

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHAT'S *REALLY* THE PROBLEM?

In this week's *parshah*, Sara Imeinu has just passed away and Avraham Avinu concerns himself with finding a wife for Yitzchak. He summons Eliezer, his faithful servant, and tells him to travel to Haran and find a suitable girl there.

Eliezer at first protests that "perhaps" the prospective bride will not wish to return to Eretz Canaan with him and asks whether, in that case, he should take Yitzchak to Haran to marry and settle there. Avraham rejects this idea and Eliezer sets off and eventually finds Rivka, Besuel's daughter. There, when recounting Avraham's instructions, he repeats his doubts regarding her wish to accompany him back.

Rashi notes an interesting discrepancy between the spelling used for "perhaps" - אולי - in this account of Avraham's instructions and the original request made by Avraham. When Eliezer first expresses his doubts to Avraham, the word אולי is written with a "vav" (the usual spelling) but when Eliezer repeats the instruction to Besuel, it's written אלי without the "vav," which can also be translated as "to me." Rashi writes that this revealed Eliezer's hidden hope that the girl will not want to return home with him — because he wanted his own daughter to marry Yitzchak.

It remains difficult to understand why "perhaps" was not spelled in a way that revealed Eliezer's true intentions before he set out to Haran. The Kotzker Rebbe *ztz"l* explains that at first, Eliezer was not aware of his subconscious bias. He didn't know why he was expressing doubts regarding the journey to find a *kallah* for Yitzchak; he considered himself a loyal servant. However, once Avraham made it clear to him that there was no question of his daughter marrying Yitzchak and his own wishes were no longer relevant, he became aware of his initial motives.

Becoming aware of one's subconscious desires is not easy. It's only natural for a person to be biased toward his own interests — the problems start when we don't realize we are, and try to explain away our feelings with rational-sounding explanations. When we fool only ourselves, it's bad enough — when we impose our feelings on others and justify them too, without even being aware of what the real issue is, problems tend to get bigger rather than go away. It's hard to resolve issues we aren't aware of or won't admit to.

This week's essay is dedicated by

B.Z.F.

a long time listener to Rabbi Gruen's weekly classes

in appreciation for the wonderful work and help he provides.

Parshas
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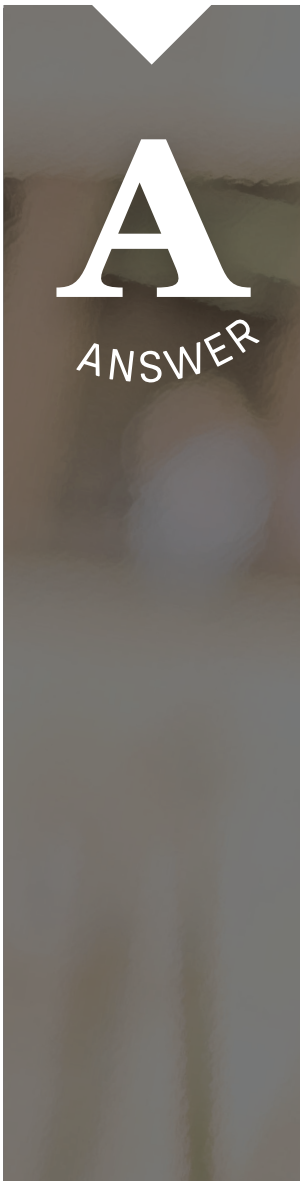
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband and I are very happily married *b"H*. We're in our mid-twenties. My husband is a mentor and did really well with younger boys, advising them and helping them with their issues. Lately, however, he started working with older *bochurim* just a few years younger than he is, and they discuss their personal struggles with him.

I'm not entirely sure what my question is, except that I'm wondering if such a sensitive job is really right for someone so young. My husband is very *ehrlich* but he's also very curious about things. When he discusses issues with these *bochurim*, he gets exposed to all sorts of negative ideas and behaviors. Why does my husband need to hear all this?

And even if this type of work is right for him, what can I do to make sure that he won't be negatively affected? I hope you can read between the lines and give me some guidance to help me feel more comfortable about the situation.

Thank you



I'm happy to hear that you're happily married, *b"H*. A question regarding a happily married couple is so different from one where there are significant difficulties with *shalom bayis*. It's sad when difficulties in a marriage spill over into other areas of life and cause unrelated issues to become problematic.

Your question is about whether your husband should be mentoring boys with presumably serious issues to discuss. Without knowing him, it's hard for me to address this responsibly, but I'd like to discuss the topic in a general sense, from different angles.

It appears that your husband really does have a certain talent for listening to people and helping them with their issues. This is a talent like any other, given by Hashem, to ensure that the world can continue to function. Hashem gives people a natural attraction to doing the things they are good at. Even when people don't use their talents to earn a livelihood, they often find a way to put them to use in other areas.

Your husband is only in his mid-twenties and has already been helping younger and older boys for some time. It's common for a person with a strong talent in a certain area to find a way to express it even from a young age. Over time, they gain experience and knowledge; sometimes, they seek to educate themselves in order to develop their natural talent on a deeper level.

People often try to discourage others, especially if they're young, from relying on their intuition and pursuing their talents or skills. Telling someone, "You're too young for this," is unlikely to help and can be very hurtful. Even when a little caution is needed, it's more productive to encourage that person (while also impressing upon them that because they're still young and inexperienced), that they should do whatever they can to further develop the skills or passion they feel drawn to.

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When it comes to mentoring (or helping others in general), much has to do with the recipients of the advice and information, and less with the passion itself. Many people believe that they are capable of imparting their wisdom to others, even though they have never actually succeeded in becoming respected advisers. What's important is whether people appreciate the advice being offered, accept it, and gain from it. Interestingly, this is also a pertinent question for people who *don't* feel qualified to mentor others and have grave doubts about their suitability; and yet, other people keep seeking them out and asking for their advice. If people want to hear from you, it usually signifies that you have something valuable to offer.

