

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

NICE ON THE INSIDE; NICE ON THE OUTSIDE

Following the disastrous plague caused by the actions of the Midianites, an army of Klal Yisrael was formed to wage war and take revenge. Rashi notes that the grammatical structure of the words in the *passuk* reveals that no one actually wanted to go to war — and so they were forced into it. Rashi also quotes the Midrash which explains that Bnei Yisrael knew that once revenge was taken, Moshe Rabbeinu would pass away. As they didn't want to lose their leader, they were reluctant to do anything that would bring his death closer.

The Midrash notes how different this behavior was from what had transpired just a short while earlier, when the Jews had been loudly and vociferously complaining to Moshe, to the extent that he was worried he would be stoned. How could their feelings have changed so completely in such a short span of time?

The Shelah Hakadosh explains that sometimes, complaints against a leader are due to bad character traits which cause people to complain and be ungrateful. At other times, however, they result from people feeling so close to the leader that they are comfortable enough to openly express their feelings, without holding back as one normally would with a revered authority figure. Since the Torah tells us that the Jews were distraught at the idea that Moshe Rabbeinu was about to pass away, we know that their complaints were due to a sense of closeness — Moshe was almost like a father to them.

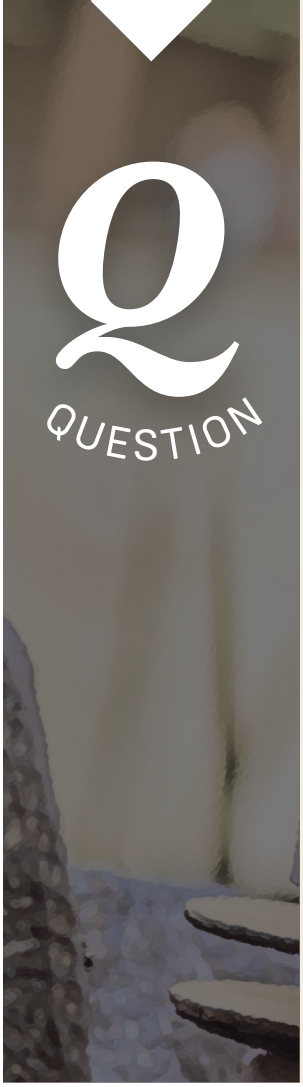
In our own lives, we tend to be far more openly critical of those close to us. This is generally not because we dislike them, but because we feel more comfortable to express our feelings. Within measure, this can be a good sign, as long as we express ourselves with respect. However, feeling overly comfortable with others can lead us to behave in ways that are frankly unacceptable, simply because we can get away with it.

It's also important to be aware of the flipside of this observation. When people close to us are too critical for our liking, we can give them the benefit of the doubt and remember that their feelings may be coming across too strongly only because they feel so close and comfortable with us.

הגליון נתנדב ע"י
משפחת כהן
לע"נ אביהם
ישראל דוב בער
ב"ר יצחק ע"ה

נלב"ע כ"ז תמוז תש"ס
תנצב"ה

Parshas
Matos-Masei
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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for everything. Your *shiurim* are like a beacon of light in a dark world. Very few educators, speakers etc. in today's world are educating with the right *Torah'dig hashkafah*. You are a true inspiration. The way you validate everyone and answer with such patience — it's amazing.

I have an interesting question. What does working on one's *middos* mean? How does one work on their bad habits and instincts?

I grew up in a family where speaking nicely, respecting others, behaving decently etc. were all things that you needed to show on the street, because you have to be normal. At home, however, you can say what you like and how you like it. Family members are not among those people you have to consider important. For example, my parents were allowed to yell, but constantly yelled at us children to stop yelling, etc., all in the name of "*chinuch*."

I never knew that other homes operate differently, until, a few years ago, I made a new friend and a whole new world opened up for me. In her home, everyone and everything was calm and peaceful. Children were allowed to feel what they felt and to express it. Everyone got validation and acceptance. It was so good to be there! And that's when I realized that a calm and peaceful home can be a reality.

