

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

SECRETS BETWEEN SPOUSES?

As Hashem describes the final *makkah*, He tells Moshe Rabbeinu that although the Egyptians will suffer a tremendous, shattering blow with the death of their firstborn sons, no one will lift a hand against the Yidden: "*U'lechol bnei Yisrael lo yecheratz kelev leshono*—But to all the children of Israel, not one dog will whet its tongue."

The *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* notes that since the Torah was given only with the letters and without vowel points, it is possible to alter the *nekudos* and read an additional meaning into these words. Thus, the words of the *passuk* can be read "*lo yecheratz k'lev leshono*" — nothing bad will happen to those whose speech is "like their heart" — that is, to those who speak only the truth and keep far from falsehood.

"All the *tzaros* that come upon a person," the *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* continues, "come, *chas v'shalom*, because of his being immersed in *sheker* and not attached to *emes*. For someone who is attached to *emes*, whose speech and heart are the same, the harsh decrees are sweetened."

Success in many areas of life — relationships, business, *chinuch* — is closely linked to being truthful and therefore trustworthy. *Sheker* can wreck relationships, destroying trust between people that is hard and sometimes impossible to fully rebuild.

Emes is something we should cultivate in ourselves and our children; it is so important to do so, that when a child admits to a wrongdoing instead of lying to evade punishment, it is often advisable to waive the punishment and praise the child for speaking the truth. *Emes* is the basis of life in this world as well as the focus of the very first question we are asked as we prepare to enter the next: "Did you engage in business faithfully?" The Torah tells us not only to avoid *sheker* but to "distance ourselves" from it.

The only exception to this is if *sheker* will undoubtedly bring about the higher goal of *shalom* in its purest sense. That is essentially the example of utilizing *sheker* properly, for its ultimate purpose, which is to build relationships that will otherwise be hurt by "too much" or misplaced *emes*.

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Anonymous

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Parshas
Bo
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I recently heard your *shiur* about a wife who was upset that her husband was hiding things from her, and it really shook me up, not just because of what she wrote to you, but also because it sounded so much like my own wife, even though I don't hide much from her and don't have the issues you described.

All the same, I found myself really identifying with the husband she wrote about, as I do often find myself hiding various things from my wife because it's simply not comfortable to share them. I've tried sharing so many things and very often I come away feeling put down, and it's simply easier to share less. For example, I shared with her about someone we know who (in my opinion) overworks to make a few extra bucks, and her immediate response was, "Why don't you too?"

I want to know how I can feel comfortable talking to her without feeling judged. It could be that it's all in my head and she doesn't really judge me, but my feelings are real. I really believe that if I had to borrow money, it would be hard for me to tell her because she wouldn't handle it well and it's easier to keep it to myself, as I don't want to feel looked down at, talked down to, or judged, and I certainly don't want to keep hearing about it, or listen to her worries that will follow.

So of course I understand that there are women who have complaints about their husbands not sharing enough with them, but from the husband's perspective, it's not always easy to share. I hope I will never have to be in a situation like the one you described (with terrible debts and so forth), but if I was, *chas v'shalom*, it's very hard for me to believe that I would be comfortable sharing the truth with my wife.

Looking forward to your advice, and thank you so much.



The issue you raise is relatively common — very many people struggle with knowing how much to reveal to their spouse and whether it might sometimes be appropriate to conceal information. Because *sheker* is such a despicable *middah*, and hiding information is essentially a compromise on *emes*, this is a very sensitive topic and anyone discussing it must do so with extreme care, so as not to transmit any wrong messages.

In most relationships where this issue emerges, it is only one of the spouses complaining about the other one hiding things. However, this is definitely an issue that is faced by both wives and husbands, with both demanding more transparency at times. Similarly, both husbands and wives can be too critical at times, which can tempt their spouses to hide information.

It's important for everyone to remember that giving another person space to be open is a matter of respect. When we accept that each person is entitled to his opinions and preferences, it's much easier to accept whatever they tell us without being judgmental and making them question whether they were right to be transparent in the first place.

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The flipside of according people this respect is accepting that at times, they may choose *not* to share. Even in marriage, we are entitled to keep parts of our

lives, our thoughts, and even sometimes our deeds private. Marriage does not fuse two people into one, and while the majority of married life is comprised of things that affect both spouses, there are still plenty of things that directly affect only one. In general, it's fine to either tell or not tell one's spouse about things that don't directly affect them. Problems only arise when either practice is taken to an extreme.

Sometimes, things may appear extreme even if they aren't, simply due to differences of personality. Some people are more transparent by nature while others have a greater need for privacy. When a very open person is married to a very private person, their "clash" in personality can blow issues out of proportion, and it's then that open communication becomes so critical.

Take, for example, the hypothetical case of a husband who feels hurt by the fact that his wife never asks him about his job or his schedule. What looks to him like her complete disinterest signals a lack of concern for him as a person, and may lead him to feel taken for granted. It's important that he shares his feelings with his wife, as she may actually be devoted to him and extremely appreciative of everything he does — it's just that she's a very reserved person by nature and it doesn't come naturally to her to express interest in details that actually don't affect or interest her at all. It's nothing personal and actually says very little about the quality of their relationship.

