בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

SHAVUOS

HARD FOR ONE AND MEANINGFUL TO THE OTHER

In the *Sefer Baal Shem Tov,* it is quoted from the *Siddur Reb Shabsi* that one should be careful not to speak *devarim betailim* from after saying Tikkun Leil Shavuos until after Kedushas Keser the next morning, and this was the *minhag* of the Baal Shem Tov. The reason given is that in the Tikkun, we learn extracts from the 24 *Sifrei Tanach*, and these 24 *sefarim* are like the 24 pieces of jewelry given to a *kallah*, a parallel to the Shechinah. Once these jewels have been set aside and readied, we don't want to distract our minds with any interruptions until they have been given over when we say "Keser Yitnu Lecha" and we, so-to-speak, present the jewels to Hashem.

The relationship between Hashem and Klal Yisroel teaches us a lot about the marriage relationship. We in this world are merely a *mashal* to the ultimate *nimshal*.

The idea of having "no interruptions" is an important one. We often do something special for our spouses, especially before Yom Tov when the Shulchan Aruch tells us that a husband should buy a present for his wife. Often, wives buy presents for their husbands as well. We give compliments, favors, and many good things, at any time, but sometimes we negate the gift by "interrupting" it with something else. Sometimes, we give a compliment, but we follow it with criticism. We do a favor, and then expect something in return.

This doesn't mean that the recipient of favors and kind words should disregard them just because something else was said as well. We should always try to accept the good for what it is, appreciate it, and let it build the relationship.

All the same, we should be aware that sensitive people or black-and-white thinkers tend to zoom in on even the tiniest speck of criticism. When interacting with such people (and in fact, this is good advice for any relationship), it's doubly important not to dilute the positive with anything negative at all, because the negative acts like a black dye that colors everything as soon as even a drop is introduced.

The importance of consistent positivity is something we can also learn from *Sefiras Ha'omer,* the buildup to *Kabalas HaTorah*. We have to count every single day. If we miss a day, we can (and should) still continue counting, but we can no longer make a *berachah*. In fact, the importance of being consistent applies to every aspect of our lives: learning Torah, serving Hashem, and in relationships with spouses and children.

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Recently, someone told me that he listens to my *shiurim* even though some of the questions sound so "petty." It's true that if a person is dealing with bigger challenges, the smaller ones can seem petty. It's also true that someone else's major challenge can appear petty to you, as there is often no effective way of conveying the emotions of a "petty" problem that make the issue loom so large to the person experiencing it.

Furthermore, the questions I address in this forum are chosen because of their general relevance. If a certain person needs an answer to a specific question, I address them privately.

The question this week actually relates to Purim, but instead of connecting Purim to Shavuos and touching on the aspect of Kabbalas Hatorah that they share, I'll admit that I'm choosing to address it now both because it just reached the top of the list, and because I view all questions as a springboard to discuss a topic. The issue at hand is often just an example.

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I have a question. I'm not sure if my issue comes up in your circles, but it probably does.

On Purim, many women have themes and want the whole family involved in the theme. They want everyone to dress up and match the *mishloach manos*. Not all husbands get involved, but my wife makes it seem like they are.

I'm uncomfortable dressing up on Purim but I've done it in the past to keep the peace. It's usually just a hat or something small, but I'm still uncomfortable with it. My wife is adamant that this is a family thing and everyone must do it.

My kids are also into this by now and my wife makes it seem like it would be terrible if I don't want to get involved and that my kids will not be happy about it. The truth is that some of them won't care at all.

I know it's important to swallow your pride sometimes and I've been doing it for years. I assume you'll tell me I don't have to dress up, but I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Also, how do I explain to my wife that I'm just not doing it this year?

Thanks a lot.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

This questioner happens not to be from Brooklyn or Lakewood, but I think this question could be coming from many circles. Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with dressing up on Purim — in fact, I do so myself. There's a *minhag* to do so and I don't know that it's exclusively for children. It's also common for women to have "themes." Many men are okay with it; many are not. Some men are more involved and some less so.

But as I prefaced, this is clearly not only a Purim issue. Here's another example: Let's say a family has a *simchah* coming up and a woman tells her

husband: "You're the *baal simchah*; you have to get up to speak. *Everyone* speaks at their *simchah*... If you don't, it'll affect the entire family."

It's not unusual for someone to feel that what one family member does affects the whole family, and to back a demand with it. However, even if this *is* something that "everyone" does and it is an expected "given," it's still wrong to manipulate your spouse into doing it. This is not an acceptable way to behave, aside from the fact that it's often counterproductive. Sometimes, being so insistent and even shaming the other person will only cause them to resist even more strongly.

