

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

KEEPING HASHEM WELCOME IN OUR HOMES

After detailing the *mitzvah* of *shemittah* in this week's *parshah*, Hashem reminds us that "the land belongs to Me" and that we are only "*geirim* [strangers] and *toshavim* [residents] with Me." The Chasam Sofer notes that in several places in the Torah, Hashem Himself is referred to as a *ger*, which is not the ideal situation, as we want Hashem to be with us constantly.

He explains that the way to ensure that Hashem is a constant presence in our lives is to make ourselves *geirim* — to remember that we are strangers in the world, just passing through on our way to the Olam Ha'emes. It's when we get too settled in this material world that Hashem becomes "a stranger" in our lives.

Nowhere is it more important to have Hashem's presence with us constantly, than in our homes. When addressing *chassanim* and *kallos*, there's lots of talk about making a home a place for the Shechinah, but once the *sheva brachos* are over, this concept doesn't get a great deal of attention. This is more than unfortunate, as maintaining a focus on bringing Hashem into our lives is what makes all the difference in the decisions we make in how to behave, and impacts how spouses relate to one another. It's also so relevant to how we bring up our children, as Hashem is described as partnering with the parents to bring new life into the world.

If we want to build homes where the Shechinah can dwell, constantly, we have to keep the right perspective on life — that we are passing through in order to serve Hashem and bring His presence into the world. When we imbue our actions with the right Torah *hashkafah* and keep Torah'dig goals in mind, we will be able, *be'ezras Hashem*, to live with Hashem all of our lives.

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Parshas
Behar
VOL. 6 | ISSUE 31



Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your *shiurim*, which are a great source of *chizuk*.

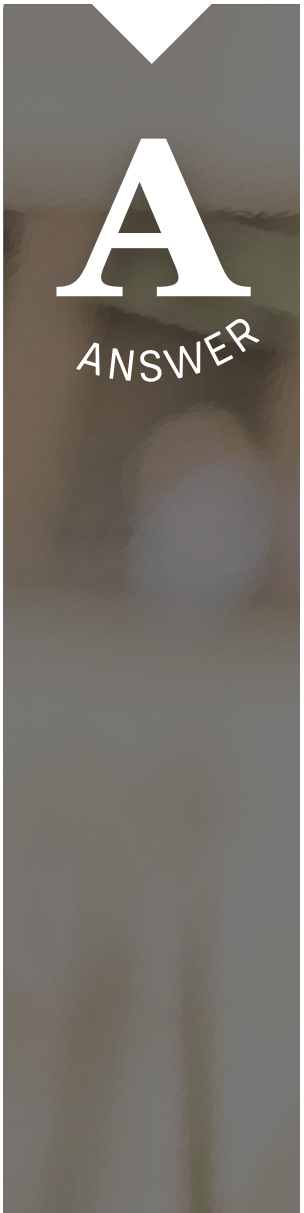
My husband and I have been married for one-and-a-half years. We have a little baby, *baruch Hashem*, and also very good *shalom bayis*.

We usually eat our Shabbos meals at home, and both of us really enjoy that. My question is about Shabbos meals, because before we were married, my husband would sometimes be invited to a *maggid shiur* for a Shabbos *seudah*, along with friends from *yeshivah*, at the *maggid shiur's* home. His family also has a lot of guests on Shabbos.

Now that we're married, my husband has a good friend who keeps asking him if he can come to us for Shabbos, with his wife, who is my friend. My husband doesn't see a problem in this, but I don't think that it's a good idea for couples to mingle in a social setting.

So we would like to ask you what we should do — is it okay to invite a couple to eat with us on Shabbos, or is it not such a healthy idea?

Thank you



A ANSWER

It's a pleasure to receive a letter from a couple with good *shalom bayis*, especially as they recognize it and are grateful for it. Where there's good *shalom bayis*, just about anything can be resolved, and sadly, vice versa as well — where there is friction between the couple, even the smallest issue becomes a big unresolvable problem.

