

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY WITH PRIDE

In this week's *parshah*, Yosef's brothers plot to kill him, mockingly adding, "Now we'll see what will come of his dreams." The Baal Hafla'ah (in the name of his grandfather) notes that Rashi states that the words, "We'll see what will come of his dreams" were actually spoken by a *Bas Kol*, a heavenly voice, which was heard only by Reuven and not by the other brothers. Reuven therefore concluded that the words of the *Bas Kol* were meant for him alone, and that he should act on them to ensure that Yosef's dreams *would* be fulfilled. He then set out on his mission to rescue Yosef.

Each and every one of us has a unique mission in life, and even if we don't hear an actual *Bas Kol*, we do receive messages from Hashem in all sorts of ways. When an idea occurs to one person and not to others, that too is a form of a heavenly message. What a shame when the person with the idea doesn't act on it, and waits for someone else who didn't get the message to make the first move.

So often we know very clearly what the other person should be doing. We know where they'd succeed, or we notice their blind spots. We have it all down pat. If only our spouse would do XYZ differently, everything would be good.

If you see an issue and your spouse doesn't, there's a reason. Perhaps it's because you are the one with the ability to fix it.

What if the issue pertains to your spouse alone? Even then, there's a lot you can do to encourage change in them. You can't force other people to fix themselves, but you can make the circumstances more conducive to change. Let's take "our" messages and do what we can on our end, and hopefully, affect everything and everyone around us for the better.

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Parshas
Vayeshev
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I listen to your *shiurim* all the time, and gain so much from the very doable, practical advice you give. Sometimes I smile to myself when I hear you describing things that I was sure only me and my husband deal with, and feel so relieved that we're normal.

What I wanted to ask about is the result of what happened to a relative of mine who got divorced, not for any particular problem but simply because her husband decided he was no longer attracted to her. I'm very close to this relative and after seeing what happened to her, I started to worry that the same could happen to me.

There wasn't any special reason for me to feel that way. My husband and I have had our ups and downs and he hasn't always treated me so well, also because I used to have terrible mood swings that he didn't know how to deal with, and so he sees me as "damaged goods" and himself as a *tzaddik* for putting up with me and investing so much to set me straight. But I just wanted to hear from him that what happened to my relative could never happen to us, and I forced myself to be vulnerable and ask him straight out, after telling him what had led up to my question.

He heard me out, and then looked me in the eye and said, "The ball's in your court." Then he just walked off as if the conversation wasn't a big deal at all, while I was almost in tears.

I was left feeling that I have to "behave" and be a good wife, "or else." It feels like an unbearably heavy burden. My husband does help quite a lot with the children and wherever is needed, but I feel like he just threw the entire responsibility for the emotional side of our marriage onto me. Is that fair or even reasonable? Does this mean that I can't ever express any negative feelings and always have to present a happy face regardless of what's going on? Should I have never raised this issue with my husband in the first place?

Thank you so much — your *shiurim* give me the motivation and strength to keep going.

A ANSWER

You mention feeling "normal" about the problems we all deal with. Chazal say: "*Tzaras rabbim chetzi nechamah*" — there's comfort in knowing that a trouble is shared by many. It's not so much that we're happy that other people suffer too; rather, it's the reassurance that there's nothing wrong with us personally, that what we're dealing with is normal. The more normal a struggle, the more you can assume that there are solutions.

All couples deal with difficulties, and most deal with the same sorts of problems, even though they may feel so painful and complex that it's hard to imagine that they're not at all unique. Obviously I don't know any of the details of what happened with your relative and her husband, but such

situations, where one spouse "loses the feeling of attraction" to the other are not so uncommon either, unfortunately.

I can understand that witnessing her marriage break up was very distressing for you. However, even though to you it seemed inexplicable (why did her husband initially feel attracted to her and later not?), there was certainly a lot more to it than this superficial explanation. It wasn't something that happened *to* them — it was something that they participated in.

Feeling attracted to one's spouse is very important — I don't mean to negate that. Before becoming engaged, it should be one of the main considerations. It's terrible to hear divorced people saying things like, "I didn't really want to marry him/her in the first place, but I felt I had no choice."

Once a couple is married, however, attraction becomes something a lot deeper than the initial instinctual feeling that they had for one another. The attraction that builds over the years is based much more on emotions than on appearance. Even the way we perceive a person's physical attributes is highly colored by the emotions we have for them.

