Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Pikudei |

Don't Skimp on the Positive Feedback

You're Brilliant, Betzalel

The Torah tells us that Betzalel construced the *Mishkan* with the exact instructions that Hashem gave to Moshe. How did he know what those instructions were? Says Rashi, that the *passuk* doesn't tell us that Moshe related those commands to him. Rather, when Moshe commanded Betzalel to start his work with assembling the *keilim*, not the actual *Mishkan*, he asked why he shouldn't first start building the structure for the *keilim*, in accordance to the regular construction process. Why, he asked, don't we first build the *Mishkan* and then the *keilim*? Moshe's reply offers us a profound lesson in relationships. He said to Betzalel: Wow! You're right! *B'tzeil Keil hayisa*, you must have been in the shadow of Hashem. That was the instruction that He originally gave me. And that was what Betzalel ended up doing—first the Mishkan, and then the *keilim*.

Moshe could have simply told Betzalel that he was right in his assessment of the construction process. His question was actually quite simple. All Betzalel said was that first building the structure and then assembling the *keilim* was the *minhag ha'olam*, the typical construction process. Still, Moshe chose to compliment Betzalel profusely: you're holy, you're brilliant, you're in the Presence of Hashem.

When I learned this Rashi, I thought, "How often do we have an opportunity to make another person feel good, but we choose instead not to make a big deal about it." When someone makes a comment or does a good deed—that's an opportunity for us to say, "Wow! I see your wisdom. I'm awed by your clarity. I'm impressed with your depth. I see how connected you are to the important things in life." Even when we do give someone a good word, we don't always realize what an opportunity to we have to make them feel good. The way we say it, the words we use, the generosity of our heart when we dole them out—all of this can make such a difference to them.

Obviously, when comments are overdone they may leave the other person feeling silly, but when we do it right, we have constant opportunities to make another person feel good.

Seize the Opportunity

Often, the difference between having a warm, loving relationship and having a technical marriage lies in this aspect: the person's realization of how much of an impact a few words, a few gestures, can make. If a person would seize the opportunity, his relationships would improve instantly.

When your spouse helps you for example, even if the help wasn't all that grand, it won't hurt you to say, "Wow, I would never manage without you. You just know how to do things right." On the contrary, your

words are priceless, giving them the good feeling they need.

So why don't we do this on a consistent basis? There are times when we don't realize how much the other person needs it. At other times, we don't recognize in the power of our words, that yes, those few extra comments we say do mean so much to the other person. We don't realize what an impact we could have. Others say that they can't do this because they don't feel they're being honest in doing so. As we've already discussed in the past, the crystal-clear integrity that we sometimes become too defendant of on the expense of our marriage is not all that wonderful. The Torah tells us clearly that the importance of shalom trumps the importance of *emes*, but this is not the topic of our current conversation.

Too often, an individual will tell me that he has a hard time giving his wife a good word because he feels she's much more powerful or better than him. Expressing how much she means to him, he fears, will only highlight how inferior he is. To such an individual I say that this is all about his perception. The way he feels about himself may not necessarily be the way his wife sees him, and, even if she does, the compliment or good word will only highlight the position he's in to give her something she can't give herself. No matter how powerful she appears to be, it's his good words that she needs more than anything else.

At other times, the individual's ego gets in the way of being generous with positive feedback. What, I'm going to compliment her on the food she cooks? Do these things even make a difference to me? What, I'll tell her that I was able to learn better because of the food she prepared? She'll only look down at me, noticing that I pay attention to such petty stuff. Another reason people avoid giving a good word is because they tell themselves, "What he/she did wasn't *that* great. I don't want him/her to think that I'm happy with this semi-good deed." This, of course, is faulty reasoning at its best. Noticing the good and emphasizing it will only encourage its continuity and improvement.

In summary, the reasons that prevent us from giving that good word are all petty, self-centered and indicative of our lack of desire to build a strong relationship.

