Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Mishpatim |

Do you love Hashem or your family?

The errant *eved ivri*

At this point in the Torah we don't find as much insight about relationships as in *Sefer Bereishis*, where we read about our ancestral couples and their families, but even in the Torah portion that is centered around laws, we find a profound message regarding the topic of our weekly conversation—family life.

The Torah tells us that an *eved ivri* who chooses to stay with his master even after it is permissible for him to be freed requires punishment: he must be taken to a doorpost and have his master pierce his ears at the mezuzah. Rashi explains that since the ear that heard Hashem's command of being committed to Him before all else is choosing to be a servant of a human master first the punishment is just.

If we take a look at the words that such a servant says, we find his expression and subsequent punishment peculiar. All the servant is saying is, "I love my master, I love my wife, I love my children." Why does he deserve to be penalized for saying that? Isn't this something we should all learn from—to live by the words of the Rambam, who instructs a husband to love his wife like himself? Indeed, in the *sheva brachos* we bless the newly married couple that they love each other like best friends. It seems that something is wrong with this slave's perspective, which warrants the penalty the Torah instructs to be given.

Hashem before all else

As Torah Jews, our first and foremost commitment should be to Hashem and His Torah. The relationship a person has with Hashem, who says "*ki li bnei Yisrael avadim*," should never be contradictory to any other relationship. The moment we realize that our perceived love for another individual gets in the way of our Torah observance, that's a red flag. It's telling us that not only is our love for Hashem not absolute, but also that the love we think we feel toward the other person is actually not that. Rather, we're feeling a self-indulgent kind of love toward ourselves. That was precisely the kind of love such an *eved* was experiencing. It wasn't the kind of love the Rambam advises us to aspire to because if it would have been, it wouldn't get in the way of fulfilling Hashem's command. Since the love did interfere with a Torah obligation, we understand that it wasn't real love at all.

The Torah's treatment of such an individual's expression of so-called love is a lesson in what it really means to live in true harmony. What's our marker for knowing whether we have true marital peace or a relationship that is self-indulgent and thus not authentic or fulfilling? Whether or not it co-exists with our love for Hashem. Because our first commitment is to Hashem, nothing should be getting in the way of this relationship.

Even if he loves ice cream or money or vacation, a Torah Jew knows that if it will get in the way of his love for Hashem, the desire will fall away. If we want to have a piece of dairy chocolate after a *fleishig* meal, no matter how tempted we are, the desire pales in comparison to our desire to do Hashem's will. In the same vein, if we're in a relationship that for any reason causes us to engage in behaviors or deeds that are contradictory to our spiritual commitment, something is wrong. It means we're not putting Hashem first, which also means that we're not putting the other person first. It means, in simple terms, that we're putting our selfish desires first.

When an intimate relationship is done right it won't be a contradiction to any spouse's love of Hashem. The only time a loving relationship can get in the way of our service of Hashem is when it revolves around the self. This doesn't mean that a Torah Jew doesn't care about himself. On the contrary, Hashem wants us to be concerned about our own wellbeing, to take care of ourselves and be kind to ourselves, but self-indulgence is a direct conflict with fulfilling Hashem's will.

In a fulfilling marriage, both spouses don't feel like they must choose between Hashem and their relationship. Their dual commitments are one and the same. Since they are committed to Hashem's will first, their focus in the marriage is on giving, on being there for the other spouse, which in turn allows for a fulfilling, authentic bond. That's not what the *eved* was talking about when he said, "I love my master, I love my wife, I love my children." Perhaps after making himself comfortable in his master's home, this servant *thought* that he liked his master, wife, and children but what he was really saying is, "I love myself."

This is not to say that we should be kidding ourselves by saying that we're not in the relationship for ourselves at all. Our goal is not to fool ourselves or anyone else that we don't love ourselves. Becoming truly selfless is a *madreigah* that takes time and work to attain. But, when self-love is the dominant force in a relationship—I only like you because I feel good when I'm with you—that's not a real relationship. The main idea of connecting with someone emotionally is thinking of them. When that's done the right way, it can't contradict with our higher commitment.

