RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYECHI

A UNIFIED MESSAGE

The *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* brings a *vort* from one of the Polish Rebbes on the words, *"Hei'asfu ve'agidah lachem,"* the opening words of Yaakov Avinu's *berachos* to the Shevatim.

Noting that the word *"hei'asfu"* contains the letters of the word "*efes* – nothing" and that *"agidu"* can mean "to bind and join together," the Rebbe explains that a person must first make himself into an *efes*, a nothing, before being able to join and be *be'achdus* with others. Achieving that goal is certainly a huge task, but what we can all do is at least start to work in that direction. The less a person is obsessed with himself, the more he can tolerate and connect with others.

When a person wants to have a meaningful relationship with their spouse, their children, and with anyone for that matter, they first have to "make room" for those people. Flexibility is crucial for relationships. Flexibility doesn't mean negating oneself entirely in favor of someone else; it means being able to flex and bend to accommodate others. When a person is self-absorbed, their self is too big and it's hard for them to find room for other people.

Achieving *achdus* isn't just putting yourself aside. It demands being able to question yourself, your ideas, your self-righteousness, and your tendency to justify your actions. It also means truly understanding another person, and being prepared to accept that just as you have opinions that are important to you, others have opinions that are important to them. Everyone likes to feel significant and wants to be happy, and the best way to achieve that is by working together.

One of the basics of *shalom bayis* is accepting that it's not all about you. When there really is room for another person, there's room for meaningful relationships.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED

לז"נ מרת דבורה בת מוה"ר יו"ט ליפמאן ע"ה

MAY THE BENEFIT IT BRINGS BE לעילוי נשמתה

QUESTION

HELLO RABBI GRUEN,

My ten-year-old daughter wants to spend Shabbos at a family-friend's house. My husband has different viewpoints from me about a lot of different things. One of them is where my daughter spends Shabbos.

The family that she wants to go to happens to be a close relative on my side of the family. They are a wonderful frum family who live in a nearby town and are *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos*. My husband is concerned about their standards, their behaviors, and their *hashkafos*. Specifically, with regard to *kashrus*, he's concerned with where they buy their meat, if it's up to our standards, and so on. I think it's fine since they are in a frum community. Even if we don't rely on the *kashrus*, there are ways to get around it. My daughter understands my husband and even agreed to only eat their fish, challah, salads, etc. My husband is concerned about their salads though, if they use green leafy vegetables and herbs that must be checked for *tola'im*. My daughter agreed to only eat food that doesn't have those. Although he realized that my daughter could be careful, my husband also said that maybe the pots are a problem since the mother cooks meat and vegetables in them and it may get mixed with other foods, etc. As Sephardim, we don't rely on certain brands of vegetables but there are rabbis (also Sephardic) in the community who do rely on them, so even I get confused sometimes.

The bottom line is, I feel my husband is being too strict with our daughter and needs to let loose. Please advise if possible. I don't want to keep arguing with my husband and my daughter really wants to go.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I want to make it very clear at the outset that any decision about one's children has to be a mutual decision between both parents. Any advice or clarification I may offer has to go back and be discussed between both of you. (That's aside from the fact that decisions revolving around *halachah* and *minhag*, are, for the most part, in the husband's domain.)

I also have to make it clear that I don't know the extent of the concerns your husband has, or how reasonable they are. I hope you have a Rav to whom both of you can go to ask this question, just as you should for any other *shailah* you may have. Since there are, as you note, many rabbis with varying opinions, it's important for you both to submit to the same halachic authority. If this situation is simply a *halachah* question about eating food at a cousin's house, you can ask your Rav this question. And yes, you should feel free to respectfully ask your husband if he's okay with discussing his concerns with a Rav and making sure things are being dealt with responsibly.

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I understand that this may have no significance, but you did mention that the family in question are your relatives, not your husband's. It's only natural for a person to be more subjective when it comes to his own family and genuinely not notice issues the same way we would if the same issues existed in other families. I don't know if it would be fair to say that had this been a relative from your husband's family, you might have understood his concerns better, but it's something to consider.

