

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHAT AM I SAVING?

The *Akeidah* was a tremendous expression of Avraham Avinu's dedication to Hashem. The Kozhnitzer Maggid, in *Avodas Yisrael*, explains that beyond his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, Hashem took away all his *madreigos* and feeling for the *avodah*. Had he felt that he was accomplishing something extraordinary, drawing closer to Hashem and creating a *zechus* for generations, that itself would have sustained him and made the *nisayon* easier. Instead, he proceeded with *temimus*, simply because Hashem had commanded him. This made his *avodah* all the greater.

You can sometimes notice this in *shul*. Some people clearly appreciate the opportunity to speak to Hashem; they seem to be enjoying the experience and *davening* with passion. Others seem to have little feeling for *davening*, yet continue coming day after day. It is easy to notice what is lacking in their *tefillah* and overlook the dedication involved in continuing an *avodah* that gives them so little enjoyment, but perhaps doing something that one has yet to develop a feeling for is, in some way, even more meaningful.

In our relationships as well, investing in *shalom bayis* and *chinuch habanim* can be fulfilling and rewarding when we appreciate the connection with our spouse and children. At other times, we do what is right without having that feeling, simply because it is right. Those efforts can be especially meaningful and commendable.

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Q QUESTION

I have been married for many years and have children at home, including a son of *shidduchim* age. The marriage has a long and difficult history, with some periods of time more bearable than others. However, the last few years have taken a deep toll.

My husband has been struggling with many issues, from personality issues to depression, anxiety, etc. We have a diagnosis. He also has physical ailments. However, I have lived with all these issues and struggled through them, and pretty much raised these kids alone, as he has been withdrawn all these years.

He has violated the laws of Shabbos in the bathroom, playing with his phone. This isn't a person who is very reasonable, as he also gaslights me and tells me I am imagining things. This Shabbos was another incident, and this time the voice note he was listening to was audible. Usually he is smart enough to put the phone on mute. I have reached a point where I can no longer have *chillul Shabbos* in my home. He made me feel like I was hallucinating and imagining things, as he cannot admit that he was caught and is too ashamed and weak, both physically and mentally, to pick up the pieces.

I am a strong, resilient woman and made the choice years ago not to break the home, but rather went out and got myself a fantastic job that gives me purpose and fulfillment. However, what happened this past Shabbos, on top of all the other issues, has made me question why I am trying so hard to live with someone with such a distorted view of life and himself. I am the backbone of this home. What am I saving, and why am I trying so hard? My son made me promise him that I would stick it out until he gets married.

I have never shared this with my kids. However, they see that he doesn't go to *minyan*, he doesn't leave the house, etc. Any clarification on this matter would be helpful.



A ANSWER

I am very sorry to hear about the difficulties you have been living with for so many years. Raising a family while struggling with a difficult marriage and having to pick up the pieces is not something I can claim to understand. Even though I'm hearing just your account of what's going on, the situation sounds quite terrible, one that needs much *siyata d'Shmaya* to navigate.

Whether your marriage should continue requires personal guidance from a *daas Torah* with whom you can discuss your circumstances openly. This is not merely a disclaimer. I can try to help you improve a relationship, but determining what Hashem wants you to do with your life requires clear, one-on-one guidance that an email or public *shiur* cannot provide. It saddens me how often someone brings me a serious life decision and, when I ask whom they usually consult, says they have nobody. I hope you have someone you trust who can guide you.

You ask for clarity, but it is not entirely clear what specific question you want answered. You have promised your son that you will remain married, so the question doesn't seem to be whether you should remain in the marriage or not. The only other question I see is what there is to preserve.

I often see people become entangled in arguments by responding to everything said without identifying the actual question—or whether there was one. Sometimes it is camouflaged in complaints and resentments. Sometimes the person wants validation or a listening ear, which is fine too. Knowing what you are looking for helps you determine whether you are getting it.

Here, I will try to address what there is to hold on to and what might help while you remain together. Because I'm writing this publicly, I may also include ideas that do not necessarily apply to your circumstances. Before considering what there is

to preserve in the marriage, though, I want to raise a point about perspective that may be helpful.

Considering the perspective

I recognize that you are describing many years of painful experiences, and everything you have written may be accurate. This consideration may therefore be entirely inapplicable, and I hope it is not hurtful. Acknowledging another perspective does not require accepting it as correct; it means recognizing that I cannot determine the whole picture from one account.

I understand how you have experienced the marriage and your husband's actions. Those experiences are difficult to question. Still, his account might add something that changes the picture, even if he is defensive, in denial, or mistaken.

You describe yourself as the backbone of the home, and that may be entirely true. Your children may see something different as well. Perhaps they lack information, but perhaps they also see a marriage worth preserving or a father whose presence matters to them. Their view may deserve consideration beyond the explanation that they do not understand what is really happening.

Even when another person's impression is mistaken, it can be useful to consider why they have it. I often hear, "My wife thinks I look down on her, but I don't." That may be true, but is there something that could help her no longer think so? The fact that an impression is mistaken does not mean it has no significance for the relationship.

There's a story of the Belzer Rav, *z"l*, who once called in a butcher because people were saying he sold *treifah* meat. The butcher was not known to be particularly trustworthy, but he knew that the Rav was a kind, gentle person who did not readily see bad in anyone. He assured the Rav that people only thought so; it was not true. The Rav expressed his happiness, and the butcher was relieved that his explanation had been accepted. But as he was leaving, the Rav called after him and said, "But make sure the people don't think so." Having persuaded the Rav of his innocence did not settle the matter. The fact that people had that impression was itself something he needed to address.

Similarly, you may be right without the other person's impression being accurate. Still, considering why they have that impression and what you might clarify could help address the difficulty it creates between you.

