RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Shemos

Strong and Solid

The Divrei Yisroel on this week's Parsha relates that during the lifetime of his grandfather Reb Yechezkele Kuzmirer zy"a, there was a man in Warsaw who was known as a very powerful person. Everyone was afraid of him because if someone ever offended him in any way, the offender ultimately suffered in some way. People said that this man was protected by Heaven and it is dangerous to start up with him.

One time, one of Rav Cheskele's followers came to him in a frenzy. He had somehow offended this individual and he feared for his life. "What could I possibly do to protect myself from the supernatural curse?" He asked his Rebbe in a panic.

Rav Cheskele grinned, and quoted a *passuk* in Parshas Shemos: Hashem says to Moshe "*Grab the snake by its tail…. And it became a staff*." Rav Cheskele explained to his *chassid* that if he thinks of this man as a mere snake's tail, he will lose his powers and he won't be able to strike him with "his stick", so to speak.

Sometimes we are in a relationship where we feel intimidated or scared, but it is possible that it's all in our own mind. As soon as we let go of the fear, and realize that we are stronger than we think, we see that the other person doesn't even have all that much power. It was all a mirage.

On Rosh Hashana we say, *Sheniyeh l'rosh v'lo lizanav*. We don't want to be the tail. We want to be the head. When we don't have backbone and are afraid to voice our concerns, we inadvertently hand the powers over to the other person, turning ourselves into a tail.

We see it often in employer/employee relationships, as well. Why is it that a boss can be really mean and take advantage of one employee, while he treats the other one just fine? This usually happens when that first employee allows himself to be stepped on and subconsciously submits himself to the mistreatment.

Of course, this does not indicate that you should disrespect others or fight back. It merely means that you should not be afraid to say what you have to say and do what you need to do. As long as you know how to be assertive in a respectful manner, you should not be afraid to voice your opinions and feelings. After all, if you don't tell others how you feel, you can't hold it against them for not knowing.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I'm struggling with the following question. Does it make sense that my wife should need an exceptionally strong minded husband? I don't think of myself as particularly meek, but I'm definitely not the alpha male aggressive type. Lately I feel like my wife just doesn't respect me and I'm wondering if she sees me as a weakling and would like for me to act more strongly?

I would appreciate any feedback you can offer on this issue.

Answer:

The first thing we need to do is determine what your unique definition for these words are. Strong and weak have very subjective connotations. Everyone sees something else as a marker of strength or weakness.

To set the record straight, let's clarify what strength is NOT.

Some men are in a relationship in which their wife "wears the pants". She is the one who calls the shots, makes the decisions, and carries the burden. Naturally, this can make a man *feel* rather weak. And so, in order to *feel* strong, he decides to take over! Only he will be in control from now on! His will be the only opinion that matters, he will get to order everyone around, and he will not care how others think or feel. In doing so, he believes he has arrived at the peak of power.

Actually though, this isn't strength at all. A person who is looking to overtake others and get his way is often a person who is very insecure. When someone is happy and comfortable in his own skin, he can easily leave space for others and he won't have this urgent need to control everyone and everything around him.

We see this often with young kids. When someone touches their belongings or something doesn't go their way, they will have a complete meltdown and sometimes even physically attack the "offender". To an adult watching,

does that demonstrate power? Of course not! It's a clear indication of a child feeling powerless and insecure. Unfortunately however, adults behave this way too sometimes.

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Another way people think they exude power, is when they take the opposite track. They care about nothing and couldn't be bothered about anything. If their wife asks for their opinion, they say, "Do whatever you want, I don't care". They're so haughty that they don't even deign to give credence to the opinions or actions of the people surrounding them. This doesn't only come across as weak, it is also very disrespectful. His wife might feel like she isn't important to her husband at all, or alternately, she might view this as immaturity. She might feel like she married this little boy for whom she needs to make decisions. It's very hard to look up to such a person.

Some people alternate between doing both of these things as they try to steady their footing, swinging from one form of weakness to the other. They are not sure of themselves and so they don't carry their own weight. However, none of these approaches are very likely to garner respect from a spouse.

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What *does* strength mean?

Strength is when a person is clear and confident with himself, able to voice his opinion, address his feelings and make decisions without rethinking them a hundred and one times. What's more, he has no need to use control tactics to get his way – that would only revert him back to being a weakling. When his opinion is challenged, or even dismissed, he doesn't get fazed. When necessary he will stand up for himself, compromise, or even give in to the other person. He respects others and their point of view, while remaining strong with his own. Not only is that a display of strength and confidence, it's actually that which garners respect and admiration too, making him even "stronger".

Strength is also knowing how to assert yourself when unhappy with something or unable to accommodate someone's needs. Of course, expressing that in a pleasant and respectful manner. The balance between not imposing on someone else, and not being imposed on, is a balance that stems from confidence and inner strength, usually expressed by people who are comfortable in their own skin and secure with themselves.

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Now, even if you're feeling very confident, you need to remember to be consistent and respectful. You don't always have to agree with your wife, but you shouldn't always disagree, either. You don't always have to say yes. Instead, you can say, "I really want to help you with this, but now is not a good time. I'll do it for you later." (And then make sure to follow through!)

At the outset, this might be a little uncomfortable for your spouse. She might be caught off guard when she sees you stand your ground. But eventually, she will come to respect it.

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Sometimes, a wife isn't so concerned with her husband's weakness vis-a-vis her. She feels like her husband should stand up more to *others*. But if the husband doesn't feel like he should stand up to whoever his wife wants him to, and then he does because he fears

his wife's reaction, he ends up being weak by buckling to his wife's demands.

An example where this might come up is when a husband feels like he needs to be at a *simcha* and his wife disagrees. In order to prevent him from participating, she might ask him the universal guilt inducing question: "Is your uncle/cousin/boss more important than me?" Many husbands don't know what to answer. But really, the answer is quite simple. "I am not going because they are more important than you. I'm going because *I* feel like I belong there." Most of the time she will understand that her husband is at least as important as she is, and his feelings matter, too. The important thing is that whatever he ends up doing, he should do so with full confidence. Sometimes two people can do the same action and one does it strongly while the other does it weakly.

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As an aside, it is not the wife's place to make her husband stand up to anyone. If she really feels that her husband is being taken advantage of, she can gently make him aware of it, but she shouldn't control or manipulate his reaction to it. Without realizing it, she might just be changing the dynamics of who he is afraid of and who he is controlled by without accomplishing much. She might not even realize that her actions and behaviors can give away that her intentions weren't to help him be strong, rather she couldn't handle whom he submits his authority to.

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Just to be clear, strength and weakness is not just an issue for men, I am simply addressing this questioner who is a man. Even though women are generally more flexible, most husbands don't appreciate a wimpy wife. When you have backbone and are confident of yourself and your approach to life, your spouse will much rather respect you.

We see this in the Torah as well. The Torah tells us that when someone asks you for forgiveness you shouldn't be evil and forgive him. But we're not told that we're supposed to run after them and offer up our forgiveness!

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In conclusion, to demonstrate strength, you need to be comfortable with yourself and your actions. Speak up when something bothers you. Don't be afraid to stand up for what you believe in, obviously in a healthy, respectful way with a proper balance. Don't give others powers over you. And don't impose your power on others. That shows that you're truly strong and comfortable with yourself.

Wishing you all the best,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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