RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS DEVARIM

LOOKS ARE NOT "EVERYTHING"

In Chumash Devarim, Moshe reviews with Klal Yisrael everything that happened to them in the Midbar. When describing what seemed like difficult times, Moshe Rabbeinu tells them, *"Lo uchal levadi se'eis eschem* — I couldn't carry you on my own." The Meshech Chochmah explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was talking about the future, not complaining about the past, and compares it to a person who has a large family with many children. Naturally, this comes with many difficulties and responsibilities and is far from easy. When people comment on how busy he is, the man replies, "I hope you'll also be so busy one day." This was part of what Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to tell future leaders — that when they feel overwhelmed, they should remember that it's good to feel that way; it's a good "busyness."

Raising children is good busyness. Not all difficulties are "*tzaar*" *gidul banim*; some are simply *gidul banim*. Life without a family can seem quite peaceful, but it's not necessarily a happy life. Family life is blessed busyness.

This is what we call *gezunte daagos* — good worries. Everyone gets stressed sometimes and issues come up all the time, as life is unpredictable. After a person dies, there are no more surprises, but that's not what life is about. Of course we want all our stressors to resolve themselves easily. But we also want to be alive, and dealing with these *gezunte daagos* is part of it.

Whenever you feel overwhelmed, it's good to remember how sadly there are others who are waiting for a *yeshuah* to bring more action into their lives. Normal difficulties are a sign of blessedness. Crumbs in every bedroom before Pesach means that there are children to spread those crumbs. The people in our lives aren't plastic *mentchies*. They're real people and real people come with real challenges. As stressful as these can be, people are not problems.

Every relationship is comprised of two people who are trying to get along with each other. Even in the most straightforward, uncomplicated scenarios, a relationship involves two people from different backgrounds and with different upbringings, mindsets, IQs. Relationships require a certain amount of tolerance and flexibility. As long as the differences are within normal bounds, the relationship can be good and healthy. Tolerating difficulties and challenges in a spouse or a child is part of blessed life and to be expected when dealing with real people. Issues still need to be dealt with and not swept under the rug with the excuse that "it's normal," but it's important to remember that many daily stressors *are* blessedly normal. Like Moshe Rabbeinu, we can hope that our children will learn to deal with this same type of blessed and normal stress.

I once heard that years ago, old women had an expression they used whenever they encountered an issue that may have been stressful but wasn't unusual: *"Abi nisht oisterlish* — At least it's nothing out of the ordinary." Of course, we shouldn't use this response to trivialize an issue someone presents to us, but it's an important concept to remember. When something is within bounds, be grateful that it's not out of the ordinary, not *oisterlish*.

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לזכות ר' חיים צבי בן אלטא פרומט לרפו"ש

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT AND SAY TEHILIM FOR HIS REFUAH SHLEIMA

QUESTION #1

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you for your *shiurim*. They help us a lot.

Is it ever okay to make a deal with a spouse or does everything have to work with mutual understanding?

My wife is very sensitive. Over the years, she has gained a lot of weight and I'm not happy with how she looks. Hashem didn't make her very pretty. I feel that she could put in more effort to look better. I would love it if she would work out and exercise a little. It bothers me even more because there are other women in the family who do look pretty. I understand that this really isn't something I can demand from her, but maybe I could at least ask it of her. (I try not to look at the other women and I know that having my wife look better is not the answer for my *shemiras einayim*. Still, I do want to come home to a good-looking wife.)

On the other hand, she wants me to spend more time learning, but that's very hard for me. It would mean a lot to her if I would get tested on my learning.

I thought of making a deal with her. If she'll invest more effort into exercising and looking better, then I'll invest more time in my learning. Would making such a deal be normal and healthy? Could I make such a request without a deal? Or maybe I should just keep quiet and not say anything at all? Whichever approach I take, I don't want to hurt her sensitive feelings, but it bothers me a lot.

Also, maybe you can address in general how a husband should feel when his wife isn't pretty. Because of the way we do *shidduchim*, it bothers me that the wife I got looks this way.