You also mention a diagnosis, which may be accurate and relevant. My concern is that it can become confirmation that everything is the other person's problem: "I am fine; the problem is yours." I understand why it feels validating and that living with these difficulties is hard. Still, be careful about the conclusions you build upon it. I have seen people consult several professionals and hold on to the assessment they like best, regardless of other opinions or what it actually explains.

What there is to preserve

Choosing whether to marry someone and deciding whether to end an existing marriage are different questions. Before marriage, it is important to look for *ehrlichkeit*, good *middos*, and physical and emotional health. Perfection is not available, but the right considerations matter. Now that you are married, however, there is already a bond and a commitment. Something that would have led you to decline a *shidduch* does not automatically mean that your marriage should end.

I recently spoke with someone in a very difficult marriage involving abuse and considerable hardship. Asked why he stayed, he explained that he had doubts about the *shidduch*, sought *daas Torah*, and was guided to proceed. Once married, he committed himself, and that guidance and commitment changed how he approached the difficulties that followed. He wanted help improving things and making life easier, but was not considering ending the marriage he had been guided to build. Not everyone can do that, and perhaps not everyone should. For him, however, the considerations that had made him hesitate before marriage were no longer the basis for deciding whether to remain. Once he had committed, it was a different question.

There is a joke about a boy asking his mother why she married his father. Was he wealthy? "No, my dear, your father had no money then." Was it his distinguished appearance and beautiful beard? No, he did not have that beard when they married. Was it his important position? He had none. "Oh," the boy concludes, "so you simply felt sorry for him?" Years later, it may be hard to see what originally drew a couple together. But the fact that you are already married is itself something to take into account, even when there seems to be little attracting you to the marriage now.

As long as you want to preserve the marriage, there is usually something to invest in. There are also abusive and dysfunctional situations that cannot be tolerated, where a person can no longer function and the family is falling apart. Sometimes a marriage cannot continue, but that does not mean it has no value. Whether you can save it is different from whether it is worth saving.

Even with the marriage itself looking so worthless to you, your children are another part of what there is to save. Your son's request means something, even if part of his concern is simply the image of having two married parents. How he feels about his family is not insignificant. I am not saying his request obligates you to stay; I am saying it is something to consider when asking what you are preserving.

Most often, children benefit from growing up with two parents in the home, although abuse and dysfunction can make that arrangement intolerable. Perhaps your children want the marriage to continue because they do not know everything that happens. It may be good that they do not know. I recently heard about a private difficulty between

husband and wife that one parent decided to disclose to the children. The disclosure caused further damage and benefited nobody. This is not a blanket statement about every situation, but your children's lack of information is not itself a reason to discount what the marriage means to them or to tell them what they are missing.

Investing in the relationship

Since you are remaining together for now, it is worth considering whether the relationship can improve while its problems remain. *Chillul Shabbos* is no light matter, but addressing it separately from your communication, time together, and feelings toward each other may be the best approach to both the problem and the relationship. Some issues, such as bad addictions, take over both spouses' lives so completely that this is impossible. In many cases, however, the difficulty can receive its own guidance while the relationship receives attention too.

This does not mean ignoring the problem or denying its effect on you. Sometimes speaking pleasantly seems to imply acceptance, or spending time together seems to send the wrong message, until nothing constructive feels possible. Separating these matters allows you to address the difficulty without having it determine every interaction.

You do not necessarily have to wait for your husband to agree to work on the marriage before doing something useful yourself. I do not know whether you have the strength to make him feel good, and I am not saying he deserves it or that you have to. But if you can, perhaps he will feel more understood or less worthless, and perhaps something will improve. Will a compliment lead him to go to *shul*? I have no idea, but if you are remaining together and can make the effort, it may be worth trying.

You may already have discovered that fighting and attempting to force change have not helped. Investing in the relationship offers another direction. You may feel you have neither the energy nor the desire to try again, and perhaps you are not obligated to. I am offering an idea that might help if you want to try, rather than determining what you are required to do.



Clarifying where you stand

There is one further point that requires particular care. Your situation may be exactly as serious as you describe, and your *daas Torah* may tell you that the behavior or circumstances cannot continue. Even then, before concluding that the marriage must end, there may be an important conversation that has not yet taken place.

Sometimes divorce is such a terrible prospect that it is not mentioned until the decision has been made. Other times, it has been mentioned repeatedly in arguments without its seriousness being understood. If you truly cannot continue, calmly explaining where you stand may still make a difference. This requires proper guidance and sincerity; it cannot be a threat or a game.

The conversation might sound like this: "I know you are struggling, and I am struggling too. I love you and care about you, and I want to be here for you. These things are very difficult for me, and I cannot handle them. I have tried to help things change, and perhaps something I have done has contributed to their not changing. I cannot go on like this. Perhaps we have to reconsider whether we have a future together, or whether a drastic change can happen soon."

If he understands both the seriousness of the situation and your desire to stay together, there may still be an opportunity for him to respond differently and offer something to hold on to. The point is to speak softly, confidently, and sincerely about what you cannot live with and your wish to preserve the marriage. This is different from announcing that you are strong, have a good job, and no longer see any reason to remain with him. This approach is easily misused and needs personal guidance.

You need a *daas Torah* whose guidance you will follow even when it is not what you hoped to hear. When someone brings me that guidance, even if I disagree, I help them work within it. They are following someone they trust to clarify what Hashem wants, and I would want you to have that foundation.

The Akeidah teaches the value of fulfilling Hashem's will even without the spiritual feeling that would make the avodah easier. With clarity about what is right, your efforts to build a marriage in which the *Shechinah* can dwell remain meaningful. With *siyata d'Shmaya*, effort, and *tefillah*, may you improve your marriage and have a wonderful life.

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