RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS LECH LECHA

THE BEAUTY OF ROUTINE RELATIONSHIPS

On their way back from Mitzrayim, Avraham Avinu and Lot were obliged to part ways. It was then that Avraham told Lot, "*Im hasmol ve'aimina ve'im hayamin ve'asmilah* – If you go left, I'll go right; if you go right, I'll go left." Many interpret this interaction as referring to the never-ending struggle between the forces of *kedushah* and *tumah*. The Har Tzvi explains that if the *yetzer hara* shows his true colors and presents himself as being on the "left," incorrect side, then we can turn to the right and go our way. However, if the side of *tumah* tries to present itself as "right" and correct, then we will have the task of proving how it is really the left side and against everything holy. The first step in any battle is to identify the enemy.

Unfortunately, in relationships, it's all too easy to misconstrue the other party as the enemy. So often, I'm asked to intervene with couples who have a long list of complaints against their spouse, with the common denominator being that their spouse "just doesn't care about them." It would be so much more effective – and much nicer – to point out all the things your spouse does for you *which prove how much they do care*, and then to share the specific thing that is bothering you. If you can preface that with: "I know you care about me, and that's why I feel comfortable telling you about something that's important to me…" you'll probably accomplish much more! Try to keep in mind that a single oversight shouldn't be taken as proof that your spouse doesn't love you or care for you. It's possible that they care for you more than anyone else. But two different people will inevitably disagree on how much certain things bother them and don't automatically realize how much the other person might be upset by something that doesn't upset them at all. This doesn't have to become a problem as long as there is open communication. What *is* a problem is when one spouse behaves in an obviously caring way eighty percent of the time but the other spouse harps on the remaining twenty percent when their spouse allegedly doesn't come through. What's an even bigger problem is focusing on that twenty percent and acting as if it's one hundred percent of the relationship.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED BY
THE SCHLESINGER FAMILY
MAY IT BE A ZCHUS FOR THE FAMILY AND KLAL YISROEL!

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN

Thank you for your shiurim on TorahAnytime. I am an avid listener and appreciate the fact that they are very down-to-earth and applicable.

My husband and I have been married for about a year. We've had some challenges from the start. We spent the first year just surviving. Now that we're trying to work things out, I feel like we fell into the rut of routine. For example, we only talk about technical things that have to get taken care of. It doesn't bother me but bothers my husband very much. He feels that he's not doing his duty of working on the relationship. But as I said before, I think it's just that in the beginning he didn't feel comfortable talking so now it just became habit.

If you can discuss this topic in you weekly shiur and advise, A) how to get past the routine and B) how to calm my husband down that it's not a lack of effort from his part, it would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time and may you be greatly rewarded for all you do for Klal Yisroel.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Thank you for listening to my classes and for the kind words of feedback. You present an excellent question and I'm sure many people can relate to different parts of it. I'll start by addressing a point about relationships in general.

There are things that are *routine* and things that are *technical*. Some people are okay with technical relationships. "Can you do this? Can you take care of that? What time are we leaving?" As long as they get along, help each other out where needed, and generally enhance each other's life with companionship, they're content. Others aren't okay with this kind of relationship and find it lacking. Some people literally can't handle lack of depth in a relationship. They need a personal connection and open communication. And some take this further still. A deep connection isn't enough – the relationship has to be fun, novel, and exciting.

The early days of a relationship can be very exciting, but real relationships aren't built on constant sources of excitement. Genuine connection falls somewhere in-between technical and exciting, when people come to realize that "routine" is an important part of a relationship. Living on a constant high, even from *simchos* or vacations and other desirable things, isn't good. It's often a distraction from real life. It's important to get into and enjoy a healthy routine.

So, while a relationship which is too *technical* might be something to address, please don't confuse that with *routine*, which shouldn't necessarily be seen as a problem at all.