QUESTION #2

HI RABBI GRUEN,

I appreciate any help you can provide.

My wife complained recently that sometimes she doesn't feel good about getting dressed up and putting on makeup. She feels that she's not being valued for who she is; rather, she's being treated like an object.

She gets dressed up on Shabbos and when we go out, and tries to look good even when we are home. Although it makes me happy and is important to me, there is a part of her that objects that she "has to" do this because if she doesn't, she's "not doing her job" and I will resent her for it.

How would you recommend I bring this up and address it with my wife so that we can transform this from an area of conflict to something that builds our marriage?

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

This is a sensitive topic and an important one to discuss. The way to approach it will depend on many variables, and the specific communication will have to be adapted on a case-by-case basis, depending not only on the details of the situation but also and more importantly on who the husband and wife are.

The idea of a woman being beautiful for her husband is not a secular idea. However, the idea of a wife being valued exclusively for her beauty is a very secular idea, and not a new one at all. Chazal note that as far back as the times of the Chumash, many men had two wives. One wife was for procreation; the other was made infertile so that her beauty would not be compromised by having children. In this vein, the Gemara in Maseches Kesubos 59b quotes Rav Chiya as saying, *"Ein ishah ela l'yofi,"* and also, *"Ein ishah ela l'banim,"* and the Maharam Shiff explains that

both aspects are important and no husband should think that it is acceptable to forgo children in favor of beauty.

In Maseches Taanis it is stated that beautiful girls would say that a wife should be chosen for her beauty while girls with noble lineage would say that a wife should be chosen for her lineage. The girls who were not good-looking would say that a wife should be taken *l'shem shamayim* and should be provided with clothing and jewels to enhance her appearance. *Halachah* is clear that a man may not marry a woman until he has looked at her, as being married to a woman whose looks disgust him will lead to him sinning with *ve'ahavta lerei'acha kamocha*.

There are many things to learn from these teachings of the Gemara, but their simple meaning still holds true — a husband should ideally see his wife as beautiful and Chazal see this as a serious consideration, not something that is a concession to the *yetzer hara* and so forth.

There are people who can relate to the idea of *"Sheker hachen vehevel hayofi* — Charm is false and beauty is insignificant." They are taken by inner beauty, *middos* and *yiras Shamayim*. All the same, virtually everyone relates to the simple meaning of the Gemara.

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It's also important to remember that beauty is a relative term; as the saying goes, "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." Even cold and hot which can be measured by degrees can be perceived differently by different people. A child who is adorable to one person can look quite interesting to another.

It says in Shir Hashirim, *"Ki koleich arev umareich naveh* — Because your voice is sweet and your appearance is beautiful." The Gemara cites Rav Chisda as teaching from this that if a woman has a masculine voice, it is considered a defect, because a woman should have a sweet-sounding voice. If a man marries a woman on the condition that she has no defects and then finds out that she has a heavy, masculine voice, it's not considered a *kiddushin*.

If so, the Torah Temimah asks, why doesn't the Gemara learn the same lesson regarding a woman's appearance? What if a man marries someone on condition that she has no defects and then discovers something about her appearance that he considers ugly? He replies that appearance is different, because each person has his own concept of beauty, and that Chazal are teaching us that even if something doesn't seem so beautiful to us at first, it's possible to *find* beauty in it. It seems that one can learn to appreciate someone even if they're not initially so attracted to them. Perhaps you can see their inner beauty. Maybe you can learn to appreciate someone's essence enough to outweigh your disappointment at their physical appearance.

Some physical issues are more objective, such as cleanliness and tidiness. These are also relatively easy to rectify. But it's also possible to change one's perception on a broader level. Maybe someone has a lovely smile and a gentle, unassuming character, and you can learn to focus on these things more. There are many more possible examples.

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To any woman reading this, it's important to appreciate that given all the temptation in the world today, it's all the more important for a husband to come home to a wife that looks good. His struggles may not be her responsibility and certainly he's not allowed to look at other women just because his wife isn't so pretty. But more than the fact that your husband deserves a good-looking wife, it's important that you should want to look good for him. All the more so if it's important to him.