Like Water on a Rock

Here's a word to the individual who has tried showering their spouse with good words and hasn't seen results. The spouse either didn't react or, in worse cases, scoffed at your gesture. It's important to remember that we don't always see the short-term results of our positive intentions, and not always will our spouse express his appreciation and gratitude, but every good word reaches a good place. Know that you're doing the right thing to foster a deeper relationship. Keep doing it consistently and you will *iy"H* eventually see how your words had an incredible impact on your spouse. I've seen time and again, even in couples where the *shalom bayis* was in shards, that small gestures of goodwill even from one party made a tremendous impact on the relationship. "I noticed you did this for me. I appreciate it." "You're so talented." If you see your spouse has a hard time handling direct compliments, do it indirectly, but do it. "I would never be able to do such a thing," or talk about the deed, and not the person.

In one couple that I worked with, the relationship between them had reached a freezing point. When the husband first started with small, positive comments, his wife rejected it, saying, "Don't start with your bribery. I don't buy it." But just a short while later, the atmosphere in the home experienced a drastic rise in temperature. Like water on a rock, the love in the words gradually reaches the heart.

When you notice that your wife put together a beautiful *mishloach manos* for someone, you could say, "That was nice." At the same time, though, you could say, "I'm amazed with you. When Purim comes around you have so much on your plate, but you still made time to do this. Wow. I'm impressed." Both of these are compliments, but see how one makes such a profound impact, how good it makes your wife feel.

Saying "Thanks," is very nice, but it doesn't express any deep appreciation. Every time your spouse does something for you, you have an opportunity to deepen your relationship by giving a more effective good word. "It means so much to me that you take out the garbage

every evening. It makes me feel that you're concerned about the house and about me." Give it in large quantities. Don't skimp.

Be Generous on the General

When it comes to noticing a negative behavior in our spouse, we're tempted to say, "You always do it like this. Why can't you ever ask me…" In that case, we're easy on the generalizations as if the person never did a good thing in their life. This is obviously very hurtful. Yes, I forgot to do it today, but that doesn't mean I don't do it all the other times. It hurts when you tell me I never get it right.

If there's one place to go easy on generalizations, it's with the positive. When your spouse does something positive, why not say, "You always know how to save me from sticky situations. You always have me in mind. Your help always saves me." When Moshe Rabeinu complimented Betzalel, he didn't specify that Betzalel exhibited wisdom in this particular circumstance. No, *b'tzeil Keil hayisa*, you're such a wise, holy person, now and always.

"You're so *ehrlich*, you have such *yiras shamayim*." Just because this is the first time you noticed this good deed doesn't mean you can't be generous with the compliment. On the contrary, you'll see how your words will become a prophecy, one that your spouse will be motivated to fulfill.

Give Them the Credit

Even when you and your spouse work together on something, don't be afraid to give them the credit. Contrary to what our fear drives us to believe, this won't turn them into an arrogant being. Rather, the good feeling they will derive from your words will motivate them further to do their part, with joy.

In the famous Talmudic passage in Nedarim, we read about Rochel, the daughter of Kalba Savua, who encouraged her shepherd husband Akiva to learn Torah. When he returned after spending 12 years in yeshiva away from home, he heard her tell a neighbor that she would encourage him to go back for another 12 years.

Finally, when Rabbi Akiva returned home after 24 years, the masses came out to greet the *Gadol Hador*. When Rochel tried squeezing her way through the crowds, Rabbi Akiva told them, "Let her. Everything that's mine and yours is hers."

From a certain perspective, Rabbi Akiva was right. If not for Rochel, he may have never learned Torah in the first place. He may have not gone to yeshiva, nor returned for another 12 years. However, the expression he uses implies that everything, every effort he and all of his talmidim invested, is solely her credit. That's quite a general expression that apparently plays down the intensive part that Rabbi Akiva and his disciples played in their growth. He could have said, "Let her pass. She has such a big part in this. She was *moser nefesh* for this." But no, Rabbi Akiva chose to give it all to her. He wasn't afraid to give her all the credit. What an expression of true *shalom bayis*! How amazing Rochel must have felt to hear those words.

