RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS BESHALACH

MAYBE THERE IS STILL WHAT TO DO?

There is a well-known *maamar Chazal* that relates what Hashem told the *malachim* at the time of Krias Yam Suf: *"Maasei Yadai tov'im bayam ve'atem omrim shirah*—The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you're singing?" Even though the Mitzriyim deserved their punishment, it is still painful to Hashem, so-to-speak, when His creations perish.

A *chassidishe vort* from the Imrei Chaim based on this *maamar* provides us with an important lesson. The Imrei Chaim explains that sometimes, it can appear that the Yidden aren't doing what they should — they aren't saying *shirah* to Hashem. However, that is only because they're *tov'im bayam*, drowning in difficulties. On the other hand, when it's *"ve'atem"* — whose letters are an acronym for *Torah ugedulah (b)makom echad* (meaning that things are going well *baruch Hashem*, spiritually and materialistically), that's when they can sing *shirah*. When we have what we need, we can serve Hashem properly.

A person should never use his troubles to justify his shortcomings or lapses. However, when we notice someone else going through a hard time, we should be understanding and consider the possibility that this is the reason why they're finding it so difficult to do what they're supposed to be doing. What we shouldn't do is compare their reaction to what we think our own would be, even if we've faced a similar situation ourselves and dealt with it more competently. Sometimes, just giving the other person that understanding is all they need to help them get past their challenges.

When we jump to judge, even if only in our mind and heart, it often causes hurt feelings. Unfortunately, this is more likely to occur within a relationship, because having too close a perspective can make it harder to be understanding. This is especially true, if we are dealing with or even suffering from someone else's poor choices. However, if we can be accepting and tolerating of *anyone*, the place to start trying is at home.

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RABBI & MRS. B.Z. GOLDMAN

ON THE OCCASION OF THE BIRTH OF A BABY BOY!

MAY THEY BE ZOCHE TO ENDLESS NACHAS FROM ALL THEIR CHILDREN!

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I just "discovered" you on TorahAnytime from the Keiravtuni Convention and started to listen to your regular talks on TorahAnytime, which I am enjoying very much. I think you have excellent insights into relationships. I want to ask you about the following: Other than physical abuse, are there other situations where divorce may be the answer?

My question is not coming out of nowhere. My daughter is currently in the process of obtaining a divorce from her husband, and while I'm not asking whether that's the right decision or not, I would like to hear your comments on the subject.

A little about my daughter's situation: One day, I got a text from my daughter asking me to please pick her up because her husband was kicking her out of the house. She told me that for a few days, her husband did not speak to her. At one point she told him, "We need to see a marriage therapist." He replied that she should just leave, but "out of respect," he would give her one hour to pack. She asked him if he was serious, saying that if she texted me, "it would be too late to go back." He didn't reply, so she sent me the text — and right afterward, he said, "Let me see your phone." When he saw what she'd written, he told her,"If you hadn't texted, we would still have been good." He was playing mind games.

A few months before this happened, he texted my daughter about some technical problem. My daughter texted back that she was tired of him always blaming her. He replied that she knows where the door is…

We knew nothing about his behavior, which I now know has been going on for a while. To us, he was extremely nice. In fact, I always thanked Hashem that my daughter had such a wonderful husband. My daughter said that during the first year of their marriage, she tried to fight back, but when she realized that it wasn't getting her anywhere, she decided to try to keep him as happy as possible. He seemed so considerate and kind, but my daughter later told us that whenever he was nice, he always made a big deal about it, and made sure to tell her that now she "owes" him.

After my daughter returned to our home, she began seeing a therapist who advised her not to go back to him too quickly (if she went back at all). The therapist also said that my son-in-law should go to therapy to try to learn to change his ways. Of course my son-in-law kept apologizing profusely and agreed to go to therapy. A few months passed, and my daughter met with him to discuss their situation. It was then that he told her that he had only agreed to go to therapy because it was the only way to get her back. Eventually, my daughter called him to tell him that she wouldn't be coming back, and he yelled at her: "How could you not ask my forgiveness for what you put me through these last months?" When that didn't work, he started crying and trying to sweet-talk her out of divorcing him.

I asked her why she never told us anything. She replied that she figured that some people are more happily married than others, and there were some small positive aspects that she didn't want to risk by rocking the boat. Also, in *kallah* classes, the girls are taught not to tell parents everything that goes on in a marriage.

Again, I am not asking for your confirmation that divorce is the best option here, but I would like to hear your comments on this topic.

Thank you so much.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Unfortunately, the situation you describe is sad and painful. I'm not sure whether anything I can write here will be helpful at this point, but the topic is an important one and sadly relevant to many people. There are points that I cannot elaborate on or discuss openly in a public forum, but I hope I'll be able to offer some helpful ideas - and I further hope they will not be necessary.

