Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Ki Seitzei |

Cause of Divorce

Marriage Lessons?

In *Parshas Ki Seitzei* the Torah explicitly discusses *shalom bayis*. The Torah describes a wife whose husband wasn't happy with her and gave her a *get*. She leaves him and marries someone else, and eventually the second husband divorces her as well. The *halacha* is that the first husband is not allowed to remarry her.

The question is why would the first husband want to take her back altogether? Didn't he already divorce her? Apparently we're concerned that one day he'll realize that she wasn't as bad as he thought. Even if his wife was not *motze chen b'einov* and he sent her away, he still might change his mind and want to take her back. Let's try to understand how such a thing can be possible.

The Suffering Spouse

Generally, when couples are experiencing difficulty, one spouse complains more than the other. This dynamic subtly influences the view of the people involved with the couple. Subconsciously, they get the impression that the complainer is the 'victim' and the other one, who is always being complained about, is the 'perpetrator'. This however, may be far from the truth.

Tziporah* has an easygoing nature and isn't often vexed by other people. Her husband, Yitzy*, quickly becomes frustrated and disappointed in interpersonal dealings. Yitzy is the instigator in most of their clashes, but since he is always complaining about what he perceives as Tziporah's many wrongs, family and therapists tend to stick up for him and look at her as the perpetrator.

Supporting Yitzy is not dealing with the problem at all. Saying 'I don't know how you manage being treated this way', and similar sympathetic comments don't help anyone.

Pain Hurts

The first point that we have to make is that there is no such thing as right and wrong in interpersonal relationships. Feelings are very real, each individual experiences them in a different way. Everyone is right when it comes to themselves; if I'm feeling hurt then I am hurt.

Whether or not the other spouse did or didn't do what they are being accused of, is irrelevant when it comes to feelings. It's not about right or wrong, and no one will gain from showing or proving who is 'wrong'. When a little boy is afraid of a monster, the monster doesn't have to be real, but the fear certainly is.

What's Really Going On

At the same time, it is very important to realize that the one who is complaining is causing the problem just as much, and sometimes even more, than the other party. Bringing up problems all the time, makes everyone focus on the negative and creates a very unhealthy atmosphere in the marriage.

This doesn't mean that when someone isn't happy he is automatically the perpetrator, or that he should cover up his emotions. The point is to try to get some clarity and understanding about what is really going on in the relationship. People should start to think about what's happening and checking if they might be the ones causing the breakdown.

The Sunburn

Very often, the issue is simply that some people are harder to please. A wife might complain that her husband doesn't take her emotional needs seriously enough. But at the same time she should think, 'Could it be that he's okay, and I'm just really hard to please?' People may not understand or agree with this. They might not see themselves in this light, but it could very well be their personality.

When people are expressing unhappiness, it can be very real. Nevertheless, the question is, what's really causing it? And what can be done about it? Should we keep smearing the evil perpetrator, or perhaps we *should* blame the overly sensitive 'victim'.

When someone gets sunburned and a friend comes over and gives them a pat on the back, that hurts. But who is the 'victim' and who is the 'perpetrator'? It was just a friendly pat! Are you making your spouse out to be an abuser, because of your own 'sunburn'?

Is It Pure Evil?

Sometimes, one who is overly sensitive will say, 'My spouse is nice to *everyone* but me'. Does that make sense? Do you really think that your spouse is faking with their friends, family, and workmates, and only with you, her inner evil comes out?! Maybe your wife's other relationships prove that she isn't really so hard to get along with after all.

On the other hand, this isn't absolute. You can't always say, 'I have friends. Obviously I can get along with people.' Maybe it's only a small group of friends, or only people with whom you have a lot in common where you are successful.

Getting Sucked In

What makes this confusing is that once the fighting begins, the easygoing spouse may get sucked in as well. People sometimes do this without even realizing. They're upset, and they say very hurtful things thus bringing their easygoing spouse down to their level of negativity.

Once the argument is going on, both sides look the same, and it's sometimes hard to see who started the argument. As Mishlei says אל תענה כסיל כאולתו פן תשוה לו גם אתה *"Don't answer a fool like his foolishness because then you'll be just like him."* And in Mark Twain's words, 'Never argue with a fool, the onlookers won't be able to tell the difference'.

Seeing the Other Side

Sometimes people really don't see that this is what they're doing. Their feelings are so real to them, that they don't even realize there's another side. While relating their story, it never occurs to them that the listener may think they're the one causing the problem.

Rinah* was very upset and worked up. 'My husband came home and instead of doing XYZ, he brought me an ice-cream. It was so ridiculous of him, can you believe it? I just wanted to run away'. To her it's obvious that she is the victim of his mistreatment. Yet the one listening was thinking, 'I feel so bad for her husband, he's trying so hard and she's just not letting it happen.'

This same woman continued, 'I yelled at him once and you know what he did …' If you yelled at him, you're the perpetrator. You may feel like the victim, but in your story you admit that you started the problem.

Making Changes

This brings us back to our original point. How could it be that someone who divorced his

wife would later want to take her back? The answer is that one day he might finally realize that she wasn't the one who was hard to get along with. He was at fault! How much better it would be if people understood that the first time around, instead of constantly complaining and expressing unhappiness.

So what are we supposed to do about this? If you're a person who complains a lot, harping on problems and telling people about how much you suffer from your spouse – slow down and think a little bit about what's happening. Can it be that your spouse is actually very nice, and you have an issue that is causing trouble? You may not be the whole problem, but you may be part of it.

If you are the one being blamed, always trying to please a perpetually dissatisfied spouse – take a step back and relax. You may be fine, and it's he who has a problem. Continuously taking all the blame may just be feeding the other person's issue and aggravating the problem. Instead, look for help; try to see if there's something that you can do to fix up the situation.

Chinuch: Problem Children?

Often parents complain about their children, when in reality they're the problem, not the children. People sometimes make themselves into 'victims' of their children's special needs or situations, they enjoy talking about how much they suffer from their child, but that is a whole subject on its own.

But perhaps a lot of your complaints have more to do with you than your child. How many people grow up feeling that they were never able to please their parents? If your child never makes you happy and is always a cause for complaint, perhaps your expectations need recalibration? It is very important for parents to be able to look at themselves honestly, and see what part are they playing in the difficult situation that exists.

-Q&A-

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

Question:

When stressful situations come up, and my wife is harassing me, the only thing that I can do to get her to stop is to mention divorce. Is that something I can continue to do?

Answer:

Divorce is something that the Torah allows when it's necessary, so it's definitely something that can be done, but it's not something that you should ever say. Mentioning divorce challenges the whole foundation of your marriage. It might work as a tactic for manipulating someone and making her stop doing something you don't like, but it's very hurtful and damaging to the relationship. The truth is that if you've mentioned it in the past you should apologize, because it takes away from the stability and trust in the relationship.

What can you do to stop someone from harassing you? There are many things to do. You can tell them that you can't continue the conversation this way, or that you need a break, and so on. Even mentioning consequences, such as 'I love to come home for supper, but if this is what's going to happen, then I might have to come home a little later' is okay, but bringing up divorce undermines the whole marriage, making it seem temporary and conditional, and that clearly is not what a marriage is about.

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