RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS VAYETZEI

STAY ABOVE THE MUD

Parshas Vayetzei brings up the image of Yaakov Avinu going to sleep with rocks around his head. The Yisa Brachah of Modzits asks why Yaakov only protected his head; what about protecting the rest of his body?

He relates a story about a young man who had been supported by his father-in-law but now needed to find a source of parnassah for himself. The man first went to Harav Yechezkel of Kuzmir for guidance. Rav Yechezkel advised him by relating a parable.

If a bird gets stuck in mud, how can he help himself out? He can use the strength of his body to free himself.

What if his body is stuck? Then he can flap his wings to get out.

If his wings are also muddied? He should use his mouth to call for help.

But if his mouth is in the mud? Once his head is stuck in the mud, the bird is really in trouble.

Rav Yechezkel explained to the man that one can serve Hashem while seeking parnassah as long as he makes sure his head never gets stuck in the mud. If your head stays clear and pure, you always have hope.

The Yisa Bracha comments, that's why the Torah tells us that Yaakov Avinu protected his head. The head is the most important part of a person. And it's important to be able to keep a clear head.

This concept is so important to remember in our day to day interactions. People get offended or quarrel with others because of their emotions. It doesn't make 'sense' to fight with a spouse. But sometimes emotions overtake their intellect and affect their thinking.

A person's reactions are unfortunately often his emotional responses to what was said or done to him, even if it's not the best way to react. When someone gets hurt and emotionally overtaken it easily becomes a reason to fight.

It's not easy, but if only we can try to keep our heads above the mud and understand when we're not in control of our emotions, we can deal with situations more effectively.

Question:

The following question is short, painful and sensitive. It was sent by a questioner I know, and I am familiar with the situation, but I will try to address it in a way that even people who are BH not in such circumstances can benefit.

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

You know my story. It's been very tough. My question is, when does a person know that he tried his best to make a marriage work and it's just not bashert. At what point is it time to go to the Rav and dissolve the marriage?

Answer:

You find yourself in a very painful situation. I hope most people can't relate to the question, but for those who can and those who can't, hopefully the answer will be beneficial.

The first thing I want to point out is that, like everything else, we have to address this from a Torah perspective. While the Torah promotes the idea of everyone being and staying married, as in "it's not good for a man to be alone" (Bereishis 2:18), "Better two than one" (Kiddushin 7a). Yet, the Torah certainly discusses the concept of divorce, it's one of the Taryag Mitzvos.

According to the Torah, being very different from each other is not necessarily grounds for divorce. The secular focus on "chemistry," "attraction," and "compatibility" are not *emphasized* in the Torah. It would be great if every marriage was always blissful, but it's important to remember that it doesn't say anywhere in the *seforim* that it always has to be enjoyable.

I want to briefly mention two more Torah concepts, although they probably require lengthier treatment. Firstly, there is (almost) no mention of a woman divorcing her husband – which says a lot about this issue. Secondly, it doesn't say that if a man has difficulty with his wife, he *must* divorce her. In fact, we find that many great men chose to stick it out in difficult situations for whatever reasons they felt was right for them.

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I'd like to point out another important idea. Whose advice can one rely on when faced with a decision as momentous as divorce? I've often had people tell me that other professionals advised them to divorce and yet I felt I would be able to help them. If so, why would *I* tell a couple to divorce?

Maybe when I feel that it's a lost case, someone else would still be able to save that marriage. It really is a bit difficult to decide at what point there *truly* is nothing to do any more, and the fact that one person feels so - a person personally and subjectively involved - may not be defining of the actual reality.

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What *should* a couple do when their marriage is very stressful, very challenging and full of resentment? They're struggling and unhappy and want to know if they can make it work.

We can ask, "Is it possible to cool off the entire New York City with air conditioning?" It may be possible but it's not practical. It's possible to set up air conditioning units on every street but the cost would be prohibitive. Technically, they probably could make it work. For the right price and with the right effort, it's possible to make any marriage work. Sometimes it's more practical, sometimes less.

Sometimes, you can write down on paper what a couple can do to make their marriage work. The question is if they're capable or if it's realistic to implement it. But it's important to remember that almost every situation can be dealt with. That's why, I don't remember ever advising people to divorce, because I personally felt that there was something for the couple to try. Of course, the person still has to decide if *they* will do it. It may be very difficult and stressful to do what can be done.

