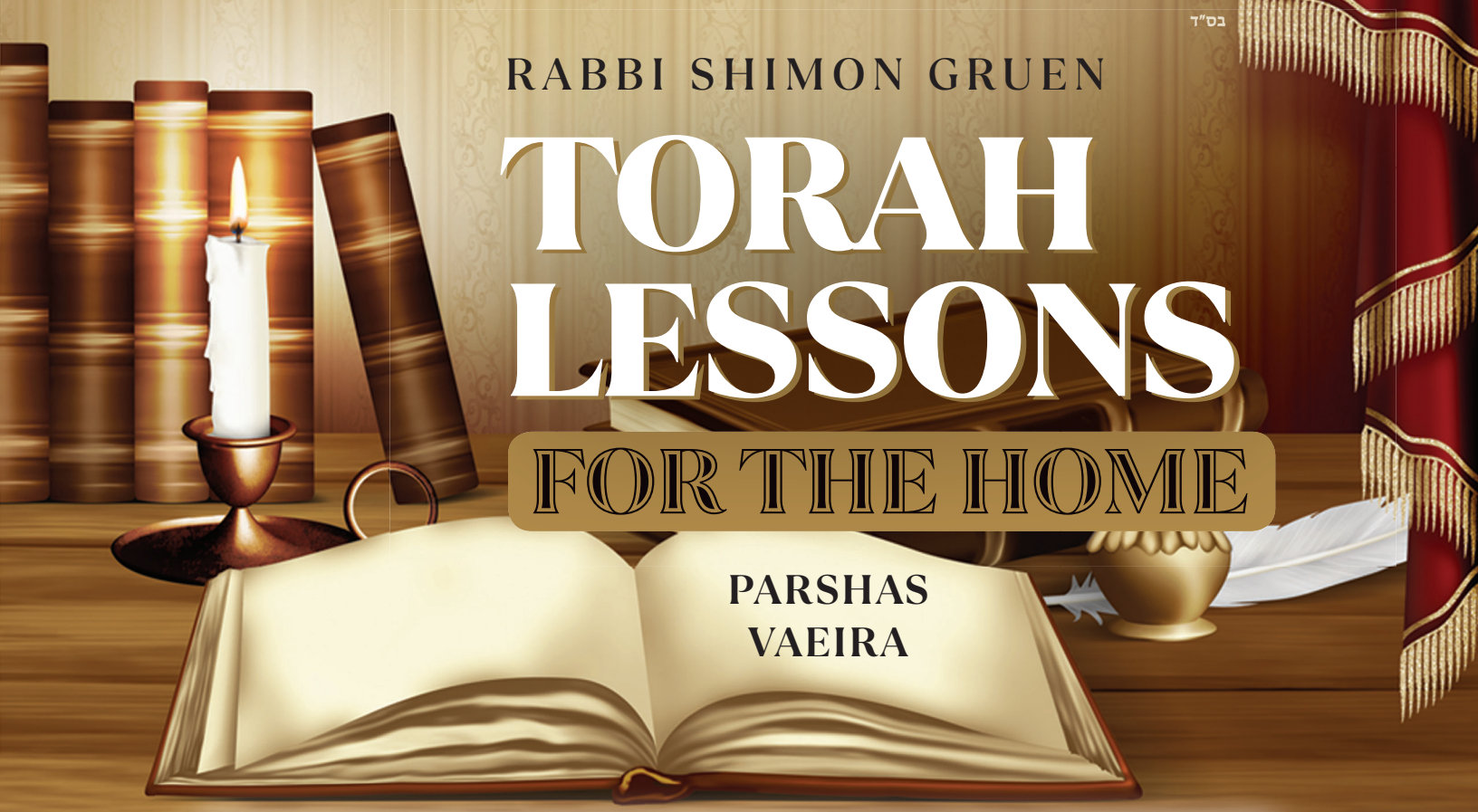
RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAEIRA



A RELATIONSHIP WITHOUT ATTRACTION

The Torah uses four different expressions of *geulah* for *Yetzias Mitzrayim*: *vehotzeisi, vehitzalti, vego'alti, velokachti*. The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh explains that each term refers to a different level of *geulah*. First, Hashem freed us from the yoke of hard labor — as soon as the *Makkos* began, the Yidden didn't have to work anymore. However, there was still a certain level of enslavement because the Yidden still felt intimidated by the Mitzriyim, and so, of their own accord, they continued to engage in some light labor. To address that, Hashem sent a separate *geulah, "Vehitzalti eschem me'avodasam."*

In our own lives, there are times when we find ourselves in difficult situations and don't realize that some of the difficulty is self-imposed. Just like in Mitzrayim, we need Hashem to take us out.

