RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# TORAH LESSONS

## FOR THE HOME

### PARSHAS RE'EH

## COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

In this week's *parshah*, we are enjoined to give *tzedakah* to the poor: *"Nason titein lo ve'al yeira levovcha besitcha lo* — You shall surely give him and your heart should not feel bad when giving him."

The Machzeh Avrohom teaches an important lesson from the double-command, *"Nason titein*." We are obligated to tithe our income and to give that portion to *tzedakah,* and the actual setting aside of the *maaser* or *tzedakah* money is actually a *mitzvah* in itself. The Machzeh Avrohom adds that when we first set aside the money we're planning to give, it's much easier to hand it over when requested. Conversely, if someone asks us for money and we haven't set anything aside and have to decide how much money to give, it's that much harder to hand it over. One of the reasons for the double command is to remind us to set the money aside and then to actually give it over. If we do things that way, our hearts won't feel bad when we give the money. Moreover, Hashem will repay us for both actions.

In fact, this is a valuable lesson for anything we need to give, not just money. If someone wants your time, attention, or good words, it's that much easier to comply if you've decided in advance when and how you're going to give. That way, you won't feel that others are intruding on your time or space.

Furthermore, if you let the other person know in advance that you're planning to give, they'll feel reassured and won't keep pestering you. If you tell a poor man that you've already set aside money for him and that he'll receive it at a certain time, he'll feel calmer. The same applies to providing time and attention. People *beg* for it because they don't know if they'll get it. Then they think they're only getting it because they nudged. But if you let them know it's coming, they don't need to beg. "Today, at five o'clock, I have a half hour to spend with you, and I'm really looking forward to it."

As an added benefit, if you schedule it in advance without waiting to be asked, a half hour might just be enough. When the person has to keep begging for your time, everyone ends up feeling resentful and even after half an hour they don't feel like they got anything from you.

This applies of course to "quality time" but it's just as applicable to any mundane request.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED IN HONOR OF
**SHALOM NECHEMYA WAKSZUL'S PIDYON HABEN**
MAZEL TOV TO HIS PARENTS, GRANDPARENTS AND GREAT GRANDPARENTS, AND LOADS OF NACHAS!

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# QUESTION

## DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

**I listen to your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime and appreciate the clear messages! Thank you!**

**I heard a *shiur* where someone said that her husband doesn't like her "technical" conversations. You advised the husband to try asking more questions such as how she cooked supper, maybe from where she got the recipe or if she ever made it before, etc.**

**I'm a very strong, opinionated person and my husband is more insecure. I like technical talk and I have no problem when it's quiet. My husband, though, becomes very insecure when it's quiet. When it's quiet, he starts asking questions like the ones you mentioned. (I don't know if my husband listens to your *shiurim*, but I don't think so.) For me, once he starts asking these questions, it's very uncomfortable. I get nervous, and instead of connecting through it, I disconnect when the conversation starts getting silly.**

**My question is, could it be that for one couple, talk like this is a solution and for others it ruins the connection?**

**What could I do to be more tolerant of my husband's chatting even though I find it silly or unimportant most of the time?**

**Thank you so much!**

# ANSWER

## RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Thanks for the good word on my *shiurim* and for the feedback on that specific *shiur*. Your question shows clearly that you and your husband have different communication styles and preferences. It's quite normal for couples to have these kinds of differences and in fact is to be expected. Going into marriage thinking that you'll always enjoy the same kind of communication is unrealistic. It's not the way relationships are expected or even intended to be. A marriage puts together two individuals who interconnect, and all relationships require a measure of flexibility and understanding on both sides. But because there are so many variables and differences of style, it's true that what may be good advice for one couple may not work at all for another. I'm happy to expound further on this idea of building and enhancing communication, and brainstorm with more suggestions.