That said, unfortunately it's not always the case that people in the position of "mentor," even if they have many clients or students, are actually dispensing good advice. I'm aware of several cases of therapists and others in similar roles who counsel couples on *shalom bayis*, for instance, even though they were never married, or are not happily married themselves. Some of them seem to be people who could actually benefit from the services of a therapist themselves.

In other cases, even when there's no obvious reason why a person is unqualified, and they have the experience that should help them to grasp the issues well, they simply don't have the knowledge or intuition to effectively guide someone in a given situation. They may feel ready to address issues faced by those just a few years younger than they are, based on what they've been through, but while they are familiar with all the issues, they still aren't capable of addressing them.

Finally, there are those people who are "so easy to talk to," which makes it tempting to look to them for advice — but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a good idea to do so. This category may include family and close friends. The question then is: You may find it easy to open up to them, but do you feel better afterward? Were your issues resolved?

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It should go without saying that issues should be discussed, whenever possible, only with someone who is *ehrlich*, and whose advice and ideas are completely and consistently aligned with Torah values. Discussing sensitive issues with someone who doesn't have this sensitivity cannot possibly be helpful. What this means is that *ehrliche* people will be exposed to issues that they wouldn't otherwise encounter.

There is a principle that such people, who endanger themselves in order to help others, have Heavenly protection. Some compare this to a pot that has absorbed *treif* which has to be immersed in a kosher pot full of boiling water in order to remove the *treife* substance. The kosher pot, meanwhile, remains kosher. It doesn't absorb the *treife* substance, because a pot that is engaged in removing the unwanted substance won't simultaneously absorb it.

Applied to the idea of a mentor, one who is actively engaged in removing the problematic issue from the person he's helping, may be protected from the danger of absorbing problematic behaviors or ideas himself.

Nonetheless, a great deal of caution still needs to be exercised and everyone should be aware of the dangers involved. Experienced mentors will be more aware of the pitfalls. Less experienced mentors may find themselves making mistakes simply because they're dealing with new issues. A mentor should, for example, always ask the permission of the parents before talking to their child in his car or his home. Even when there is no halachic problem, one must be very sensitive to the issues involved and take precautions.

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For you, as the wife of someone mentoring *bochurim* who may sometimes be discussing serious issues, it is important that you are aware of what this means. There have been cases where the wife was unaware of the changes in her husband as the result of immersing himself in other people's issues, until it was too late.

If your husband's mindset and/or behavior have changed since he began mentoring *bochurim*, perhaps you should discuss this with him. This should be done only with a great deal of wisdom and respect. You should take care not to give your husband the impression that you don't trust him or believe in his ability to help others. But if you see anything that raises a red flag, don't ignore it. Better still is to have clear boundaries in place before any red flags appear.

One way of achieving this is to present the idea to your husband as something he can do to put your mind at rest. You should make it very clear that you don't suspect him of any weakness. Only then, add that you're a little concerned at how being exposed to various issues can affect people. Suggest respectfully that you think it might be a good idea for him to form a connection with an older and more experienced mentor, a Daas Torah, with whom he regularly discusses the *bochurim* he's helping. Clarify

that this would help you to feel more comfortable, even though you trust him — and add that you admire him tremendously for his willingness to "get himself dirty" in order to rise to his calling.

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If your husband seems to be doing fine in a responsible way, and yet you still feel conflicted about his role as a mentor, it could be your emotions that are causing you to see things in an unfavorable light, rather than genuine doubts regarding his competence. That is not to say that your emotions are "wrong." Discovering our biases is always useful, as it teaches us so much about ourselves. So, in what way might your husband's role as a mentor disturb you?

It's possible that your husband is so absorbed in dealing with other people's troubles that he doesn't have much time left for you. It's possible that you feel sidelined, especially as so much of what he is busy with are things that he simply cannot share with you, both due to the nature of the issues and to confidentiality. It's natural to feel this way.

It's also possible for one spouse to feel jealous of the other who appears so fulfilled with their role while they feel left behind, frustrated at not being able to utilize their own talents. Figuring out one's own feelings in any painful area is obviously vital if we are to have any chance of fixing things.

You should certainly discuss any difficult feelings you have with your husband, as there could be a great deal he can do to put your mind at ease. He could set aside times of the day and week when he won't pick up the phone to people and will only spend that time with you. He could find ways to involve you in his work, while taking care to protect people's privacy. With respect, goodwill, and creativity, almost all obstacles can be overcome.



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One thing that all couples should be aware of is the impulse to control one's spouse. It can take a lot of honesty to notice this impulse. Often, one spouse will seek to control the other spouse in an area that they themselves struggle with — because the fact that they struggle in that area makes them more aware of it, and makes them feel more frustrated when they see it in someone else, too.

After all is said and done, it's important to allow people to make their own decisions. As much as you can and should share your concerns and feelings, and deserve to have them addressed, it's ultimately your husband's decision on how he wants to pursue his career and follow his passion. I hope he takes your feelings seriously (and this can depend on how you present and communicate them), but it's good to remember that it's his call, and that should help both of you work together in a reasonable manner.

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It's clear from your letter that you recognize your husband's natural talent for helping others, and I commend you for this. Unfortunately, there are many people who gain recognition in the community for their talents while their own spouses don't appreciate them.

You also respect your husband as someone who is *ehrlich* and wants to do what he can to help others. It's my hope that you'll be able to communicate your respect for him, along with your genuine concerns, and become his partner in his work, enabling him to make the most of his talents and bringing out the best in him — and in yourself.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: CHAYEI SARAH 5785

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

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