I'd like to mention a *vort* from the Kotzker Rebbe *zy"a* on the words, *"Ulai lo soveh ha'ishah laleches acharei* – maybe she won't want to come with me," spoken by Eliezer after being told by Avrohom Avinu to go and find a wife for Yitzchak. When Eliezer repeated this conversation to Besuel and Lavan, the word "*ulai"* is written without a *vav* so that it can also be read as *"eilai."* Rashi explains the discrepancy by noting that Eliezer initially wanted his own daughter to marry Yitzchak, and this bias prevented him from understanding why he was questioning whether the girl he found would be willing to accompany him back. It was only after the *shidduch* was already completed and his own desires were no longer relevant that he could take a step back and see his own thought-processes as subjective. It's very normal to be subjective and also not to realize it, which is why it's so important to run things by a third party, especially when it comes to questions of *shalom bayis*.

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I believe that it is important for children to spend time with family. It gets touchy when people have to weigh the desire not to expose their children to certain things against the importance of being with family members. There definitely are times when it isn't in the best interest of children to spend time with certain people. But even when it's essentially okay for them to meet and spend time together, it may be advisable to do so on your own terms. If a Chanukah party is taking place in a venue that isn't good for your children, you can try to find another time and place for the children to get together. If there will be other people besides the cousins there, for example, and it makes you uneasy about the gathering, maybe find a time when just the cousins can gather. These kinds of issues are often solvable and not necessarily all-or-nothing situations.

In this specific case, the details seem to be about the food, although it's certainly possible that your husband actually has other concerns in mind that he prefers not to tell you about, things that he is worried about that could have a negative impact on an impressionable child. Even if your daughter promises to be careful with their foods, bear in mind that it will be very awkward for her not to eat certain foods that her cousins offer her, and will put her under a lot of pressure that you surely wouldn't want to subject her to. You should also consider that when she grows up, she could decide that it's okay for her to use these vegetables because they were good enough for her cousins. While she may know in theory that certain *hechsherim* are better than others and accept that her own family has higher standards, seeing close relatives actually eating food that was previously considered unacceptable certainly has an impact.

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Let's now discuss the general question of what to do when a child asks for something the parent isn't comfortable with. Even when we say "no," it's important to listen, understand, and validate, showing the child that we understand their feelings. Don't knock the child or make fun of them for asking for something that's important to them. "You want to go to your cousins? I understand." Show them that you care and make them feel loved. After expressing all that, you can tell your child that you're not comfortable with it. "Maybe we can come up with something else instead. I'll think of something and get back to you." You don't necessarily have to replace the request with something else but it is a way to show how much you care. When your child sees that, it will be much easier to accept the refusal and even your reasoning behind it.

This is another reason why it's so important for both parents to be on the same page. Your child should feel that both parents care about her and are very firm about their decision. When you discuss this with your husband, keep in mind the end goals: "*We* want to show a united message to our children. *We* want that message to convey love and caring." Figure out how you can get on the same page. Don't let this incident become the basis for her to start wondering whether one of you cares more for her than the other.

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You feel that your daughter really wants to go to her cousins' house. Sometimes, the reason children keep asking for something is because they sense that the parents haven't come to a final decision. More than her desire to go, she wants to know what her parents' position is, and if you and your husband are conveying a mixed message, it leaves her unsure whether to back off or persist.

This is why conveying certainty in your response is so important. Saying things like, "I'm not sure whether..." or "It might not be such a great idea to..." is likely to prompt your child to challenge you. As a *mechanech* once explained to me, children are certain about what they want. If you counter their certainty with your uncertainty, you're unlikely to resolve the situation. If instead you provide a clear and confident answer, of course cushioned with the sensitivity needed, you have a greater chance of having your words and opinions taken seriously and accepted in good grace. Once your daughter hears a final "no," she might have an easier time channeling her desire to spend time with family and friends in another direction.

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Regardless of how you end up resolving this specific issue, it is very important for a wife to always be respectful of her husband. Sometimes it boils down to a husband feeling that his wife is challenging his opinions or level of *frumkeit*, and not respecting his *ehrlichkeit*. Giving him that respect and showing him how much you admire his devotion to *Torah u'mitzvos* can sometimes make him less defensive. Sometimes, husbands become overly protective of their *shittos* simply because they feel that their wives don't accept their authority.

When both of you are motivated by the same goals of doing *ratzon Hashem*, showing your daughter how much you both care, and presenting an united front while being respectful of one another, it can be much easier to resolve the issue. I wish you and your husband *hatzlachah* in understanding each other, being respectful of each other, and bringing out the best in each of your children, together!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!