To what extent should you keep expressing appreciation to your spouse? Keep doing it until they won't be able to say—or even feel, "You don't appreciate me enough." As long as they're saying it, that's a sign that they need more. If you're so afraid to do it, know that it'll come back to you. After someone receives a glowing compliment, they don't take advantage of it. They don't cash in on the wisdom you ascribed to them, offering unsolicited opinions. On the contrary, it's the good feeling that they cherish, which makes them want to reciprocate in a positive way.

Parenting: Go Easy on the Positive Attention

Parents have an incredible amount of opportunities to shower their children with positive attention. We don't seize them either because we don't realize how much it would mean to our child or because "he doesn't deserve it." If he just started preparing negal vasser or waking up on time, I should already compliment him on it? Yes, right now. Not only will you compliment on this particular deed, but you'll generalize it too. "I'm impressed with your *cheishek*. I already saw a few times this week how you take it so seriously." "I noticed a few times how much you love to give."

Compliment your child to the extent that you're convincing him of his good essence. Take

something that appears small and let it grow. "I saw how you were looking into the *siddur* this morning at *Shacharis*. You have such *yiras shamayim*." Even when the child doesn't yet understand what *yiras shamayim* means, tell him, "I noticed how much you don't want to speak lashon hara. You're a *yarei shamayim*. This is what *yiras shamayim* means, that you want to serve Hashem." Don't lose the opportunity to build your child.

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-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: I used to have a positive relationship with my child. Over time, however, he started becoming *chutzpadig* to the extent that we went through periods of rough discord, which eventually led to a cold distance between us. At this point, this married child barely speaks to me. How can I work on our relationship so we can go back to the way things once were?

Answer: Every single parent-child relationship is unique. In each, the dynamics are different, even changing over time. Thus, it's difficult to provide general guidance to a case that must be dealt with on an individual basis.

However, there are some general aspects that are relevant to all parent-child relationships. When we look at the times when our relationships with our children are strong, we usually notice that at that time we were showering the child with positive attention, as we discussed above.

While positive attention is crucial, the child must also absorb the message that although his parent is showering him with good, respect is a necessary component in the relationship. If the child doesn't get that, he may start relating to the parent as a friend, conducting himself with chutzpah, etc. A parent who doesn't take a firm yet loving stance against this risks turning the untoward behavior into a habit. This may very well be a subconscious decision on the child's part. He sees that the parent isn't reacting to his criticism or hurtful comments, and so he keeps going. He feels that he has the upper hand in the relationship and utilizes his position in a negative way. Then, when the parent gives up and starts showing a cold shoulder, the child may feel empowered enough to distance himself too, leading to a cold distance between them—something that's painful to the parent.

I understand you for wanting to go back to the days when your relationship was warm and loving. Every healthy parent wants to feel that with their child. However, it's not enough to just shower the child with positive attention. What happens when the child doesn't do as he should? Can you express it in a constructive way? Can you let your child know that it bothers you? That's how a relationship grows. Both keeping the hurt in and fighting back aren't constructive in building the connection.

Your child might feel uncomfortable when you communicate such feelings the first few times, but with your positive attention he will realize that this is all coming from your love.

You might be thinking that it's the child's responsibility to initiate peace amongst you, but whether this is true or not is irrelevant. You want to be happy more than you want to be right. This is true for children of every age. If you want to have a relationship with your child, trace back to the times when it was good to see what you did then. Start doing those things again, but this time, with an awareness of your boundaries—of what you will and what you won't allow.

Show your child that you want a relationship with him, but also express the importance of boundaries, of his *derech eretz* to you. If this seems contradictory to you, you may benefit from the help of someone who can assist you in achieving this healthy balance.

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