RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

BALANCED PERSPECTIVES

The parsha opens with the dramatic scene of Yehuda negotiating with the Egyptian viceroy regarding Binyamin's penalty for stealing the goblet. The Medrash says that Yehuda tells him" "The law in our Torah is that if someone steals but doesn't have the means to pay, he gets sold as a slave. But Binyamin had money. Why should he remain captive?"

The Ohel Yaakov asks: Why is Yehuda mentioning what it says in his Torah? He's talking to the king of Egypt.

The truth is, this Torah law seems somewhat strange. If a person stole, why would anyone want to take him into his house as a slave? Who would take a thief into his house?

The Ohel Yaakov explains that actually we're not talking about a common thief here. A Jew would never steal for no reason. It must be because circumstances forced him to do so. If he'd have had a job, he certainly wouldn't have stolen. This is why he is sold into slavery so that he can earn some money and make restitution.

In this case however, Yehuda tells Yosef, Binyamin actually has money. He didn't steal because he was forced to due to circumstance. It seems that he's untrustworthy. If so, why would his honor want to take him into his house?

There's a remarkable Torah lesson here. If a man stole and is sold as a slave, he's given the message that someone is willing to give him a second chance.

Often, we see people do certain things and interpret them negatively (from our perspective,) and then make their actions personal. If he did *this*, he's unreliable. If she said *that*, she's a liar.

Perhaps there's a justification. He did *this* because of *that*. Perhaps the person felt stuck or that they didn't have a choice. But if we don't allow someone to save face, and we pin a negative label on them, we are doing something damaging to the relationship. Labeling the person doesn't allow for change and positive growth. Conversely, by giving them the impression that you think they didn't really mean it – even if they really did – you're giving them the opportunity to mend their mistake and grow from there.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

1) Our family is a blended family but this question applies to "normal" families as well. My husband's oldest children got married shortly after we did. On yom tov, they like to move in all together. Their children play with each other and they get to bond. However, it is physically and emotionally hard for me to run a hotel, and we can't always ask our single kids to help out.

We have two teenagers who end up bearing the brunt of this and help out so much, we don't have time to bond with them on their time off from school and yeshiva. Besides, we feel that like we don't get a chance to bond with the grandchildren and couples because there's so much going on.

Between visits, my relationship with each one depends on how much time I had with them before they got married. Furthermore, all the progress we made with our oldest single daughter is compromised each time her married siblings come.

We are thinking of asking that only one family at a time comes for tom tov, so we can work on our relationship with them, and hopefully, when things normalize somewhat, we can handle more at a time.

Is there a problem with presenting our new plan to them, that we hope to build a personal relationship with each of them before hosting large family gatherings, which as of now, foster a lot of negativity and strained relationships? Any advice would be appreciated. Thank you.

Another question along the same lines:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

2) Most of my children are married. I'd like to know if it's my responsibility to keep them close. I understand that if I don't invite them over to make sure that the married children and grandchildren see each other, they will have very little to do with each other as time goes on. I feel that this is my responsibility and try my best to make sure these get-togethers happen. My husband, on the other hand, doesn't see the importance and sees it as a burden. He'd rather go to sleep early than be up at a Chanukah party. My question is, is it my responsibility to keep the family close, and if yes, how do I deal with my husband's lack of interest? Thank you.

Answer:

We have two separate questions, one from a woman who feels like she's running a hotel and is resentful, and the other from a woman who feels it's her responsibility to have her kids over, but is concerned about the shalom bayis aspect.

Without going into the specific details, whether Chanukah, yom tov or blended

families, I'd like to focus on the general idea of family bonding and parents facilitating that.

It's important to note that the fact that these questions are coming from opposite perspectives proves that it's normal for people to have different feelings about this. I may have my own opinion on this, and there may not necessarily be any single *correct* approach to this. Spouses can certainly have different opinions on this. The question is not who's right, rather how they will approach a subject on which they have differing opinions.

There are other viewpoints to take into account here as well: the married children and the children still living at home. They may not be part of the decision-making process, but they may not either see things exactly the way you do. Perhaps the most important part of my answer to any such questions (read: debates), is this: be okay with people having different opinions.