Many things can be learned from such situations, not only by people dealing with something similar, but also by people dealing with something far less challenging. Hearing what others go through can help put things into perspective for a spouse whose biggest issue is a husband who always comes home late — it's not quite the same as a husband locking his wife out of the house. The same applies if your husband forgot your birthday or hasn't been helping enough lately. It's not fun to deal with these things, but it's not the end of the world either. Many of us can benefit from discovering that whatever we're dealing with is far from the worst out there, and sometimes it's comforting to realize this, and focus on counting our blessings instead.

Divorce is an option that the Torah provides. It's not something that the *Chachomim* designed to deal with an unfortunate situation that developed over time. From this we can deduce that there are times when divorce is warranted. It's interesting to note that *Maseches Gittin* comes before *Maseches Kiddushin*, which illustrates the concept that we go into marriage knowing that it can be terminated if necessary. All the same, even at times when things seem past fixing, there are sometimes ways to save the marriage. And even when a situation reaches the point where divorce is the only remaining option, it's still important to study what happened and ask whether there may have been points along the way where the proper intervention could have made all the difference.

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The question above only presents one side of the story, but the behavior described does seem to be abusive and possibly indicative of what many label a personality disorder. Is anyone obligated to put up with what this woman experienced? Probably not. A spouse has every right to leave such a marriage, and maybe they should. But that doesn't mean that someone who really wants to find a solution and has the strength needed to persevere, can't sometimes succeed in doing so.

I'm not blaming anyone in such a situation for their behavior, but I do want to discuss the two different ways of responding to the situation the daughter tried — again, just so we can learn from them. The first is "fighting back," until she realized that it wasn't working. "Fighting" in general, especially with a person who has a difficult temperament, is never advisable. Low self-esteem, a difficult past, or ongoing struggles all take a toll on a relationship, and fighting will only add to such a couple's challenges. It's a common mistake to think that "putting up a fight" might help break the other person and get them to rethink their way. Perhaps you meant something else with this term, but it's important to know what doesn't work, to avoid learning the hard way.

The second way the daughter tried to deal with the situation was by "trying to keep him as happy as possible." Ironically, that's almost as big a mistake as fighting. When someone is so self-centered, trying to keep them happy only enhances this trait and encourages them to feel even more entitled and justified in their egoism.

Many people fall into these traps. When you're dealing with a difficult person, whether a spouse or a child (whom you can't divorce), fighting them won't get you anywhere. But pacifying them also makes things worse. And you will eventually reach a point where you can't make them happy anymore.

While the daughter was trying to make her husband happy, she seems also to have resigned herself to going without much happiness herself. While it's true, as she realized, that some marriages just are happier than others, that doesn't mean that anyone should take abuse. Everyone deserves to be happy and content, even in more difficult situations.

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That said, even when things have reached the point where a spouse is literally being kicked out of

the house, there may still be ways to avoid divorce. There are certain drastic actions that can be taken — which I won't discuss in a public forum, and generally should not be done without clear guidance from a competent individual — which can keep such relationships in check. Not everyone is capable of doing this, but it can be effective even with people who are abusive in many areas of their life, deterring them from introducing the abuse into the marriage. If such a person knows that their spouse will tell them firmly, "If you choose to throw me out of the house, I will do XYZ, and *you* don't want *that* to happen," then they may subdue the abusive tendencies. These can be things you should never "try at home" – unless the alternative is a certain divorce, and there's sadly not much to lose. So without going into detail; if a marriage reaches the point where there seems to be nothing left to lose, there may still be things to try. If and when those things don't work either, it might be healthier to terminate the relationship.

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Another point raised was the way girls are prepared for marriage and taught not to tell their parents everything that goes on between them and their husband. It's quite true that it's not good to share *everything*. You can share the *nachas* with them. You can even tell them which couch you bought. But anything personal and intimate should not be shared with parents.

This doesn't mean, however, that you have to deal with difficult situations on your own. In fact, if parents notice that their child is struggling, they may have to be the ones to open the conversation. But even then, parents shouldn't press to hear all the details, and children should not reveal everything. In general, parents are simply too subjective and too emotionally involved to give the correct guidance, even if they are professional counselors themselves. And while a person doesn't need to be a professional in order to get married and deal with whatever that entails, guiding someone else's marriage requires a degree of professionalism.

What, then, can parents tell their children? First, calm them down. Tell them that it's normal. Not all marriages are easy. Advise them to go talk to someone. In fact, I often tell parents to tell their children that *they themselves* went to talk to someone about their marriage and that it helped. If you can, give your children the name of someone to talk to. And tell them to come back to you for another referral if that one doesn't work out.

This can help a child feel comfortable and open without getting too involved and detailed.

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There are difficult and painful situations and there are times when things don't work out. The Torah gives us a way out, and it's actually a *mitzvah* to get divorced when the situation calls for it. However, often there are things that can be done to help avoid a situation from becoming that bad. And even in extreme situations, there are firm boundaries that can be set, and help that can be obtained, that can help situations arrive at a better place.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS
FOR THE HOME

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!