You describe taking pleasure in your Shabbos *seudos*, which is great. Shabbos provides us with such an amazing opportunity which is unfortunately often wasted when people treat the Shabbos *seudos* as a longer and more lavish version of a mid-week meal. The Shabbos *seudah* should be something entirely different, something we prepare for and invest in. With a bit of creativity and effort, Shabbos *seudos* can become times that are anticipated and enjoyed by all family members.

That doesn't mean that the Shabbos *seudah* shouldn't be enjoyed as a great meal too — after all, Oneg Shabbos includes enjoying the physical aspects. But while we must bring Hashem into our homes all week long, on Shabbos His presence should be much more palpable.

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Every family finds its own way to make the Shabbos *seudos* special. For some that will involve inviting guests. The question of whether a young couple should invite another young couple is more complicated than many people might think.

There are definitely different opinions and attitudes about this in different communities and cultures. It is crucial for a couple to have their own rav and *moreh derech* who can help them understand what is and isn't allowed, as well as what is appropriate. This involves both *halachah* and *hashkafah*, and the precise guidance will depend on the details and circumstances. In the event that a couple doesn't have someone whose guidance they follow, this could become problematic.

Aside from the question of what is correct and appropriate, however, there are other considerable factors that are worth taking into consideration.

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Addressing the lady asking the question, I would first note that I am not your rav or *moreh derech*; all I can bring to this question is my own opinion, based on years of experience with many couples. What I can say, definitively, based on that experience, is that the "mingling" that you describe is not just unhealthy — it's dangerous.

While "dangerous" may seem an extreme word to use, consider for a moment what we mean when we say something is dangerous. We don't let our young children cross the street, for example, because of the danger. Even though on more than 99 out of 100 occasions that a young child does run across the street, nothing happens, it's still dangerous, because in the event that something *does* happen, it can easily be fatal.

I am no extremist, but I know for certain that everyone who is involved with *shalom bayis* issues in this day and age can bring examples of serious relationship issues that started out at "innocent" social get-togethers. Without anyone intending for things to become a problem, some situations ended with devastating consequences (while others had less devastating but still far from desirable results). I am not talking about a level of danger that is one in a thousand.

Not everything is considered mingling. Men and women speaking occasionally in a formal manner, or responsibly, isn't mingling. One's level of piety and care to keep a distance from women can depend on many things, but mingling is something else. What I'm referring to are informal encounters in social settings such as meals, outings, and vacation.

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One of the traps the *yetzer hara* uses to cause us to stumble is packaging something potentially very dangerous as "not a big deal." In all the cases I have knowledge of, things started from something so seemingly innocuous that it would have been hard to say that it was prohibited. But that's how the *yetzer hara* works — he instills doubt, making us wonder, "What could be wrong with *that*?"

This is perhaps why the only place in the entire Shulchan Aruch where we find the warning, "*me'od me'od*" (very, very) used is in relation to the separation and distance necessary between men and women. The warning is given specifically to men, who are told to "keep very, very far from women." Here we see the great sensitivity of Chazal on this issue and their great awareness and understanding of human nature, because no one sets out to step beyond red lines, but even getting close to the red line is dangerous.

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People who try to challenge this often point to instances where mingling takes place, even regularly, yet "nothing bad happens." Now, aside from the fact that sadly, "bad" things do happen, although not all the time, even one in a thousand situations of damage is a huge tragedy that could have been averted if Chazal's guidelines had been respected.

But there's another important point that's relevant here. When comparing with or emulating those who are less stringent in this or any area, we must also acknowledge that different communities have different levels of sensitivity to different issues. In some communities, other red lines are stressed far more, whereas — just for example — having couples mingle is something that people don't think twice about. What this means is that in places where this is not seen as acceptable, failing to keep a distance from red lines will have graver consequences, as people still have the level of sensitivity in this area that Hashem intends us to have.

