

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the Home

## HOLY AND HAPPY

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem brings out Bnei Yisrael from Mitzrayim and leads them in a roundabout way toward Eretz Yisrael. The *passuk* explains that Hashem "did not lead them by way of the land of the Pilishtim, for it was close by, as He said: In case the people reconsider when they see war and return to Mitzrayim."

In his commentary *Imrei Shafer*, Harav Shlomo Kluger *ztz"l* provides an additional understanding of these words. Since one can also translate "for *it* was close by" as "for *He* was close by," he explains that by leading the Yidden away from the Pilishtim, Hashem was showing His closeness to us. For Hashem, it was not enough to point us in the right direction, toward Eretz Yisrael and away from Mitzrayim, and then allow us to make our own decision of where to go. Due to His great love for us, He wanted to ensure that we would make it all the way to Eretz Yisrael without turning back and therefore guided us away from anything that could cause us to doubt leaving Mitzrayim. He made certain that we would leave all the empty enticements of Mitzrayim behind and make our way to a life of happiness and fulfillment both in this world and the next.

The Torah is the *sam hachaim*, the potion of life, and Hashem is not just our king who gives us a set of rules by which to live — He is our father who wants only what is best for us. As we make our way through the journey of life, this is a lesson that is so important to keep in mind. When the outside world claims to possess the secrets to happiness and tempts us into thinking that there could be something good "out there," we can think back to this *passuk* and be reassured that the Torah is not just a rule-book, it is the guidance of our loving Father who wants to shield us from all evil and lead us toward what is truly good, for our benefit. This enables us to choose life and happiness, for ourselves, our families, and our nation.

**This week's essay is dedicated**

לע"נ מרת **לאה** בת
ר' **שמואל מיכאל** ע"ה
**קריגר**

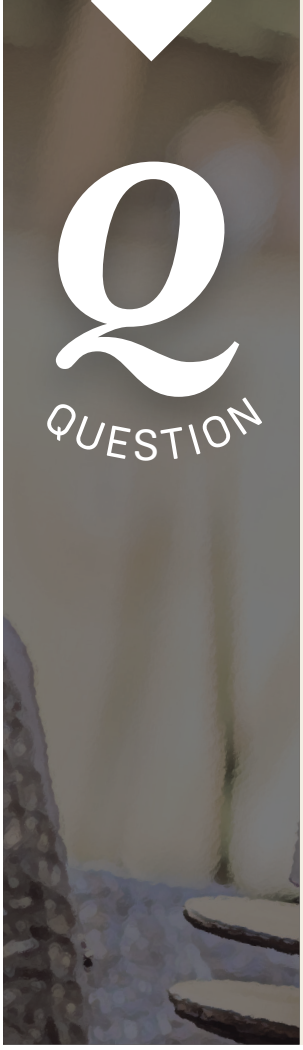
יאה"צ ו' שבט

תהא נפשה צרורה בצרור החיים

ותהיה מליצה ישרה עבור כל
יוצ"ח היקרים

Parshas
**Beshalach**

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## *Question #1*

**Dear Rabbi Gruen,**

**I recently gave a laptop computer to a relative who wanted to be able to access the internet. Last week, I remembered that I had left some files on it that I needed, so I took it back for a few hours. I happened to look at the browsing history on the internet and was shocked to see that the wife of my relative, a young *chassidishe* woman, had joined a forum of *heimishe* ladies discussing issues related to intimacy.**

**Isn't there something that can be done to stop people joining such forums?**

## *Questions #2*

**Dear Rabbi Gruen,**

**I have a suggestion. With regard to intimate relations, new couples are really taught next to nothing about the specifics, and I'm sure it's desperately needed in today's world, especially as there is so much information available on the internet and probably the vast majority of frum Yidden have searched for information there. I think this is a huge problem, especially as the contradictions between fantasy and reality must be incredibly confusing.**

**You would be doing an amazing service by giving *shiurim* in this area, covering the issues in general terms and then offering your email address to anyone who wants to ask specific questions. I would go so far as to guarantee that Hashem will provide you with a special Shaar in Gan Eden for undertaking this.**




There's a lot to be said about appropriate internet usage, but this isn't the place to discuss that. In general, it's hard to take responsibility for anyone other than ourselves; we're usually very limited in how much we can prevent people from doing anything wrong. Often the most we can do is work on ourselves and try our best to have a good influence on others. People who attempt to "make" others improve generally end up very discouraged and disappointed.

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Regarding the topic raised in the questions printed above, there are definitely two "schools of thought." Some people, like the person asking the second question, insist that because so much information is already "out there," most people have already been exposed and therefore the issues should be addressed as openly as possible. Others contend that the Torah is timeless and that even just discussing non-Torah ideas to refute them will only cause damage.

I believe there is a way forward that respects our traditions and addresses contemporary issues without delving into anything from the outside world. In the past, I occasionally wondered why an area of *halachah* that is so central to our lives is taught with the lightest touch

and never revisited. But over time, I have come to understand that this is actually the most natural way, because knowledge in this area evolves during the years of marriage according to the nature of each specific couple.

Furthermore, very little can actually be transmitted before marriage as the ideas, when theoretical, are very foreign. The most important lesson to transmit to *chassanim* and *kallos* is that there is nothing to be ashamed of and that after they get married, they should feel comfortable asking any question that occurs to them.

