at the end of the day, if you want something, ask for it.

WAITING FOR THE FISH

Years ago Satmar published the Zemiros Divrei Yoel, a zemiros that includes all of the minhagim of the Satmar Rebbe zy"a. So that week a certain Satmar chossid came home and told his wife; this week I have a new zemiros, this week the seuda will be run entirely according to the new zemiros with the Rebbe's minhagim.

The man began the meal, ate his challah and began singing kol mekadesh as per the zemiros. When the song was over he looked into the zemiros and then looked up and stopped, waiting. "What happened?" asked his wife. The man just pointed down at the zemiros in front of him, and continued sitting in silence.

"Ok," thought his wife "I guess the zemiros says that after kol mekadesh you meditate silently for a few minutes". Actually, in the zemiros, it is written that when the rebbe finished kol mekadesh, fish was served. And so, instead of asking for fish, this brilliant fellow just sat and waited for his fish to materialize! It doesn't work! If you want something, ask for it. If you're not assertive and you don't know how to state your needs, you may not get them.

TEACHING OTHERS TO ABUSE YOU

Up until now we were discussing assertiveness in the sense of being assertive to get what we want. There is another instance in which assertiveness is very important. That is when you're being hurt. In such a case you must stick up for yourself and state clearly that you will not tolerate abuse.

Actually, people don't know this, but many times they've been teaching their abusers to abuse them. If your husband is mistreating you, think about it. Does he mistreat his sister the same way? Does he mistreat his business partner the same way?

Let me explain. Often, when somebody is doing something hurtful to you, they are only doing it because you've allowed it in the past. In a certain yeshiva, the boys would use their phones during shiurim, texting, and doing other things while the Rosh Yeshiva was speaking. A blatant sign of disrespect! But in the afternoon during secular studies, no one dared take out their phone. The Rosh Yeshiva was at a complete loss to understand the situation. He had a very good relationship with the bachurim and he had never had an issue with control, he couldn't figure it out!

I suggested to the Rosh Yeshiva that perhaps he'd been teaching the boys that it's okay to use their phones. "If the first time a bachur took his phone out during class, you would have stopped the shiur and explained that you can't go

on while someone is using a phone, perhaps it wouldn't have happened a second time. It is only because you didn't protest in the beginning that you now find yourself in this situation. While the secular studies teacher was very clear with them, and taught them not to use phones; by ignoring it, you were in effect teaching them that it is okay to use phones during class."

It's not that the boys love or respect the Secular Studies teacher more than the Rosh Yeshiva, or that your husband loves his sister more than he loves you. Rather the others were clear with him that they won't tolerate everything, while he never heard that from you. If someone is doing something to you that you don't like,ויגש אליו יהודה, confront him, tell him about it!

WHY RABBI GRUEN'S SUGGESTIONS DON'T WORK

Now, we've already mentioned that it takes great chochma to be assertive. Don't come home and say to your wife; "Sarah, from now on I demand that you immediately return my calls and reply to my texts. I will not tolerate abuse from you anymore, you had better shape up and begin treating me with respect!"

Obviously, there is a proper way to navigate any interpersonal relationship. Just because you think you're being assertive and now everything should be ok, doesn't mean that everything will be ok now. If you feel that you're being assertive but it's not working, there are two possible reasons. Either you're not doing it right, like Sarah's husband in the previous paragraph. Or you're not being consistent enough.

"Old habits die hard". If the class knows that it's not a problem to use their phones during shiur, it's very hard to get them to stop after reprimanding them just once. You have to be very consistent and slowly train them that this particular action will no longer be tolerated.

If you're trying to be assertive and it's not working, it may be that you simply don't know how to be assertive, and instead you're bullying or overbearing, which is further exacerbating an already difficult situation. Or, perhaps you're not being consistent and clear enough in your message. For this reason it's important to run these things by an objective third party who can often help you navigate sticky situations, pointing out where you might have gone wrong.

YEHUDA FLATTERS THE EGYPTIAN RULER

Going back to Yehuda, he knew how to be assertive in the right way. Yehuda didn't yell at Yosef and accuse him of using his position to make unfounded accusations against the brothers. It was certainly true, and that is certainly how it seemed, that this Egyptian was picking on the brothers and causing them great aggravation for his own amusement. Yet instead of "being direct and assertive", Yehuda was assertive in a smart way and flattered Yosef.

Yehuda said כי כמוך כפרעה, -"You're a great and mighty ruler, you're like Pharaoh! Surely a great man like you wouldn't want to see a perversion of justice. Surely an upright man like you wouldn't want to see our old father die of broken heart". Yehuda confronted Yosef, but instead of being aggressive, he did so in a manner that would be pleasing to all those involved.