When a certain sensitivity is lost, it can appear to make things simpler, now that the previously questionable behavior is normalized. Often, however, what this really means is that people have simply lost the special level of sensitivity that the Torah should imbue us with. Becoming desensitized to the extent that mingling isn't seen as a big deal is a tremendous loss.

To give a (slightly extreme) example: Imagine if somebody were to ask about the permissibility of making a *chasunah* without a proper *mechitzah*, using the argument that in some communities this is done and not known to cause problems (which may or may not actually be the case). If this person is suggesting introducing this type of *chasunah* to a community where it is unheard of, the likelihood is that it will cause far more problems than in places where those types of *chasunos* are the norm. And further — why would he want to degrade their sensitivity in this area, even if it was not going to cause specific problems, in the first place?

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There will still be people reading this who assume that there are exceptions. The wife writing the letter mentions that her husband doesn't see the problem, and this is relatively common, especially if the person concerned grew up in a home where there were always lots of guests, or he was accustomed to eating by other families on Shabbos. However, it's important to understand the differences between a family inviting

guests, a *maggid shiur* inviting *bachurim*, and a couple inviting another couple.

In a family setting, the social aspect is less intimate and it's more of a "crowd," so to speak. Even if there are several young couples at a long table, they are likely to be swallowed up in the general atmosphere. There is also generally a *rosh hamishpachah*, which is a point actually mentioned in the *poskim* regarding occasions when a *mechitzah* is not necessary.

At the home of a *maggid shiur* who invites a number of *bachurim* to a *seudah*, the atmosphere is also not "light-hearted and social." This cannot be said of two couples sitting together at a table, even if the two men are friends and the two women chat between themselves, but they are still sitting in close proximity. The red line is right there and could be (accidentally and even unwittingly) crossed at any moment, if not on the first encounter, perhaps on a later one.

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Then there are situations where one feels (rightly or wrongly, whatever the circumstance may be) that, "I simply don't have a choice." What then?

In such a case, it can happen that a person says to himself (perhaps unconsciously), "Well, I know this is wrong, but once it's over I'll do things properly. For now, I don't have a choice."

I don't mean to say that people set out to step beyond the boundaries, but it is important to recognize what could happen if a person is not on his guard, and to take all possible precautions. Let's compare it to someone who for whatever reason feels he cannot wear a seatbelt, whether because it's broken, he has stomach pains, or it's too great a restraint for him. It would be wrong for him to think to himself, "I'm anyway not doing this safely, so I'll just speed along the Palisades without a care in the world!" No — the opposite is true. If for whatever reason he is deprived of the protection of a seat-belt, he should double-check that the airbags are in working order and that the brakes are functioning, and he should drive slowly and cautiously.



The same applies here, where no matter what, the laws of *yichud* of course still apply, and caution must be implemented wherever possible.

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The wife asking the question presents it as both her and her husband seeking my advice. Whenever I can address both spouses together, it's much easier to find a way to a solution, though it's certainly possible to see huge improvements even when only one spouse is addressing the issue. It's important to make sure this issue doesn't become a point of contention in the marriage.

Even in cases where both husband and wife are willing to address issues, it's so important that they figure out an effective way of doing so. Too many couples clash over the same issues for years without finding (or even, sometimes, looking for) a solution.

Solutions emerge from either discussion or compromise (or both), sometimes with external input from a rav or counselor or another trusted person. A good solution leaves both spouses feeling better, not one of them feeling they got the raw end of the deal, even if their part of the "compromise" means that next time around, the other spouse has to give in. Compromise should be accompanied by understanding of the other person's position and accepting that a middle path is actually the best one to take.

Be'ezras Hashem when we approach problems with humility and bring Hashem into the picture and into our lives at every opportunity, we will be able to build homes for the Shechinah and experience Hashem's help and guidance throughout our lives.

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