

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

EXACTLY WHAT YOU NEEDED

This week's *parshah* describes Eliezer's search for a suitable wife for Yitzchak Avinu and his journey to Aram Naharayim. When Eliezer arrived at his destination and realized that Hashem had guided him to encounter Rivkah, a relative of Avraham Avinu as he had been instructed, he thanked Hashem and said:

"*Anochi baderech nachani Hashem beis achei adoni*—Hashem led me on the road to the house of my master's relatives!"

The *Divrei Yisrael* notes Rashi's comment on the word "*baderech*": "On the designated road, the straight road, on the very road that I needed," and asks what the surprise is about—didn't Eliezer know where he was going?

He explains that when a person sets out on a journey, he may think he knows where he's headed and which path he needs to take, but it's only once he arrives that he knows for certain that he was actually meant to end up there. All kinds of things can happen along the way to disrupt a person's plans. But if you end up somewhere, that's where you were meant to be, no matter what your thoughts are on the matter.

People get married with all kinds of ideas in their head, some of them immature, unrealistic, overly ambitious, and so forth. Ironically, with a "prearranged" *shidduch*, people certainly think they know what they're getting into, as all the "investigations" are done beforehand. But plenty of surprises await the new couple, and I've received many letters over the years from people who are a few months, a few years, or even longer after the *chasunah*, upset that "it's just not what I wanted—it's not for me."

There's no question that without *emunah* and *bitachon*, a person is going to feel this way. That's why we need to trust in Hashem that whatever path we're on, it's "the very road that I needed."

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Parshas
Chayei Sarah
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QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your phone line and *shiurim* on Torah Anytime. I'm learning a lot from the information you give which includes so much wisdom.

I hope you can help me with my question.

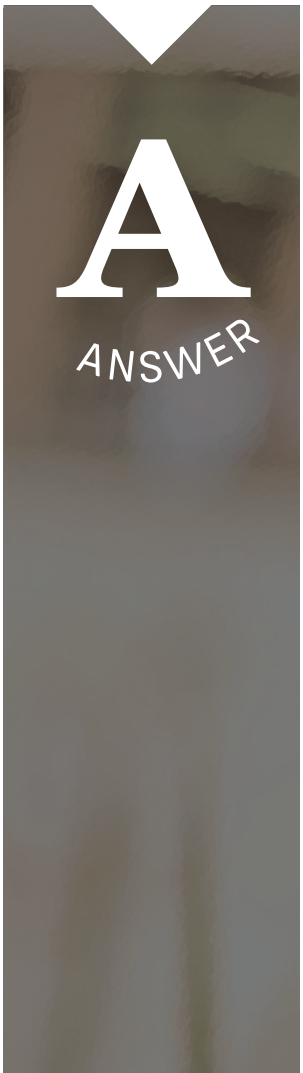
Is there something I can do so that my husband will validate me? Whenever I tell him about something that worries me or bothers me, he either dismisses it or tells me it's *"shtusim"* etc.

How can I tell him that I don't need him to agree with my beliefs or thoughts—all I need is for him to acknowledge my feelings and opinions and accept them? For example, I don't want to follow doctor's orders for a certain issue with my son. My husband claims I've been brainwashed. When I try to explain my worries, he just gets stiffer with his opinion and I get anxious that he's not going to understand what I want from him.

How can I explain to my husband that if he listens properly to what I say, echoes back my words, and perhaps offers to think about them, and then discusses a compromise with me, we will both probably end up much happier? My husband thinks that the more he dismisses my opinions, the quicker they'll go away—but the opposite is true.

Also, my husband sometimes hurts my feelings or embarrasses me. When I tell him, he usually reacts coldly, saying something like: "What do you want from me?"

Please can you give me some wise advice? Thank you.



A

ANSWER

Before I address the questioner, I'll preface my words by saying that all the men cringing, thinking that their own wife could easily have written such a letter, should know that the behavior described here is truly hurtful. It's very common for wives to feel that their husbands just don't understand them, and regardless of the suggestions I'll make for this particular wife in her situation, every husband should try his best to ensure that his wife doesn't feel this way. It's actually also quite common for husbands to say the same of their wives, or to feel that their wives don't take them seriously or value their opinions, and we should all be doing our best to avoid this.

