Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Pinchas 5780 }

Manner of Speech

An Interesting Interpretation

In this week's parsha we learn the story of five sisters, the daughters of Tzelafchad, who came to speak with Moshe Rabeinu about receiving a parcel of land in Eretz Yisroel, despite the fact that their father had died without sons. So Hashem said to Moshe, "*Kein benos Tzelafchad dovros* – They spoke nicely, and they were right."

Now, the word "*Kein*" could mean that they were right, and it could also mean "like this". I once heard an insightful play on the words of this *passuk*. *Kein benos Tzelafchad dovros*. Hashem said to Moshe, "It's okay. Don't be scared that a bunch of women are bombarding you. They're not attacking you. This is just the way they speak."

Sometimes, we are approached by someone who speaks in excessively strong terms or comes across intimidating. It's very likely that they are not trying to scare you. It's just their way of talking!

Miscommunication

Have you ever heard of the "Dor Haflagah Syndrome"? When the builders of the Tower lost their language skills, they began throwing stones at each other instead of working in an orderly fashion. If someone asked his friend to pass him a hammer, he would get it thrown at his head by an exasperated co-worker. It was miscommunication at its worst, with all the frustration that comes along with that.

We sometimes suffer from this syndrome as well. All your wife asked for is a hammer, but you hear that she wants it thrown at her head! It could happen when we choose to hear a hidden message that simply was not there, or, alternately, we take words at face value when they were just meant figuratively.

One cause of such misunderstandings is when people judge others based on their own lack of good communication - they don't mean it when they compliment their husbands, so they assume he doesn't either. They think of "throwing the hammer" while passing it, so they assume they're being insulted when they're actually getting a compliment. But when they take a moment to think about it, they may realize that their spouse wasn't trying to be hurtful at all!

It's way easier to notice when others don't read you well, than when you misinterpret others. So, if you feel hurt or slighted, it's okay to approach the speaker privately (preferably on the following day) and tell them, "I felt hurt by what you said yesterday." Don't be surprised to find out that what you thought they were saying was not at all what they meant. *Kein bnos Tzelafchad dovros*, it might just be the way they talk.

When dealing with others it's important to keep the lines

of communication open and to have an open mind.

Verbal Variables

So many outside factors are responsible for how people talk. Age, for instance. When a three-year-old yells "I hate you!" during an angry tantrum, it elicits one reaction from you. You might very well find it less offensive than when an adult uses the same phrase. What is considered offensive in one country, might be heard as the biggest compliment in another. Boys in yeshiva have a very different way of describing things than their counterparts in seminaries. The list goes on. When someone tells you something that you find appalling, take a moment to assess if the problem is on your end, and they were not trying to offend you at all.

I once spent some time in the ICU with one of my children, and the doctor came into the room to discuss the child's prognosis. He listed some really scary scenarios, and I was visibly shaken and concerned after he left. I went outside to try and collect my bearings when I bumped into the hospital Rabbi, who saw my crestfallen expression. "What's going on? Why the long face?" he gently inquired. I told him how the doctor just told me some really frightening things, and I'm scared. "Nah!" He dismissed it with a flick of his hand, "That's just ICU talk." To prove his point, he went in to talk to the doctor himself and came out with a wide smile.

Indeed, doctors just have a habit of listing all of the worst-case scenarios – possibly to cover their bases in case anything goes wrong. But there really was nothing to worry about. A couple of days later, we were B"H released from the hospital with a healthy child in tow.

I could have been tempted to call in hospital personnel or to make a scene. How could the doctor be so mean and scare me with such brash talk? He should be fired! But that's not how it works. This is how doctors speak, and it was up to me to educate myself on how to fish out the information that was pertinent to me and to filter out whatever was just "ICU talk".

We can do the same thing anytime anyone tells us something that we find bothersome or unsettling. Filter out the tone and just listen to the message, or if necessary, do just the opposite.

Learn the Language

Aside from realizing that all of us have a different way of saying the same thing, it's important to remember that every individual human has his own language. When you get married to someone, take the time to learn their language. If they say something that you perceive as hurtful, think for a moment: Did he really want to hurt me? Did she really mean it that way? When they say it to other people, do they get hurt? Maybe it is just your imagination that is playing tricks on you.

There is a popular concept that there are five love languages, and every person has a different love language. It's normal to expect your spouse to show you their love and dedication in your own love language. But you need to remember that he or she might have a different love language than you. Instead of trying to explain to them how they can reach you in your language, why don't you try to learn theirs? Why don't you listen to what they say so that you can figure out what will truly make *them* happy?

It would be very convenient for you if your cleaning help can speak to you in English, but *instead of waiting for that to happen or being resentful when it doesn't, go ahead and learn Spanish. Stop educating other people to do what you might be able to do yourself!* How much better will it be if you learn Spanish?

When your spouse compliments you, accept it for what it is. Don't dig so deeply into it that by the time you're done analyzing it you're convinced that it was actually veiled criticism. Their way of complimenting might be different than what you're used to, but that doesn't mean that it isn't sincere. That's just their way of saying things.

