Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Pinchas |

See Positivity

The Past is Multiplicitous

Our parsha begins: "Pinchas son-of Elazar, son-of Aharon Hakohen placated my fury". Rashi tells us that Aharon is mentioned here for a reason "The people were critical of Pinchas, saying: 'This man whose maternal grandfather served idols murdered a prince in Israel!' so the verse points out that his *paternal* grandfather was Aharon".

Rashi is a bit difficult to understand. How does Pinchas's other grandfather change anything? The people were saying that Pinchas's personality was tainted because he had the genes of an idol worshipper. Does the presence of other genes remove this stain on his personality?

I think Rashi is trying to teach us a lesson here. Don't associate someone with their negative past. The past is very broad; a lot of things happened in the past. Rather than bringing up the negative, let's focus on the positive.

The Past as Ammunition

Why would you want to focus on the negative? If you're married to a woman for ten years, you've certainly been on the receiving end of many thousands of kindnesses. So there's some negativity as well, why focus on that?

People often bring up the negative past as ammunition, there's a certain security in knowing that "I have leverage over you; you're at a disadvantage in this relationship". Often this feeling remains even after one has "forgiven" his spouse. Yet he cannot let go of the negative feelings because he feels *empowered* by them. "I'm right" he thinks, "She wronged me"!

The Past is Empowering

It's sad when people misinterpret their spouses. To keep harping on one negative aspect of someone's personality is an error, one that will hurt both of you. If you keep harping on the bad, it leaves you feeling like you're married to a horrible person, and it further leads your

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spouse to believe that she's a horrible person!

However, if you keep mentioning the positive aspects of your spouse, you're actually encouraging and focusing on the good. Thank your spouse again and again! Are you losing anything by thanking her for something she did a month ago? No. You're a winner! As a matter of fact, both of you stand to gain from such a relationship.

Gratitude

Devorah* felt that her husband didn't compliment her enough. After listening to one of my talks on this subject, she began thanking her husband profusely on the rare occasion when he did compliment her. Sure enough, his compliments began flowing much more easily. He felt good complimenting her, and she felt good being on the receiving end.

Now imagine if she would have labeled her husband a thankless narcissist who is incapable of complimenting someone else. What would that have done to their relationship?

By the way, a sure sign of someone with a big ego, is someone who labels others that way. Chazal tell us כל הפוסל במומו פוסל and the Baal Shem Tov famously said that if you ever see a problem in someone else's personality, you're suffering from the same issue at some level. So if you can only see negativity, something is probably wrong inside of you as well.

Is This All?

This lesson was also taught by Kalev in Parshas Shelach. While the people were swept up in complaining against Moshe, Kalev silenced them by saying "Is that all Ben-Amram did for us?" The people were quiet, thinking Kalev would provide them with more ammunition against Moshe, but instead Kalev began enumerating all the positive things Moshe had done for them.

When people are in a negative mindset it is so important to put things in perspective. Yes, you have a complaint against your wife, but is that all she has done for you? This one mistake, is it the be-all and end-all of your relationship?

Even if you would like to complain about something to your spouse, make sure he knows that you don't feel that he is defined by this one issue. First thank him for everything. Then you can share with him how much you would appreciate it if he would make slight improvements in a certain area. That slight change in your behavior can be a huge game changer for your marriage

Just Let Go

Moshe* was horrified when he discovered evidence that Leah* had lent her brother $100,000 from their joint bank account. He kept saying that she would never be able to regain his trust. While his angst is understandable, we need some perspective here. By the time Moshe found out, all the money had been returned already - for five years! Looking at the facts objectively proved that while Leah was certainly wrong to extend such a loan without permission, it was only because of Moshe's tightfistedness and inability to trust her, that she felt compelled to act behind his back.

But Moshe did not let go. "She will *never* be able to regain my trust" etc. It dragged on and on. It was so silly. Why make it hard for someone to regain your trust? Who said that they will even want to continue pursuing the relationship? Get off your high horse and let go!

How Are You Viewing It?

When Pinchas was being condemned for murder, he had actually been doing something good. He stepped in to stop the plague that was killing the people, and he was praised by Hashem for what he did. But because people were negatively prejudiced towards his family background, they saw him as a wild murderer. If only they would have chosen to look at the other side of his family they would have realized his true *tzidkus.*

We need to look towards the positive, but more than that, we need to erase the negative past. Forgive and forget. The medrash in last week's parsha tells us that after Bilam's donkey spoke and embarrassed him, it died. Hashem did not want the donkey to walk around and be a continual source of shame. Bilam was put to shame by his

donkey, and he deserved it. But once the objective was achieved, it's time to move on. No need for the donkey to continue walking around and be an embarrassment to Bilam.

Your Attitude

There is actually nothing inherently wrong with complaining about something your spouse is doing which you don't like. But it's your focus, it's the way you say it. Requesting an improvement does not have to come along with "You always" or "You never". You can simply ask for it.

Let's learn from Hashem who erased the embarrassing past, even for Bilam Harasha. Hashem is *Chanun hamarbeh lislo'ach*, and we should endeavor to do the same.

And by the way, you can forgive yourself as well. It's important not to let your mistakes define you. The Mesillas Yesharim says that when making a *cheshbon hanefesh* one should always be careful to review his good deeds and his good characteristics. Harping only on the negative will be detrimental for you and will not provide you with an accurate self image.

Chinuch: Encourage the Good

In parenting; a child should always be associated with his good qualities. If you're constantly putting your child down, you're causing him to identify with his mistakes. It is so damaging to a child to be identified with the negative aspects of his personality, and it leaves him with a negative self image that will take years to erase.

Children are constantly growing, why should we focus on a mistake they may have made? An adult may have a "mistake" ingrained in his psyche. As a result he may have developed a wrong attitude on life. But your child is just starting out, he's still developing. Your child is really a work in progress. So there is really no reason to look at his past, let's just focus on his future and be positive and encouraging.

-Q&A-

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

Question:

My son had a very difficult homework assignment and he wasn't managing to get it done. I told him it's ok if he skips it, and he can tell his teacher that his mother said it was ok if he doesn't do it. When the teacher heard that he said to my son "Your mother is telling you how to do schoolwork? I'll tell you what to do at home. When you get home make sure to squirt ketchup all over the kitchen table!"

My son is a good boy and apparently he missed the sarcasm in his teacher's response, and so he obeyed. I just came into the kitchen and the table was covered in ketchup! How do I deal with this situation?

Answer: This is a bit of an unusual scenario, but I'll use it as a springboard to highlight this subject. Your children are not pawns. Don't use your child as a monkey in the middle. I see it often when parents are divorced and the child is forced to carry messages between their parents. Don't do that to the child.

In the presence of your child, always speak respectfully about other authority figures in his or her life. Don't demean their teachers or your ex-spouse. In this case, both the mother and the teacher are mature adults and they just need to find the time to have a respectful conversation with each other, and things can be ironed out. But using the child as a go between is damaging to him.

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