Spouses absolutely should listen to each other, try to understand one another, and try not to hurt one another. A husband, or wife, who doesn't realize that he should try to be understanding, has a lot to learn. Listening to one's spouse with respect is one of the fundamentals of married life; it's vital if you want to learn to understand one another (and this applies in all relationships).

This is true with children too. If your young child, for instance, comes up to you during Chol Hamoed and says that he wants to take a trip to Florida, you might be tempted to ridicule him and say, "What a crazy idea!" But you'll be better off trying something else. You can hear him out, maybe ask a few questions ("What made you think of that?" "Why *davka* Florida?") and then tell him how clever he is for coming up with such a suggestion. You can even add that you'd actually love to go, if you could. It's certainly *muttar* to stretch the truth a little for *darchei shalom*. The main thing is to give him the feeling that you're willing to listen—that you see

him as worth listening to. Only then do you clarify that you don't see it as practical but you'll try to think of something else instead.

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With regard to the writer of the letter and question, the wife wants to know how she can bring out this behavior in her husband. It's interesting that she doesn't mention whether she has ever told her husband clearly what she is looking for. While husbands (and wives) certainly should know without being told that they should treat their spouses with respect, the first thing to do in any situation where one spouse isn't getting what they want is simply to ask for it.

There are many reasons why this particular husband might not have figured out that all his wife wants is some understanding and validation. As obvious as you may think it is, it's so important to both be clear in your own mind as to what you want, and then to express yourself clearly. To give a less charged example than following a doctor's advice, let's say the wife would like to leave for a *chasunah* at six o'clock. She tells her husband, "I'd like to leave at six," thinking that she's opening up a discussion about the best time to leave. Her husband, however, assumes that she's telling him, "I decided to leave at six," and that she's not interested in a discussion—and all he's left with is trying to explain why it makes no sense to do so!

The simplest way to resolve or avoid this kind of misunderstanding is to be clear. "I would really like to leave at six o'clock. How about you? Is that too early for you? Do you think it's doable by any chance?" Said like this, it no longer sounds like you've already made up your mind. If you don't make things clear, and there have been times in the past when you expressed your opinion and clearly expected your husband to go along with it, it shouldn't be a surprise when he assumes that this time, it's the same again.

Often, people say, "Why would he think I meant to be the one making the decision? Just because I said what I would like?" It's important to make sure nobody has reason to misinterpret your intentions. This reminds me of a cute anecdote I once heard. The Belzer Rav, Harav Aharon *ztz"l,* once summoned a *shochet* to see him, and when he arrived, he told him, "People are accusing you of selling *neveilos* and *treifos*."

"Oh, that's just what they think," the *shochet* said, brushing it off and assuming that the kindhearted *tzaddik* would be only too willing to accept his claim of innocence.

"Oh—wonderful! You're really not selling *neveilos* and *treifos*!" the Belzer Rav replied, and the *shochet*, relieved that he was apparently cleared of all suspicion, turned around to leave.

Just as he was about to walk out of the door, the Belzer Rav called out to him, "Just make sure that no one has any reason to think this again…"

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When the issue is a straightforward, unemotional topic, it's not hard to be clear that what you want is understanding, a discussion, and/or a compromise. Once emotions get involved, it's trickier. A wife can feel very vulnerable telling her husband, "You know, I'm really worried about what the doctor said. Please don't think I'm being silly. I just want you to understand how I feel."

This is part of the reason why it's so much easier to say, "Why can't you understand me? Why don't you care?" Saying, "I would so much like to just feel heard or understood. I would really appreciate feeling cared for," is much harder—but much more productive. Aside from being less critical, it's also less direct. Notice the missing "you."

Recently, a certain husband sent me a long text message he'd written, asking whether I thought it was okay to send to his wife. I won't get into the question of whether it's appropriate or recommended to communicate with one's spouse via text message. What I did tell this husband was, "Try cutting out the word, 'you.'"