If your relative and her husband reached the point where they were no longer attracted to one another, chances are that it wasn't some bolt out of the blue that happened one day. It was likely the culmination of weeks and months and maybe years of not treating each other properly, of not knowing how to communicate with respect, and so much more. Therefore, there's no reason why you should fear that the same thing will happen to you— a broken marriage is not like a sudden illness that couldn't have been predicted.

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You ask whether you should have raised this issue with your husband, and my feeling is that divorce is a topic that should never be raised unless it is meant in absolute earnestness, and in circumstances that clearly warrant it being mentioned. Marriage is not an unconditional bond, and therefore divorce is not a theoretical concept, but something that sometimes unfortunately might happen. But until that point is reached, and hopefully it never will be, it shouldn't ever be talked about.

There are also other topics that are better not discussed between husband and wife, despite the school of thought that says that spouses should be totally transparent and open with one another.

Even if you think something could be achieved by a discussion, you have to weigh that achievement against the distress and possible argument that will result, and it's usually simply not worth it. If, for instance, you know that your husband always gets upset when you mention a certain issue in your family of origin, it's better to avoid talking about it. The same applies to topics that aren't even relevant, where "discussion" just turns into a theoretical argument in which the difference of opinion is taken personally and leaves behind nothing but hard feelings.

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So, your husband has placed the ball firmly in your court, and that can feel like a huge responsibility. But perhaps it can also be seen as a huge privilege. It's your choice how you look at it.

You can see your husband as someone who is looking to wriggle out of responsibility, or you can look at him as someone so deeply affected by the way you behave that he feels overwhelmed and powerless to change the dynamics of your relationship. Maybe he's wrong, yet he simply seems to be looking at you as the stronger spouse in the marriage, and the power you have is very real.

Most people would acknowledge that they could do things that would absolutely ruin their marriage; likewise, they should acknowledge that they can do things that will absolutely improve their marriage. This emphatically does not mean that you are exclusively to blame if things are difficult or go wrong. Each spouse remains responsible for his own actions and responses to the other's behavior. You are under no obligation to make your husband happy or indeed to make him feel anything at all. A codependent relationship is a very unhealthy one, for everyone involved. It also never works, because it's impossible to *make* someone feel something. You can only do your best, and *daven* for *siyatta diShmaya*.

You've described some difficult (but not unusual) issues you and your husband are dealing with, and

it may feel unfair that he is relying on you to resolve them. Reframing this aspect of your relationship can help a lot if again, you see yourself as the spouse with the power to improve things. Perhaps your husband doesn't feel capable of addressing the issues. Perhaps he isn't sufficiently aware of what the issues really are. If you *do* have that awareness, then you're the one who should be using it for the good.

While many therapists believe in "couples therapy," my approach is always to help the spouse who wants to do the work. There's so much that one spouse can do even without the active participation of the other. Waiting for one's husband or wife to get on board is often just wasting time. (And that's without taking into account all the failed attempts "in session" to determine who's right and wrong, with a third party being paid to watch and interfere, with very little success. The therapy room may initially feel like a safe zone where everything can be freely expressed, but nobody can guarantee that the hurt feelings will be left behind in the room when the session ends.) Your spouse may never see things the same way as you do, and that's actually okay. You don't have to agree on everything in order to get along.

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In your specific case, your husband appears to be very sensitive to your moods and emotions. The way to address this (as with any issue) is to avoid challenging him directly and instead to make him feel calm around you and confident that you see him in a positive light.



This doesn't mean that you can never complain. What it does mean is that you have to know how to raise issues and discuss them calmly and with respect. Acknowledging that you might very well be part of any problem that exists in your relationship (as is almost always the case) is a good place to start, as it greatly reduces the likelihood that your husband will respond defensively. Then, you can go on to ask him to make a certain change, adding that you'll appreciate it so much if he can.

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What about, you ask, the times when you're feeling upset and want to express negative feelings? There are ways to express distress, frustration, anger etc. without harming your relationship. Mostly this will mean first reassuring your husband that your difficult feelings are not necessarily due to him but because of something outside your relationship, and that you aren't asking him to do anything other than listen with sympathy and some understanding.

Of course you can give full vent to your emotions and pay no heed to how this will impact your marriage, but as you've already seen, this is usually a very bad idea and just isn't worth it in the long run (and probably not in the short run either, once the "good" feeling of venting wears off).

It's often challenging to be calm, when you feel anything but, to admit your own part in an issue when you feel overwhelmed by the other person's behavior. It takes awareness and effort to achieve this, but it can be done, and the rewards are immense.

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
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Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org