People should happily and readily do what they can for their spouses and children. Sometimes we decide to do things because we feel obligated, or because we're concerned that the other person will be upset if we don't, or simply because it makes us feel good about ourselves. That's all fine — the problem starts if we get upset at what we perceive as a lack of appreciation or complain that it's "unfair" — and even use it against the other person. "You know how late I stayed up last night to do this for you?" Sometimes all the other person is thinking is: "You didn't have to."

It's beautiful to have other people in mind and do favors for them, and if you can, do it with a smile. If something is too hard for you, or you're feeling like a martyr, you should discuss it and make sure it's the right thing to do. But if you take something upon yourself or accept a certain responsibility, don't blame others if it's hard.

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QUESTION

HELLO RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you so much for your clear and straightforward answers to all questions.

You mentioned once that when someone can't make conversation with their spouse, they should make an effort to be interested in what the spouse is interested in. I find that when I try doing that, I just become even more fed up. I could try to do all the right things but it doesn't bring any good feelings from either side.

There are times that two people just don't click. They can't make conversation past the pleasantries, whether it's a matter of personality difference or just because that's how Hashem created them.

My question is, what happens once we're married? Can we work things out and build a relationship despite the fact that there is no attraction and we can't even make conversation? Should we just accept the fact that we'll be like business partners and do our jobs to the best of our ability?

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I'm happy that the two choices you bring up for your marriage are either trying harder or accepting. Sometimes people mistakenly believe that if there's no attraction, there's no relationship and the only option is to get out. The Torah *does* give a way out of a marriage when necessary but people definitely tend to see a lack of attraction or "clicking" as a bigger problem than it is, assuming that it's unsolvable and that the only option is to end the marriage. Your two choices are much better.

Let's start by appreciating that the two of you are not fighting and putting each other down. People can take that for granted. Chazal say that "*Tzaros rabbim chatzi nechama*," which means that even just hearing that others have it as bad as you is comforting to know. In fact, many couples are in far worse situations than what you describe, to the point that they don't want to be anywhere near each other. Some couples scream and fight. It can help for you to appreciate that that's not what you're dealing with. The fact that your difficulty is not making good conversation can be a reason to be grateful to Hashem. Sometimes you have to comfort yourself with the fact that things could have been worse.

A certain man I know was married for a while before he had children. Once, he was walking down the street with his wife and passed another man who had gotten married in his forties and divorced shortly thereafter. The divorced man called over the husband and whispered in his ear, "Just know, some people don't even have what you have." It was a reminder to be thankful for what you do have *even* when important things are clearly missing.

If you're in a relationship that's not antagonistic, challenging, or depressing, that's something to be thankful for and it's also something you can build on.

A story I once read conveyed this important message. It described how a woman went to a restaurant for a Chanukah party with her husband and two children. As they were sitting there, she started thinking about the size of her family and wishing she had more children. There was another large party taking place in the restaurant at the same time. She looked over and saw what appeared to be an older couple celebrating with a large family, and she found herself feeling jealous, especially when she compared them to her own extended family which was too dysfunctional to provide her with any level of support.

She decided to go over to the elderly woman and compliment her on her beautiful family. But as she approached, the elderly lady stood up and pulled her aside. She told the young woman that she had noticed

her looking over at their party with envy in her eyes, and that she wanted to tell her the story behind the party. The elderly lady had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness and according to her doctors, she shouldn't have been alive for this Chanukah. By a miracle, she was still holding on, but as things stood, she had no chance of making it to the next Chanukah. But that wasn't all. The people with her weren't even her relatives. She and her husband had never had children, and her husband had decided to make this party for her to cheer her up and had invited all the doctors and nurses who cared for her to celebrate with them, as they had no extended family to celebrate with.

"I wanted to tell you the truth. You have nothing to be jealous of. I don't have children, and I don't have much time left."

The two women hugged and cried, and each went back to their own tables. The young woman felt so humbled. She was grateful for her family, her health, and the future she had to look forward to. Her perspective changed completely.

Sometimes, it's important to realize that things can be so much worse and that we should be grateful for what we have. This is true even when there are difficulties. Recognizing what we have in a relationship makes us aware that we have what to build on. It gives us a renewed impetus to go back to the spouse we don't feel so attracted to and try to make it work.

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You didn't mention how long you and your husband have been married, so before I go any further, I would just like to note that sometimes, a couple during *shanah rishonah* can be worried that they don't feel attracted to one another. They forget that it takes time to develop a genuine connection. But even after 15 or 20 years of marriage things can still change. Just as younger couples look forward to becoming closer as they build a family, older couples can look forward to becoming closer over things that come up later.