In each situation, it's important to evaluate the problem against the solution. Is the difficulty worthwhile because the marriage is dear to you? Do you want to salvage the marriage for yourself, your children, or for the potential you see in it? Then you want to deal with the problem to save the marriage. If the marriage is not meaningful to a person, the problem will be too difficult for him to deal with. Consider: If this problem can be removed, do you still want the marriage? It may still take a lot of work, but if you want it, it can be done.

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I once gave a class about "lopsided relationships" wherein one partner contributes much more than the other. Some relationships are equal where for each bit you invest, you get an equal amount of return. But some relationships are simply lopsided. One partner may have to make ten investments before they will slowly start seeing returns. There may end up being returns on all the investments, but not in an equal, tit-for tat format.

In some marriages, one spouse feels like they've already invested so much but they're still not seeing anything. It's important to realize that some people need to get *a lot* before they can start giving back. There may be things that you can do now that will eventually give you what you need. It's not easy and it's not even, but it's very often worth it. You may just save your marriage and salvage all that could have been lost, avoiding the heartache and difficulty that are an inevitable part of divorce.

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There are situations where you'll be told that there's nothing you can do or that staying together can be worse than divorce. But often when you're ready to invest the energy and you find the right person to help you with that, it can be doable.

It's important to get practical and professional advice. An objective outsider may see your situation very differently and may help you realize that it's time to allow yourself to be guided. But please, if you're invested in saving your marriage, find someone who wants that as much as you do. I once heard a therapist say, "I'm not going to tell you to divorce but I can't help you as long as you're in this marriage." If you're looking for someone to validate your wanting to get out, you'll find plenty of them, but if you want to save your marriage, that approach can't work.

Another important point: if you're working with a professional but you don't feel helped, you're feeling more resentful or things aren't moving, it's fine to move on to someone else. (*Not* because you didn't like what they said but

because it's not working.) If someone tells you there's nothing to do, you may want to go for a second opinion. Moreover, it's always important to make sure that any advice you get is in sync with *daas Torah*. Sometimes *daas Torah* will advise you, because of the particular situation, to stay in a marriage even if it's difficult.

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But maybe before considering divorce, consider the question, "Are you married yet?" Often, the relationship was never set up the right way and it can be helpful to go to someone who can help you get into it right. Perhaps both spouses can relearn things about getting married in a healthy and Torah'dige way. Evaluate what *you* can do better – not what someone else can do better – to help the situation. Evaluate your investment and the *kochos* you can put in to make it work if you want to. But if you don't want to, it's probably not going to work.

Let's understand that when you're looking for a shidduch, you're not obligated to marry someone just because the shidduch was suggested and "you can always work things out." But once you're married, getting divorced because it's not exactly what you were looking for is not the Torah way. In most situations, it's worth investing in the marriage. In my experience, nobody regrets the time they spent working to save or make their marriage better, even if it doesn't work out in the end.

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If for whatever reason it doesn't work out in the end and people feel that divorce is the right option, there's a Torah'dige way to do it. It doesn't have to be messy or nasty. It can be done healthily and without conflict if emotions aren't allowed to take over. Usually, though, a person would need guidance for that.

But never mention divorce unless it's something you thought over well, feel might really be necessary as well as something you're truly ready for cha"v, AND spoke it over with someone. Mentioning divorce at the wrong time or too early can shake the foundation of a relationship and undermine the security of the home. If a person needs to make an ultimatum, there is a right way to do it. "I'd love to make this work, and I don't believe it's all your fault at all, but I really feel that if there's no way that XYZ can't happen or change I'm afraid I won't be able to stay here." It shouldn't sound like a blame game or a victorious move you're about to do, rather a sad and unwanted decision you feel compelled to make. Hopefully saying it right can also be helpful in avoiding it from happening.

Marriage takes work. Marriage is worth the work. Talk to those who are looking to help you and your relationship. Find out what *you* can do to help you and your relationship grow and develop. It may not be easy, but there is advice that works if you're ready to invest in your marriage.

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TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
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