Baruch Hashem I got married to a wonderful husband. We have a very loving, respectful, and honest relationship. But of course all the bad influences and habits from my childhood came along with me, and I find myself losing my patience and behaving pretty intolerably a lot of the time.

I am currently in therapy to work on all the crippled relationships and bad feelings that developed over the years due to a lack of understanding between me and my parents. But I think that it's also the bad *middos* and the instinct to talk annoyingly and impatiently that need to be worked on, but I have no idea how.

Please let me know your insights,

Thank you very much.



A ANSWER

Thank you for the compliments on my classes. I appreciate the good words, and I'm happy you found something that encourages you to move forward on your chosen path, a very commendable one.

You do indeed have an interesting question, one which touches upon different stages in your life's experiences. You grew up in one type of family which, as a child, you thought was normal; you later found out that other families can be quite different; and today you are married to a wonderful husband and trying to do things better and finding it a struggle.

What you endured was part of your life-plan, custom-made by Hashem for you. Without those formative experiences and the awareness you gained from your friend's home, you wouldn't be the person you are today. None of us gets a choice on the family we are born into; the only thing we can control is the way we respond to what we've gone through. Certainly some people have greater challenges to surmount, along with which come greater capabilities.

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I don't know any more about your life than what's contained in your letter, but I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that virtually everyone in the world can relate to your experiences, at least somewhat. I don't mean to downplay what

you experienced as a child in your parents' home. I can't comment on whether your parents were truly so much more "hypocritical" than the norm in the contrast between their behavior for the outside world and how they behaved at home. However, I would like to stress that this contrast is something we find in virtually all families, at least on some level. It's not right, but it is definitely normal to "be on one's best behavior" when people are watching, and to "take things easier" at home.

I recall a certain case where a young boy's mother had a baby, and the children at home needed to be sent to relatives for a few days. Coincidentally, the boy's *rebbi* was his uncle, so what could be more natural than for him to spend that time with him, and also accompany him to school and back each day? But the *rebbi* refused. He explained that having his nephew see him in his home environment, relaxing at the end of a day with a newspaper on the couch, would damage the esteem in which he held him.

Hypocritical, or just human nature? The answer usually lies in the degree to which the two modes of behavior contrast.

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Especially when it comes to one's parents, it's very hard for people to assess things objectively with any degree of accuracy. As we gain awareness of our own faults and deficiencies, it's so tempting to blame our parents for them and so easy to (even unconsciously) blow things out of proportion in order to transfer the guilt to others. After all, all parents "could" do better. Does this mean that all the failings in their children are the parents' fault?

The first answer to this is that we all have our own *bechirah*, and should never blame anyone for our choices. Furthermore, adopting the attitude of (for example) "I learned to lose my temper from my father, so it's not my fault" is not only wrong; it's also extremely unproductive.

You are entitled to have compassion for yourself due to whatever you went through, but don't adopt the identity of a victim. Victims are passive; they by definition can't do anything about their predicament, which becomes like a handicap, a disability that simply cannot be overcome "because of what I've been through." Instead of seeing your past as a handicap, see it as an exciting challenge. Even more, see it as a challenge that you're now doubly equipped to take up, because of your newfound awareness and also because of the wonderful husband you have at your side.

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Another problem with adopting a victim mindset is that over time, everyone else in your life is blamed for the wrong choices you make. If it's you who deserves to be pitied when you "lose it" with your husband or your children, then it's their fault for triggering you. It's sad to see this play out in people's lives, with the abusive patterns being passed down to generation after generation, and no one ever saying "sorry" or trying to change anything — because, after all, it's not their fault...

Even when "victims" do realize that they are abusing others due to the way they were once abused, it's quite rare for them to stop in their tracks, admit what they're doing wrong, and apologize. Apologizing is hard. There are ways of making it easier, such as by writing a letter instead of saying the words, but it really does have to happen. And when it does, it creates a powerful incentive to truly change one's ways, an incentive that doesn't appear, as long as we stuff the awareness of what we're doing wrong under the carpet.