But on a practical note, I truly believe that a relationship can be built despite a lack of attraction. Even people who don't share opinions, tastes, or ideas, and aren't attracted to each other, can build a strong relationship. There are things you can do to change your perspective, and they start with focusing on what you *are* getting from your spouse. What you're not getting may seem to outweigh that, but even so, think about what your spouse *does* do for you. Which aspects of your life are easier because you're married to this person? There are so many things we don't even realize we can be grateful for.

A man who thought he had a pretty empty marriage was once hospitalized. Although his siblings and friends came to visit quite often, it was only then that he realized how much his wife was really there for him, always, not just when he was in the hospital. He suddenly realized how much *only his wife* could do for him at all times.

We sometimes take those things for granted. But if a person is ready to focus on how much they get from someone, even if there isn't so much attraction, the appreciation will gradually create a feeling that builds up.

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I once wrote an essay titled The Unity Project, based on the idea that when two people are involved in the same mission — no matter what that mission may be — this can unify them. Working together with the same end goal in mind can bring people closer, even if their face-to-face conversation doesn't flow.

Couples are often focused on building a home, investing in their children, and raising a family. It may sometimes feel awkward when they're just sitting together in the backyard, but their investment in the main priority in life — their children — can help them bond and grow closer.

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Another idea I would like to suggest, even though it's very difficult and maybe even unrealistic as a long-term goal, is that you can try doing "*chessed shel emes*," kindness for which you don't expect anything back, with your spouse. Being a giver is fulfilling, as we know from our relationships with our young children. There's not much you can get from a baby, not even *nachas*. But we give because we *want* to give.

When it's a question of a spouse, not an infant, it's harder. But it's still possible. "It's my husband and I *want* to prepare this for him. I want to become a better person." "I want to do this for my wife and I'll feel better when I give, even if I don't feel much attraction."

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I recently spoke to a secular marriage counselor about a couple he was working with. I was surprised to hear him comment that this couple had so little spirituality (the term he used) in their lives that he didn't see how they could make their marriage work.

It was eye-opening, but really quite fundamental. If there's no higher purpose in a couple's life, other than the fairy-tale relationship many people wish for, they can end up becoming quite stuck. This can happen even if you're *very* attracted to your spouse and both of you are enjoying the relationship. Without a higher purpose, a couple can

live together happily for several years but eventually, they may just get bored of their relationship. They can feel like they're spinning their wheels.

A Yid will never feel satisfied with his life if he doesn't feel that he's living for a higher purpose. That's how we were created. Just "enjoying life" will make you feel empty after a while.

When there's *shalom bayis* and you're building a family and a home for *hashra'as haShechinah*, it's easier to focus on the right priorities and your life becomes much more meaningful, even if you're not focusing on that higher purpose all the time. You can gain a sense of accomplishment without thinking how much you're enjoying it, because you're heading somewhere and it's worth the effort it takes to get there.

I would also like to mention an idea I've heard from someone I'd wish to be allowed to call a *yedid*, Rabbi Manis Friedman, who discusses the distraction that our intimate lives can pose, which can detract from the emotional connection that people would be able to experience otherwise. It's a deep concept. People don't realize that as much as they may get pleasure from their intimate lives, much of the enjoyment can distract us from the emotional connection and unity that Hashem desires for us. That's why many of the *halachos* that apply are there to reduce the distractions and allow a husband and wife to build that emotional connection.

Maybe when there's less attraction, there's less distraction and more dedication to a higher purpose.

Of course, that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to enhance your relationship. But if you truly can't, maybe you can just stay more focused on the other important things in your life.

And for those whose relationship is smoother, when you hit those inevitable bumps, you can also think about these ideas. Work on important issues without the distraction of attraction.

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Regardless of how you feel in the relationship, one thing to remember is to always be respectful of your spouse, especially a wife to her husband. This is independent of everything else. Whether you are attracted to him or not, a husband doesn't have to earn this basic respect. Even when you're feeling down about the relationship, don't fall into the trap of being disrespectful. (Of course, a husband should also be respectful of his wife.) Over time, being respectful can also help build a closer relationship, when you're focused on building a *bayis ne'eman beYisrael*.

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One more point. *Chein* is a spiritual quality. We can sometimes see this more clearly with real estate. What makes the price of a house rise or fall? It's not the physical aspects that set the price. When Hashem decides, people start to want something and the price goes up. Some things appear to be tied to commodity values, but most things fluctuate according to the *chein* Hashem attaches to them. We ask Hashem *"Venimtza chein ... be'einei Elokim ve'adam."* We ask Hashem that people should like us. The fact that we are attracted to some people and not to others comes from Hashem. It doesn't depend on the physical details.

If you find yourself in a relationship lacking *chein*, daven to Hashem for it. Ask Hashem that you find favor in your spouse's eyes and that they should find favor in yours.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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