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Introducing ideas that are not part of our tradition is problematic in general, not just in this specific area. When Jewish publications raise issues that don't affect most people and expose their readers to concepts they may not need whatsoever, the results are not always positive. In fact, I have been told by several people that while they benefit from my classes and articles on *chinuch*, they avoid my classes on *shalom bayis* — "I have a great relationship with my wife, so what would I gain from reading about people who are having problems?" There's a point to that.

Some would counter that attitude by suggesting that such people may just be fooling themselves, in denial about the problems they're experiencing — and that being aware of potential problems is always a good thing. Experience has taught me that increasing one's awareness of all the problems in the world tends to cause confusion and damage rather than awareness and insight.

Another point I would like to make about today's publications is that they expose people not only to the opinions of the writers, but also the opinions of the readership. Back in the "olden days," *heimishe* publications would only print articles and essays by reputable people with high standards and a person who read such publications knew that they were only exposing themselves to reliable ideas. Today, however, via "letters to the editor," all kinds of ideas are published and disseminated. Even if a certain letter to the editor is rebutted by the publication or by others, the ideas, once read, cannot be easily forgotten.

With regard to online forums, this problem is so much worse as there is usually no one moderating the discussion and anyone is free to write whatever he wants. In addition, the very anonymity that makes joining such forums so tempting is a problem in itself, because no one knows what kind of people are contributing. Some members of such forums are no doubt *heimishe* women seeking clarification on certain points, but others may be very far from our community's norms and can easily expose otherwise sheltered people to concepts that they would never otherwise have encountered.

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Another serious issue that arises when one discusses these topics in a casual manner is something Chazal (Shabbos 33a) have warned us about, calling such conversations "*nivul peh*." As the second letter writer notes, these are issues that everyone is aware of, to a greater or lesser degree — and yet, we are cautioned to discuss them only when necessary and only within the correct framework and frame of mind.

Freely discussing things that should only be mentioned with the greatest of care and holiest of intentions will reduce our natural sensitivity to these issues, and that is a tremendous loss.

Even "only" talking about these things with a close friend or a relative can cause great damage. In fact, such conversations can be especially problematic as they can lead to people comparing their spouses to others from within the same community, and this can put a great strain on *shalom bayis*.

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Feeling unable to discuss issues with those best qualified to address them is a problem that I am aware of and one that ideally should not exist. That said, there are plenty of ways in which to ask a Rav or Rebbetzin questions privately and no one should feel embarrassed or inhibited.

After all, there probably does not exist a question that someone, sometime, has not already posed to a Torah authority. And that's the important point here: Advice on issues that are strictly bound by *halachah* and Torah *hashkafah* should only be given by people qualified to do so, especially as there is considerable confusion among unqualified people as to what is forbidden or permitted, what is

customary, what is a stringency, what is a leniency, and so forth.

Some people worry that if they ask for guidance from people who are "too strict," they will end up being more restricted than necessary. They may also believe that this will be detrimental to their relationship. Even if they do eventually consult a Torah authority, they may "shop around" to find someone who is willing to give them the answer they want, the one they think will be good for them. This comes from a basic misunderstanding of what the Torah is and why Hashem gave it to us.

Living according to the Torah's guidelines in all areas of life enhances our lives immeasurably, but we must be wise in order to see this. While we're restricted regarding what we can eat, and on which days we may not work, we don't go around thinking about how much we are missing out on due to the laws of *kashrus* and *shemiras Shabbos*. We know how fortunate we are to have the Torah's guidance, which enables us to experience the greatest life possible.

This applies no less with regard to the Torah's guidelines for married life. The Torah isn't just about what's prohibited or permitted — it is an entire code of behavior which directs us toward our true goal of enhancing marriage as part of our *avodas Hashem*.

Unfortunately, there are many therapists, self-help books, and "advisors" who claim otherwise and seem to truly believe that exposing oneself to new and foreign ideas and breaking down boundaries is the answer to marital problems. It's simply not true. I have seen this countless times.



It's easy to decide that this topic is the root of all the *shalom bayis* issues a couple may be experiencing, but this is a very misguided way of thinking and can even make things worse. That's not to say that problems in this area shouldn't be resolved — of course they should. Fundamentally, the Torah wants husband and wife to be attracted to one another so that they connect and enhance their love for one another. But anything of this sort must be done with proper guidance. A couple that lacks a sense of where they are headed will only stumble along the way.

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As in any other area in life, before asking for advice, it is vital to be absolutely honest about where one is headed, what one's motives and goals are. If the goal is "me, me, and me" and maximizing one's short-term pleasure, then it's hard to be successful. When we keep in mind that the goal is to build a sacred relationship with one's spouse, we will know whom to ask for guidance and how to integrate the advice into our lives.

Hashem is our loving Father who only wants what is best for us. Just as a loving, caring parent will not simply hand us a list of rules and then leave us to our own devices, so too Hashem did not merely give us the Torah and then let us somehow muddle through on our own. In each generation He has given us leaders who can guide us toward life, happiness, and fulfilment, and when we keep this in mind, we will *be'ezras Hashem* be able to build marriages that are both sacred and full of genuine *simchah*.

**TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME**: BESHALACH 5785

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