This applies especially when there is no "everyone." Not *all* men dress up on Purim, and it's perfectly acceptable not to. And we know — often from our children's outbursts — that "everyone" usually means nothing more than "most people" or even "some people" (or the people I approve of and want to impress).

When we find ourselves using the excuse of "everyone" in order to justify ourselves, it's often worth wondering why. What's wrong with simply asking for something, because it would mean a lot to *you*? Sometimes, an insecure person feels uneasy about asking for something because they feel undeserving. However, if "everyone" does XYZ, then it's only natural that the insecure person's spouse should also do as well, and it doesn't have to be viewed as a favor.

Not wanting to feel indebted is at the root of many problems. Sometimes, the issue is not wanting to appear needy or vulnerable. But it is simply wrong to "overcome" our fear of showing vulnerability by manipulating others. Does this mean a person doesn't have to take his family into consideration? Not at all. However, there are usually ways of working around things without trying to control people.

Similarly, learning how to ask nicely so as to overcome any natural resistance to being vulnerable about a request is something parents can often learn to apply with their children too. It's frustrating to have to ask them to do something they should be doing already, and of course, we *can* demand — but asking nicely can make all the difference, and also opens up the possibility of offering genuine thanks and appreciation, which encourages more of the same. Be successful, and build your relationships, instead of being right... and stuck.

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The idea of boundaries is something I discuss often. It's so important for any relationship to acknowledge *what* belongs to *whom* and recognize and respect "mine, yours, or ours." When something directly affects and pertains mainly to "me," it's important that it is "me" who gets to make the decision about it. I imagine that this is the reason why the questioner assumed I would tell him that he doesn't have to dress up.

There's nothing wrong with doing something for someone you want to please. If something is meaningful to your spouse, you may want to do it even if it's hard. But here's the catch: When someone tells you to do something and you do it, you're teaching them that you will allow yourself to be controlled. If you hesitate or say you'll think about it, you're teaching them that you're the one making decisions that affect your life. Sometimes, it's healthy and important to resist something that someone tries to impose on you.

Here I'd like to quote an idea elaborated upon in the book *You and Me Equals We*, by my friend Rabbi Yisroel Kleinman. Being *mevater*, he writes, is "the biggest problem" of marriage. Sometimes, it's actually *wrong* to give in, he writes, because often, when a person does give in, he subconsciously expects to gain something from it. If the other person doesn't respond the way he was hoping, resentment can build up and harm the entire relationship.

My point isn't that husbands shouldn't dress up on Purim or take out the garbage. But if someone is screaming at you and telling you that you *have to* do something, that's when you might do better to hesitate and tell them you'll think about it.

Another way to address this is to preempt the demand. If you know your wife gets frustrated when the garbage overflows and she already took out the

garbage three times today, you can deal with the issue without waiting to be asked or told. In this way, you avoid the problems caused by giving in to demands and creating the impression that you can be intimidated or controlled. And even if you won't score many points, helping out when necessary is still the right thing to do and worthwhile in the long-run.

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All this is assuming that the only two options are to either give in or stick your ground. What people don't realize is that often, with a bit of creativity and flexibility, you can find other ways to address this issue. It doesn't have to be all-or-nothing. Maybe you can offer to put on a hat only in your own house, or just for the pictures, etc. When you break an issue down into parts, you'll usually find at least something that you're willing to do.

Once you've made a decision about what you're comfortable with, the next step is to communicate it in a friendly, yet confident tone. Empathize with your spouse's wishes; don't question them. Focus on yourself: "I understand that you feel it's important. I don't feel so comfortable with it. This is my decision."

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Another thing to consider is whether your resistance to dressing up is because you know that you won't get any acknowledgment or appreciation for doing so, despite the discomfort it causes you. Here again, you can preempt the situation rather than wait until things are emotionally challenging. "I'm thinking of dressing up this year because it means so much to you. You don't have to, but it would make it a lot easier for me if you could tell me how much you appreciate it." If your wife is the kind of person who finds it hard to feel indebted, this could make it easier for her, as she'll feel that she's doing *you* a favor by saying thank you…

A man was upset because although he made *siyumim* often, his wife never did anything special in honor — but his *chavrusa's* wife did. I advised him to gently introduce the idea by telling her two weeks before his next *siyum* that he was finishing a *masechta* and that it would mean a lot to him if they could do something to celebrate the event. I also cautioned him to avoid saying anything about how "everyone" does things the "normal" way… You don't *have to* educate your spouse, but if they don't realize something on their own — and all of us have our blind spots — gently introducing new ideas as suggestions rather than instructions can make it easier on all of you.

Marriage and relationships are about understanding one another. It's important for a wife to understand her husband's resistance and for a husband to understand how much something may mean to his wife.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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