He did that, and when I reread the message, it was a beautiful letter, describing how "I feel that…" and "I would like it so much if…" Once all the, "You make me feel…" and "You always…" was gone, it was a totally different message that came across.

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You shouldn't have to tell your spouse again and again that what you are really seeking is validation and understanding. Tell him once, twice, and maybe a third time, but then leave it. You can also give a gentle reminder at times when it seems like one could be useful, especially when the issue under discussion is one that you strongly disagree on.

Sometimes, a person resists validating someone's opinion as they don't know where it's going to lead. They worry that if they validate an opinion that they feel is unacceptable, it's like giving it a stamp of approval. Validation and understanding don't mean agreeing. You can say, "I hear," and even, "I understand why you feel that way." You're still entitled to add, "I see things differently."

When it's clear that each spouse respects the other's opinion, there's a safe environment to discuss, validate, and come to a compromise. When a person is reassured that all he has to do is listen, he's often happy to comply.

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Often, people have quite concrete ideas of what validation means for them. In the question, the wife writes: "…if he listens properly to what I say, echoes back my words, and perhaps offers to think about them, and

then discusses a compromise with me…" That's very nice if it happens. What if she tells her husband about something that worries her and all he replies is, "Oh! Wow…"?

It feels disappointing, but the best way to respond is, "Thank you for hearing me out." Try to recognize that your husband is trying to do what you asked him to. He didn't dismiss your feelings and he listened and responded. It's true that you would like something more—and you can talk about that with him another time—but right now, appreciate what he *did* do, and thank him.

It's such a shame when, instead of seeing the positive, people focus on what was wrong, like the father in the story who asks his young son for the name of the chief of the kings who fought against Avraham Avinu.

The little boy thinks hard and says: "Kardelomer."

"No, Kedarla'omer," says the father.

"Kledarlomar," the boy tries again.

"No, Kedarla'omer," corrects the father, now getting impatient.

"Kedarlaromar," the boy says.

"No, Kedarla'omer!" says the father… at which point the boy cries in frustration, "Whatever I say is no good!"

The father is certainly thinking (and rightfully so), "Just say it right and I'll be fine!" However, he would do much better to recognize how hard the boy is trying, and to respond with an enthusiastic, "Almost!!" or just stop and say, "Wow, much better!" and leave the next round of constructive criticism for the next learning session.

It's also important not to fall into the trap of thinking that if you show appreciation for a tiny bit of progress, your husband will sigh in relief and not bother to try harder the next time. That's not how it works. If you encourage each bit of progress, it gives him the encouragement to keep on going.

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The same advice applies to the second part of the question. You don't have to wait for your husband to say, "What do you want from me?" You can preempt him and tell him what you would like: "I felt hurt by that comment. I assume you didn't mean to hurt my feelings. I'd appreciate it if you could tell me that you understand me and how I feel."

It also helps to keep it simple when you ask for understanding—and not to ask for something that you think your spouse will see as unreasonable. I don't know the background to the question about taking or not taking the doctor's advice, but it's possible that this is a big area of disagreement between this particular couple. In such cases, where the husband appears to have strong feelings on the matter to the point that he accuses his wife of having been "brainwashed," one has to be more careful.

That doesn't mean that it's impossible for the husband to validate his wife's feelings. There are ways to validate without implying that you agree, and ways to show respect even if you are totally opposed to doing things the way she would prefer. But both spouses have to be very clear and honest about what they hope to achieve by a discussion on a very contentious matter.

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To summarize: Showing respect for one's spouse is one of the foundations of marriage, and this includes listening, validating, trying to understand, and being willing to discuss. Everyone deserves to have their thoughts and feelings taken seriously, and all of us need to know how to go about building a relationship where there is a healthy give-and-take of respect and validation.

Knowing that your marriage and your spouse are tailor-made for you makes it easier to work around any communication barriers and other difficulties, as the Torah teaches us. Hashem should help that we should all be reasonable in our requests and respectful in validating others.

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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