Therefore, the husband in this situation should be open with his wife about how he feels, as otherwise, he risks making false assumptions about her silence, and this will almost certainly place a strain on their relationship for no good reason. And then, once his wife is made aware of her husband's distress, it would be smart for her to make a determined effort to overcome her reserve and display interest in the details of her husband's life, in order to display her caring. Even if she isn't interested in those details, she is interested in her husband himself, and this should motivate her to overcome those aspects of her inborn nature that cause him pain.

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Moving from the general to the specific, it's important to note that just as there are times when it's appropriate to share even when it's not strictly necessary, there will also be times when it's better to refrain from sharing unless absolutely necessary.

You describe feeling unable to share certain things with your wife as she "won't be able to handle them." In fact, that is often a valid justification, one that the Torah presents, as it would have been far better for Korach not to tell his wife about his anger at Moshe Rabbeinu, given that it had disastrous consequences.

Therefore, if, for example, a husband is feeling frustrated in his current job but sees no immediate option of leaving it for something else, he should carefully consider whether his *shalom bayis* will be improved or strained by telling his wife how he feels. While in general, sharing thoughts and feelings enhances a relationship, if he has good reason to believe that sharing in this specific case will lead to her pressuring him to do something he believes he can't, or to feeling helpless and distressed, nothing positive will come out of his sharing and he will be better off remaining silent.

That said, if he feels a need to share his feelings regardless of the outcome, his wife should do her best to make him feel comfortable when expressing himself, and should empathize and share her concern for him, without making demands or judgment calls. From his perspective, however, if he knows that she won't take it well, he cannot force her to be the one to provide him with the support he wants. Sometimes, it's more realistic and productive to seek that support elsewhere, however much it pains him to have to do so.

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This doesn't mean that a husband or wife in such a situation should despair of being able to share all that they would like, and of building a close and mutual relationship. It's just that sometimes it's best to first try to gently "educate" one's spouse on what they would like to receive, and be ready to give what is needed as well, to make communicating openly easier.

Therefore, to address your particular question, you should find a quiet, peaceful moment in which to tell your wife how you feel when she reacts in a certain way. Remember that this is about how *you* feel, not how *she* acts. It's great that you are objective and generous enough to be able to consider that your wife may not be intending to be judgmental at all — perhaps your feelings are "only" feelings. That said, feelings are real regardless of their cause, which is why you should speak up.

Once you've told her how you often feel, move quickly on to what you would like to feel instead, and what you think might help in achieving that. Don't expect her to be able to figure it out for herself, even after you tell her what you don't want her to say. And certainly don't make the (sadly very common and unfair) mistake of demanding that she come up with the "right" response to your sharing when you don't even know what the

right response is yourself. It's on you to figure that out before approaching your wife with a reasonable request.

Even if it feels or sounds awkward, you can (and sometimes should) get specific: "When I tell you I had a hard day at work, I'd really appreciate it if you could say something like, 'Wow, I'm so sorry to hear that. I hope tomorrow is better.' You don't need to suggest anything I could do to improve things, because all I want is to know that you care about me."

Make sure that you don't ask for anything unrealistic or for dramatic change. In most cases, nothing dramatic needs to change. All that's required is a little change in perspective, and it's such a shame when couples don't realize that the closeness they crave is absolutely within reach.

With that said, there's still nothing wrong with not sharing whenever you don't feel a need to share, as long as the topic doesn't affect your wife, and you are not consciously withholding information in order to manipulate her or hurt her, *chalilah*.

Furthermore, the fact that you don't have to share something doesn't mean that you should advertise it. No one should ever tell their spouse, "Don't expect me to tell you everything I do — if it's not your business, then you have no need to know." Saying something like that does nothing but cause pain and distance.

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Even though no one is entitled to demand "full transparency" from their spouse, what should someone do if they are on the receiving end of this behavior?

In general, there are plenty of ways to give the impression that one isn't concealing anything even when certain information is being withheld, without resorting to lying. After all, we all conceal things from others — we do it all the time. People don't get up in the morning and automatically tell their family what they dreamed about; people don't reveal all their thoughts to others and in most cases, we don't reveal our thoughts at all.

Hashem apparently set up the world in such a way that thoughts can remain private, which would seem to suggest that we are not obligated to reveal them to anyone, even a spouse, even when we love them and feel close to them. We are entitled to have private thoughts and feelings, and to insist that we are not required to expose them to others even when those others demand that we do.

A husband or wife who demands "full transparency" from their spouse is usually someone who feels very insecure, for whatever reason (and it may have nothing to do with the quality of the bond between them). They may need gentle reassurance that they are loved and cherished so that they can gradually come to accept the fact that marriage works best when each spouse is permitted to retain a certain amount of privacy, and that this does not mean that husband and wife are not devoted to one another. They may also need to be told, also gently and with sensitivity, that it will be easier to share things with them if they respond with empathy rather than criticism, acceptance rather than judgment.

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While marriage undoubtedly should and does change both the husband and the wife, it does not blend them into a single unit. Knowing where to draw the boundary lines between privacy and attachment requires a great deal of *siyatta diShmaya*. May Hashem guide us all to attach ourselves to the *middah* of *emes* and to know how to use it wisely to enhance our relationships.



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