Instead of insisting that the other person learn how to communicate with you, try to understand how to communicate with them by listening to what they are saying to you!

Wrong Assumptions

A mistake many of us tend to make, is to assume that others are thinking the exact same thing as we are, and that they will respond like we would have responded.

I spoke to a teenage boy's mother regarding her son, and suggested she tell him something. "No way!" She responded. "He will answer me such and such!" But I challenged her. "How do you know that? Perhaps this is how *you* would have responded to such a comment, but what makes you think he will do so, too?" She had to admit that this was indeed the case. She assumed that she can't tell her son something that would help him, because *she* would have had a problem accepting such a statement.

There are so many ways that our own assumptions get in the way and we come to mistaken conclusions because of it.

A man told me that whenever his wife reprimands him or yells at him, he draws into himself and refrains from answering back. His wife thinks he is being passive aggressive and couldn't be bothered to respond, but in reality, he was simply terrified of saying the wrong thing!

Another person told me that whenever he makes his wife aware of something that needs to be done, she chuckles. He thought she was laughing at him and not taking him seriously, but it turned out that whenever she was stressed, she automatically reacted with a chuckle. So instead of being offended by her uncomfortable laughter, he could have recognized it as a cry for help!

Going to the Extreme

It's often our own misinterpretations that cause a neutral situation to escalate into a full-blown conflict.

When our spouse tells us things like "You always.." or "You never.." – which, incidentally, are words that should "never" be used – we can become scandalized. What do you mean "I never help"? Just last week I watched the kids all day so that you can go shopping with friends! Or, how can you say "I always talk on the phone when you come home"? I haven't done that in three months!

Relax. They're frustrated and it's just their way of talking through their frustration. They don't mean it quite that way; don't take it literally. If it bothered you that much, feel free to bring it up once the situation has calmed down. Try telling your spouse something like, "Please don't tell me I never help when you know how much I try to be there for you." Or "Please don't say I always yak on the phone when I'm so careful not to do it on your time." Hopefully, next time they'll choose their words more carefully. But for now, just let it go.

That is especially true when a child uses these expressions. "Everyone in my class got their new folders already!" Don't feel guilted into running to the nearest store quite yet. To him, the children who have those new folders are "everyone". It doesn't mean that every last boy has one and he is the only pathetic one who doesn't. Don't even try to convince him otherwise, because he will not understand what you're saying. It is just his way of expressing himself.

The Hidden Messages

Sometimes it's a matter of learning the ropes.

You want to go out with friends, and you tell your wife you'll be back in a couple of hours. Her response? "Fine. I'll handle it." But you come home and find her sulking in the bedroom. "Didn't you see I needed help? I'm drowning in duties and off you go gallivanting with the guys!"

You are understandably perplexed. "But you said okay!!"

Well, she might have said okay, but she secretly expected you to notice that she desperately needed help. Maybe she didn't have the heart to tell you no, and she wanted you to notice yourself.

You have one chance to mess up. After this, you should have learned your lesson. Next time she says "Fine, I'll handle it", it is up to you to find out if she really means it.

The same can be said for the husband as well. Just because he said "Okay" doesn't mean it is actually okay with him. A first-time offense is excusable, but if you find out after the fact that he didn't really mean it, it is

up to you to figure out the real response next time around.

It's definitely not right for a spouse to be so ambiguous, but you can choose to either be right or get along peacefully.

Having said that, you need to make sure that from your end you only emit clear messages. Say okay only when you really mean it, compliment with a full heart, and serve criticism gently and kindly. Say what you mean and mean what you say. So much heartache will be prevented that way.

Chinuch: Don't Get Excited

As mentioned earlier, don't be impressed when children say big statements. If they tell you they don't have patience to *daven*, it doesn't mean that they're going off the *derech* and that they don't want to have a relationship with Hashem. It just means that right this minute they're lazy.

If they tell you that you're the worst mother, it doesn't mean that they tried out the others and you came in as the least competent one. It just means that they really want another popsicle and this is the only way they could think of venting their frustration.

Don't legitimize their drama. Calmly ask them to repeat what they want to say in nicer terms, and thereby you will be teaching them the life skill of communicating their needs effectively.



Q&A

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



Question:

I am embarrassed by the way my wife dresses. I want to know if it's normal to be ashamed of such a thing.

Answer:

Someone once asked the Radbaz a question: A Gadol Hador had lost a child and didn't shed any tears. Is that a good thing or not? The Radbaz answered that it is not. It stems from the stoic philosophers who think that feelings are not important and that crying over a dead person won't help anyone.

Hashem created human beings with the ability to feel emotions. They are there for a reason. Acknowledging that an emotion exists, and that emotions are normal by virtue of their existence, is extremely important for self-awareness.

Once you know that your feelings of embarrassment are okay and real, you can then try to logically consider why it is that her clothing bothers you. Maybe there is a way for you to gently suggest something else without imposing on her? Maybe dressing in another way would be embarrassing to her? Maybe you can speak to a neutral third party who can advise you how to deal with it?

As long as you allow yourself the ability to feel your emotions, and you don't use it to shame, blame, or try to control, you can figure out a way for both of you to be happy.

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