When this slave says that he loves other people, which in turn affects his commitment to Hashem's command, it tells us that their love to them isn't authentic. When an individual is self-absorbed, not only may his love lead to a deficiency in his mitzvah observance within the relationship, but it also hinders his ability to maintain a fulfilling relationship with his spouse and others. If you're busy with self-entitlement and self-indulgence, you can't think about another person. In a real relationship, you can automatically see beyond yourself to provide the other person's needs. If someone thinks it's all about love and enjoyment from a self-indulgent perspective, they won't feel true love in their relationship.

While becoming selfless doesn't happen overnight, the more we care about the other person and are able to understand that it's about them too, the more we're able to connect in a true way.

It's Not About Me or You

Another added benefit of being in a relationship in which commitment to Hashem precedes all else is that when an individual's life is guided by boundaries and Torah principles, he garners respect. As much as liberal values—saying what we want, doing as we feel whether it's appropriate or not, etc.— may seem appealing at times, at the end of the day it's not only not fun but also profoundly detracts from the person's respect. The other party loses all esteem for such an individual, and a lack of boundaries and/or limitations actually leads to a breach in trust. True marital harmony comes from being dedicated to a Higher Purpose.

When both spouses are dedicated to Torah, their shared commitment automatically prevents conflict. So much strife results from what I call the "Me-You Syndrome." She wants one thing, he wants another, and now there's another fight. When the couple is dedicated to something more, something higher than their own wants, much of this difficulty could be avoided. Since their commitment to Torah—to Shulchan Aruch, to a *daas* Torah, etc.— comes before their own desire, their life is

governed by values that promote peace, love, and unity. Contrary to the secular perspective which may have infiltrated into our mindset, the Torah's view of a truly fulfilling relationship is focusing on the other party. Through giving and being there for our spouse, we get to enjoy the deepest level of harmony.

In this week's *parsha*, Hashem instructs us, "*v'anshei kodesh tihiyen li*." As the Kotzker Rebbe explains, in this verse the Torah instructs us, "*mentchlich un heilig zult ihr zein.*" People err in thinking that there's one thing about being holy, and one thing about being *mentchlich*. The Torah tells us otherwise. Not only should these two values not be a contradiction, but if they don't both coexist peacefully, something not right in our mitzvah observance. At the most ideal level, a Torah Jew is both *anshei*, a mensch, and *kodesh*, holy. This is an ideal we should strive for.

Hashem or My Child?

In parenting too, true love for the child will never be contradictory to commitment to Torah. When a parent notices that what he perceives as his compassion for his child is leading him to do things that are conflicting to Torah his desire to do so may not emanate from a love for his child, only a love for himself. This is not only wrong *chinuch* but also a wrongdoing on the parent's part. In doing so, he's putting his own wants before Hashem's command.

It's important to remember that if any deed we're doing in the name of our love for our wife or child is in violation of our commitment to Hashem, the deed is not originating from our love for the other person, only from self-indulgence. When we put Hashem first, our relationship will be governed by Torah-true behaviors and only then will we experience the true love and connection we desire. This in itself is a strong lesson in *chinuch*: teaching a child what true commitment to Hashem is all about.

-Q&A-

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

Question: Since I prefer not to waste time in my conversations with my wife or children, I try to share nice thoughts that I read or heard as a basis for our discussion. But what can I do when I can't come up with something substantial? I see that my wife doesn't appreciate my silence but it's hard for me to blabber about "nothing."

Answer: While I commend you for wanting to converse in topics of substance and not wasting time on "nonsense," there is something about valuing connection. Hashem created us in a way that we have a need for relationships, as the Torah tells us, "it's not good for man to be alone." It's an emotional need that is just as important, if not more so, than physical needs like food and water. But when a person is afraid to connect, they will find excuses as to why it's not for them.

Simply sitting and talking, being there for each other, is how the basis of a relationship is built. It not only tells the other person, "You're worth it enough for me to spend time with you," but also tells the individual that he's worth it enough to spend time with the other person.

There's something about connecting to a spouse, to a child, in order to build a relationship. Obviously, the higher purpose of every relationship, of every deed we do, is to serve Hashem, but the way to get there doesn't always have to be through a lofty conversation. As long as the end to the means is clear, conversing in a topic that is important to the other individual will help us get there. When you appreciate the value of just spending time together in an appropriate setting and quantity, you will find that you even enjoy conversations that aren't centered on topics of utmost substance. With this perspective, every interaction becomes valuable, beneficial, and worthwhile.

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