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I'm afraid that until now, I've addressed this question as if you were lacking awareness and honesty, which actually isn't the case at all, for the most part. In fact, it's commendable and amazing that you are not only aware that you need to make changes, but are openly admitting it and looking for practical solutions. Unfortunately, this approach has rather gone out of style in recent decades, especially since therapy came into fashion along with a virtual celebration of victimhood. So I hope that what I have said till here might be helpful for others who would do well to learn from you.

The other reason why trying to fix our *middos* is not in fashion is simply that it's very hard to do. As much as we work on ourselves, and as much as change is possible, it's not our natural instinctive characteristics that we are changing. In fact, I wrote a whole *sefer* on this topic, *Mimtzukoseihem Yoshieim*, in order to stress precisely this: We can't change our inherent *middos*; all we can do is break them, and slowly get accustomed to doing this more frequently and with greater ease as time goes on. My *sefer* offers *chizuk* and clarity on this topic, and one of the things you should do is find a *sefer* or book that speaks to you.

The next thing you should do is recognize that this is going to be the project of a lifetime. No, not because you are uniquely challenged due to your past and your family of origin, but because as soon as one challenge is surmounted, another one appears. That's by design, and therefore, we don't always allow ourselves the satisfaction of noticing that we overcame a certain challenge — because from our new vantage point, new mountain peaks are now visible. But failing to notice is a huge mistake. In fact, just setting

out on the climb is a huge success in itself. So many people don't set out at all; they just stop in their tracks as soon as they realize how huge the challenge is, and don't even attempt to overcome it.

This is one reason why the Torah tells us, "If someone says that they exerted themselves and didn't succeed, you shouldn't believe them." Why? Because the exertion itself **is** the success.

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As we start climbing the mountain, we start figuring out which kinds of equipment are going to be helpful on the climb, and which kinds are just useless baggage to be tossed aside. It's okay to make mistakes, as long as they're not always the same ones... Ensuring that they're not always the same ones means becoming aware of what we're doing, looking out for patterns, and resolving to do things differently next time.

For instance, if you start to notice that you always get tense and irritable on Friday afternoon a few hours before Shabbos, you could start your Shabbos preparations earlier, or nicely ask your husband for more help, and so forth. Noticing and doing nothing other than feeling sorry for yourself because, "I learned from my parents that when things overwhelm you, you start yelling," isn't going to help anyone.

This doesn't mean blaming yourself for your responses. All you are doing is noticing and taking action. Very often, especially with busy wives and mothers, this means being aware of when lack of normal meals or nutrition, or sleep, affect moods and make it so much harder to stay calm.

This also doesn't mean setting yourself impossible goals such as, "From now on, I'm going to stay calm on Fridays and not yell at anyone." Instead, set yourself a small, manageable goal such as, "During the last hour before Shabbos, I won't raise my voice, even if the house is flying. Instead, I'll quietly ask my husband and/or children to tidy up, and will do my best to get things ready in time."



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Clearly this is going to be very hard at times, especially when we confront all the areas where we were convinced that, "Unless I start yelling, nothing gets done and the house is a mess." It might take time for children to figure out that "even though Mom isn't yelling, she means business and we have to get our act together." The house might stay messy for longer; things might not get done at all... but in virtually all cases, disaster won't strike.

It's also hard because we often feel dishonest as we start changing our behavior when inside, we're still seething. This isn't the kind of hypocritical behavior that so bothered you as a child, however. It's a very practical and productive way of addressing emotions — indirectly, by changing how we act which in turn, gradually, alters the way we feel.

When we speak calmly, our thoughts tend to gradually calm down. When we speak quietly, our emotions gradually subside. We're consciously rejecting the old ways of yelling and screaming in favor of new ways which still feel alien but which will become more natural over time, *be'ezras Hashem*.

And, with each new success, with each time we refuse to "let off steam" and yell or criticize, we definitely should give ourselves well-deserved praise and celebrate each step which, though it might seem inconsequential, takes so much exertion.

Ask Hashem for help, to accept the past as the setting of the scene for your unique challenges in life; embrace the present as an exciting opportunity to recreate yourself at every moment; and look with joyful anticipation at the future where you get closer and closer to the person you were created to become.

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

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