When being assertive, the point isn't to "get back" at the other person, or to prove that you're right. The point is to state your needs in a way that will achieve results. If you want to achieve results, it's not a good idea to come off sounding accusatory or antagonistic. You're not looking for conflict or tension, you're looking for a harmonious resolution, and with Hashem's help, using the proper tools, you'll get it.

THE THREE RULES OF ASSERTIVENESS

So, to sum it up: Being assertive is very important. Assertiveness can help you, to get something you want, or to stop something you don't want. Now, on how exactly to be assertive, we'll present you with three rules.

1. Don't hurt the other party. Don't say "You're mean to me, you ignore your own husband, you're a horrible human being, I'm not going to take this abuse any longer." Don't do that; hurting the other party will only create pain, defensiveness and more conflict.

Keep it about yourself, explain why the action is causing you distress and ask for it to stop. You can even start with a compliment, keep the message positive: "I know that you love me, you do so many good things for me. All day long you're busy shopping for us, cooking for me, washing my laundry. You're really good to me. That's why I thought you should know that I feel hurt when you don't reply to my texts. I know you don't mean anything, your phone isn't so important to you. But for me the phone is very important, and sometimes I need the reassurance that you take my texts seriously, otherwise I might feel ignored."

2. Be specific, don't generalize. Don't say "There is never any food for me, I'm always hungry,

this household isn't running properly!"

To you "This household isn't running properly" might mean "Dinner is served at 6 instead of at 5:30". But to the person hearing, it might mean anything from "You're so lazy" to "You're totally incompetent". The purpose of our assertiveness is to get our message across, what a pity not to get it across.

3. Say it the right way. Use the right time and tone of voice. It all boils down to this. You want to get your message across, make sure your message will be heard.

Don't give a long shiur, and afterwards while everyone is itching to get out for lunch, close your gemara and say: "It bothers me when people use their phones in class". Yes, you were specific. Yes, you didn't accuse them. But still, you did it at the wrong time, in the wrong tone of voice. Like we said when we started, assertiveness needs thought. But with the right amount of thought, you will b'ezras Hashem see results.

EDUCATING CHILDREN

And all of the same rules apply to being mechanech your children. I hear from parents so often "It keeps happening again and again, and I don't know what to do!"

Ask yourself, "Was I clear that this cannot be tolerated?" Even if I was clear, "Was I consistent?" "Am I saying it the right way and not hurting the other party or denigrating my child?"

"I don't want to have to ask my child to help!" Ok, but you have to decide what you want more, is it more important "not to have to ask", or is it more important to have the help?

Assertiveness is an important skill, which helps us in all of our interpersonal relationships. Let us learn it and use it wisely.

-Q&A-

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

Question: Do I really have to make a Chanuka Party? I don't need it, I don't like it, it's so hectic, it's not important anyway… What do you think?

Answer: You know there's a famous saying "ALL generalizations are bad". So obviously every situation is different and every scenario has to be dealt with accordingly, but I'll try to answer to the best of my ability.

First of all, societal norms should be taken into account. If something is accepted, and expected, it's not so simple to just cancel it on everyone. There's a big family ka"h, everyone is looking forward, and then abruptly everything is cancelled. You need a very good reason for something like that. I'm not saying that anyone must do anything just because "everyone" thinks it's right. It could be that there's a valid reason. Still, this consideration should definitely be taken into account.

While it's true that you shouldn't be controlled by public opinion, still it's good to take other's feelings into account. Children shouldn't feel like they're not welcome in their parents' home. The feelings of others must be considered. To make a decision purely on what's convenient and easy for "me", might be selfish.

Next, try to be honest with yourself. What exactly about the prospect of making a Chanuka Party is making you uncomfortable? Is it the timing? Is it the noise? Is it the daunting prospect of cleanup? Is it feeling like you're on display and being judged? Is it because you're uncomfortable giving a speech?

Often a situation might appear to be "just difficult". But under careful scrutiny, it becomes clear that only one or two minor aspects are difficult. If we address these aspects, it becomes much easier.

So it's important not to just look at the big picture and say "I don't like it, it's not for me, not my type, it's not important", and reject the entire idea with one broad generalization. Be honest with yourself and shift the focus. It may not be the party or the family, it may be something about yourself which can be easily rectified. If you're not happy about cleaning everything up yourself, be assertive! We just gave a whole lecture about this; say it. State your needs. Ask family members to stay after the party and help with cleanup. There are so many things that can be easily fixed with a little bit of thought and planning.

So may we all enjoy our families and have a lichtige, happy Chanukah!

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