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With that said, if your husband is bothered by the fact that your relationship is confined to what he sees as technicalities, don't trivialize his concerns and give him the feeling that something so important to him means little to you. If he gains the impression that you're not even looking for more connection with him (whether true or not), he's likely to be even more hurt, and especially so if he thinks this is because your emotional needs are being met through other relationships (which merits a discussion of its own). Even if you say something like, "It's okay that things are this way," trying to reassure him that it's not something to worry about, you're subtly confirming that as far as you're concerned, nothing is going to change. And no one likes to hear that.

I'm not suggesting that your problem is a major one that requires professional intervention in order to avert impending disaster. All the same, it's likely to be helpful for you to consider whether there's something you *can* do to connect in a way that your husband – and probably yourself as well – will appreciate. It's not at all uncommon for a husband and wife to be quite different, which can make it harder to really connect. They may have different hobbies or interests and come from very different backgrounds. It's also not uncommon for one spouse to want the other to change, or at least meet them half-way. But it's always a mistake to focus on getting someone else to change, regardless of who's right or wrong. The question is always, "What can *I* do?" Maybe *you* can be the one to start working on building an emotional connection. Since it's you asking the question, it's you I'm addressing.

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The first thing I'd suggest you try doing is start expressing emotions. This might not be something you're used to, at least not with your husband, yet I believe your husband would appreciate your sharing your feelings with him. It could even be something as simple as, "I baked a cake for Mrs. Cohen today – she just had a baby. It gave me such a good feeling – it reminded me of the *chessed* volunteer work I did as a girl. I really enjoyed it then too – I guess I'm the type of person who likes to feel useful…" Opening up to reveal your emotions can often require showing some vulnerability, which is always challenging and especially so when you're not used to talking like this, but it introduces an entirely new factor into your communication and your relationship. You can also try asking your husband questions that require him to express emotion: "How do you feel about this?" You can even bring emotions into your compliments. Instead of saying, "You're a great guy," you can say, "When you did that, it made me feel so proud of you."

You can be creative and incorporate emotions into technical statements. By doing so, you're opening new channels of communication. (Be aware that your husband may not be sure how to handle this at first. You may have to help him understand how you want him to react to more emotional statements or questions.) Try sharing topics and ideas that you usually feel more comfortable sharing with others. Talk about your hobbies and interests. Or take it a step further and try to express interest in *his* hobbies.

To illustrate this point more clearly, suppose your husband is into elections whereas you like to cook and bake. You can see this as a problem – where's the common ground? Instead of waiting for your husband to show interest in the latest recipe you tried, you can try to cultivate some interest in the latest news items. Sure, politics doesn't interest you all that much. But building a relationship with your husband does.

Showing an interest in things that are important to your spouse can help your relationship blossom. It may even prompt your spouse to become more interested in things that are important to you. There's a lot you can do to take your relationship to the next level, and you may end up surprising yourself at how much you enjoy the enhanced connection, especially when you see how much your husband appreciates it.

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Aside from working on connection, I think it's also important to have breaks in routine. Different couples have different ideas about how these breaks should look and how frequently they should happen, but they're generally a good refresher, especially when things get a bit too dry. But you should never see the routine aspects of life as a problem – on the contrary, you can learn to appreciate and enjoy life when it's smooth sailing, as well as the comforting sense of being in a largely predictable, stable relationship with someone whose company you enjoy. This is what's going to bring you true emotional fulfillment, not constant excitement and surprises. It's also important to remember to be grateful for having a relationship that's calm and routine. After all, plenty of people would give anything not to have so much "excitement" in their lives… Appreciate it when there's peace and quiet.

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Here's another important piece of advice that can be applied to many situations. If you implement any of these ideas or others and you see improvement, attribute the progress to your spouse – even if it was you who came up with more topics to discuss or thought of other ways to deepen your relationship. If you can do this, you'll likely make your spouse feel much more comfortable with the idea of change, which will in turn promote more growth.

Furthermore, even if you still haven't reached your goal of where you want your relationship to be, focus on the progress already made. There will always be more work to do, but emphasizing the distance already covered will make the road ahead much smoother.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS
FOR THE HOME

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!