A husband shouldn't demand that his wife look good. To explain this, we often say that parents and educators should provide a child with unconditional love. A child shouldn't have to demand it. By the time a child is asking for it, something is already wrong. Similarly, if a husband has to ask his wife to dress nicely for him, there's already a problem. This should be something a woman wants to provide for her husband without him having to ask it of her.

It is understood that there's a different standard of "looking good" at home and when going out. But it's important for women to keep in mind how important it is that they look beautiful for their husbands specifically at home. Your husband should be the person you want to impress the most.

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What about husbands? Are they expected to make peace with what they have, and "find the beauty therein," or are they allowed to expect someone to seek to find favor in their eyes?

Firstly, make sure your expectations are reasonable and proper, and that you're not asking for anything that isn't *tzniusdig* or that makes her feel uncomfortable.

Remember that dieting and restricting one's eating is a struggle. If your wife is not doing well in this area, it doesn't necessarily mean that she doesn't care about your feelings on the matter. She may care very much, even if you can't see it. Don't add salt to her wounds, especially if there's not much she can do about it. If you're unsure about what's reasonable to expect, it can be helpful to ask a third party.

Secondly, the way you communicate your feelings makes a big difference. Especially when it comes to something as sensitive as looks, make sure you don't come across as demanding or controlling. Try to sound

encouraging, and if you see that she's made an effort in any area, express your appreciation even if the result isn't exactly what you wanted. This is also more likely to inspire her to keep trying. You'd be surprised how saying something gentle like "you look good either way" makes it easier for her to please you and comply with a preference of yours.

But no less important than any of these ideas and tips is the need to take an honest look at your relationship in general. Does your wife feel loved and accepted, or rejected? Do you feel that she doesn't care about your feelings? Being honest and open and also willing to address her real concerns can make a big difference. While she should perhaps be making the effort regardless, it's much easier for her to do so if she feels loved. Often, a person believes they're dealing with a certain specific issue (such as this case, the issue of pleasing a husband), but many times the real issue is much bigger and the relationship at large needs to be addressed — at which point the smaller things will sometimes fall into place almost on their own.

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Regarding the question of the deal, learning in return for weight loss: In general, making deals with a spouse is not good for a relationship. Relationships are a two-way street but it's not tit-for-tat. There should be giving as well as receiving, but without conditions.

That doesn't mean that there aren't sometimes "extras" in a relationship, things that you don't *have* to do but are willing to try, in exchange for your spouse also extending herself. But you shouldn't be making deals on issues that should be taken care of regardless of what the other spouse is doing, nor should you be offering an unequal deal, where one spouse will have to extend themselves far more than the other but feels manipulated into agreeing. The right way to make a deal is when both parties discuss the options together and come up with something that both are happy with.

Just to share some of the different perspectives there are, I'll mention that I presented the questioner's proposed deal to two people and asked what they thought. One responded, "He's going to learn so that she'll lose weight? He has to learn for Hashem, not for his wife — but he wants her to lose weight for *him*."

The other person replied, "A wife is obligated to do her best to look good for her husband, whereas his learning is between him and Hashem. That's not a fair deal."

The truth is that even if a deal would be "fair and equitable," it's still not going to be the best solution in a marital relationship, even if both sides comply. And if one or both don't — what then?

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I would like to conclude by noting that although the issue of appearances is perhaps more common in relation to wives, it can apply to husbands too. The main thing to bear in mind is how you communicate. One should always take care not to be hurtful, and showing sensitivity will make it more likely that your words and concerns will be taken seriously.

I also want to point out that while this is an important issue and should be addressed, it generally will fall into the category of "*Abi nisht oisterlish*." This is not to trivialize how disturbing it can be when a spouse doesn't look good. But remember, there's more to the picture, there's more to life, there's more to your accomplishments and successes than having good looks. You should always be able to appreciate each other and live together for a higher purpose, and find favor in each other's eyes too, as we say: *Venimtza chein be'eiynei Elokim ve'adam*!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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