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So whose responsibility *is* it to keep a family together? The truth is that our responsibilities are laid out for us. The Torah delineates what our obligations are. Women are obligated to respect their husbands and run the home. Children are obligated to respect their parents. We don't have the liberty to add to our Torah responsibilities. Of course, there are good things we can and should do whenever possible. Still, it's important to differentiate between Torah obligations and responsibilities we accept upon ourselves so that we don't make the mistake of allowing the lesser commitments to infringe on the greater ones.

With that said; should a woman undertake various mitzvah-related projects and commitments? Certainly, these cannot be at the expense of her Torah obligation to her husband. After fulfilling everything the Torah requires, it's beautiful to take on as many other things as you can. And so it is in regard to a woman nobly trying to keep her family close; it's wonderful, commendable, and noteworthy, so long as this mission will not then infringe on other and prior obligations and commitments.

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When it comes to situations like this, it can be helpful to analyze the different parts of it.

It is certainly most important and beneficial for extended family to remain close. It's also important for spouses to feel good, respected, and taken care of. It's certainly important for the children still home to feel loved and cared for in a healthy and happy environment. It's important for married children to know that their parents are there for them and love them and their children in every way.

The challenge becomes balancing these important factors at once. But this is true about so many general life circumstances. It's important to *daven*, learn, work, have family time, etc. None can be at the complete expense of the other but they all have to happen. That's what healthy balance is all about.

Usually, you can make time and space for all the important things in life. If you give enough time and care to your husband, in all likelihood, you'll also be able to give time and attention to your married children. It's like the famous analogy about the person trying to fit in rocks, pebbles, sand and water into a jar. If you start with the water, filling the container to capacity, there's no place left for anything else. But if you first put in the bigger rocks, then the pebbles, then the sand and water, each one can fit into the cracks the others left. Again, it's about careful and healthy balance and priorities.

Going to extremes and being available for every single married child and grandchild, or doing it at the expense of yourself, your spouse or children at home, will make all of you burnt out and resentful.

Most often if you are flexible in your thinking and your choices you can come up with something that won't contradict your current responsibilities or obligations and still get it all in. Even if for whatever reason, having kids over for a Yom Tov meal or a Chanukah party, doesn't seem to be an option, you might very well still be able to brainstorm and come up with ways that will get it all to work out.

Even if it doesn't all work out, that's life. Real life is made up of real choices and sometimes compromises must be made. Hopefully everyone gets to win some of the time, but no one wins all of the time. Bonding and keeping the family together is very important, but it definitely comes at a price and it's worth it.

There's another point worth considering. Whenever it comes to issues that don't have a clear right or wrong approach, avoid debating the issue. Instead, be open about your feelings and how much something means to you. Telling your husband, "I wish you wouldn't have to give up your sleep to have a Chanukah party and I know it's not really necessary, but having the family together means so much to me," can be better than arguing, much better. Or telling your married children, "I wish you could all come together, but it's really difficult for me. I hope you can understand me," may be taken better than you think. Showing the other side that you understand them while offering your own feelings about it can be a real eye-opener for them.

You can *ask* them to do it for you as a favor. You can even add that they don't *have to* go along with your request, if you feel brave enough. Such an approach can calm the situation and open the lines of communication.

But back to the original thought I shared, by the same token, you should take other people's opinions into account as well. This isn't only about figuring out how to get your way, but about realizing that the different opinions each have merit. Your spouse, single children and married children each have their own opinion. And sometimes you will have to give up on something that's important to you so others don't feel disregarded. Still, it's important to make everyone, including yourself, feel that you're sorting through various facts to reach a mutually acceptable conclusion.

While priorities and balance should make you be able to have everything that's important to you, remember that you may not have all those things in the amount or frequency you envision.

Balancing involves giving up *some* of this for *more* of that. For example, 60% bonding time for 40% relationship building. Learning to have healthy discussions and being able to compromise, understanding the importance of all factors while keeping everyone as happy as possible, taking everyone seriously and still having everything that's important to you, is a truly nuanced balancing act. Ultimately, it's this balancing act that determines who is right.

Wishing you much happiness
and joy in your relationships,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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