When it comes to communication preferences it's important to remember that as much as we want one thing, the other person most likely has an entirely different set of wants. The well-known idea of the "five languages of love" posits that people have different ways of expressing and receiving love. The problem is that most people who learn about the different languages come away with an understanding of why *they* are unhappy and how *they* could be happier.

The first thing that's wrong with this is that understanding the problem doesn't get you anywhere unless you have a solution. The second, and perhaps more crucial thing that's wrong with this is that it's still all about "me." A better take-away from this concept is the realization that maybe the other person *does* try to show you love but they express it differently from how you do. Moreover, when you express your love for the other person, maybe they're not receiving it the way you intended. And the solution? Perhaps, when you start to understand the various languages of expression, you can begin to adapt to or adopt the *other* person's language.

In some cases, a different solution would be simply to tell another person what doesn't work for you and ask for what might. Perhaps your husband is actually waiting to hear what you would appreciate. Part of the solution is learning how to communicate your needs properly. If you feel that your husband is capable of making you happy but he just doesn't know how, then let him know.

If you feel he can't make you happy in the way you would like, it would be a good idea to start understanding what he *is* offering.

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But before we continue examining what might work to improve your communication, it's extremely important

to stress that regardless of how much you enjoy the communication, it isn't optional. You have to communicate. You don't like the style? It grates on your nerves? It's *still* important to communicate. It's sad how often I hear from people that they haven't communicated properly with their spouse for weeks. Some people tell me, "We just text," or "We only talk when necessary." That's not how it should be. It's a problem. I hate saying this, but it may be better to fight with someone than to have no connection at all.

Not talking with someone because you don't like what they're saying and/or because you don't mind silence is not a relationship. Besides, it's not all about you. Even if you don't like his style of communication and it can't or won't change, it's still not an option to just stay quiet, especially if you are becoming more resentful as a result.

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It's also important to try and stay away from a black-and-white perspective. There are things that are extremely beautiful and others that are very ugly, but there are thousands of levels between these two extremes. In the same vein, people can be intellectual and people can be silly, but there are so many levels in-between. If you prefer meaningful and intellectual conversations, it doesn't make other kinds of conversations "silly." If you find your husband's conversations "silly and unimportant most of the time," you should think about this. If you were claiming that he communicates at first-grade level, you might really have a problem and need to make decisions about your future, but if he's talking about things that other people would appreciate, just because you don't happen to appreciate it doesn't make it "silly." There's something wrong with considering another person's taste "silly" just because it's not on a par with your own taste.

A man once complained to me that his wife takes everything "so literally," making it very hard for him. When I asked him for an example, he said that his wife left meat on the table to cool and asked him to put it away before leaving the house. When she came home a few hours later, she saw that he hadn't put it in the refrigerator and she asked him if he thought the meat was still good, adding that Health Department guidelines say that meat shouldn't be left out of the fridge for more than two hours.

To me, regardless of my own opinion about meat left out of a refrigerator, that's not taking things literally. Literal would mean throwing out the meat after two hours. All his wife did was *ask* what to do; and it was after six hours, not two. He might be more flexible and laid-back about things, and he might even be right, but that doesn't mean she's being too literal. There are levels between extremes.

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So what *can* you do about this issue?

Instead of waiting for him to communicate with you in a way that you like, you can try to communicate with him in the way that you like. You can also be more specific about what kind of communication you prefer.

You mention that you don't know if your husband listens to my lectures. Why don't you know? Maybe you should know. I am generally of the opinion that it's fine for spouses not to know about every single thing the other does, and it's okay if someone feels comfortable making a phone call without feeling like they have to tell their spouse about it. On the other hand, if your husband appreciates a certain style of *shiurim*, perhaps you should know about it. It's good for a relationship when spouses know what types of books they like to read, for example. As much as it's okay for them not to know, it's important that you don't lead separate lives. If he's talking to you about recipes because he doesn't know what else would interest you, maybe ask him if *he* ever heard Rabbi Gruen's *shiurim* and what he thinks of them? And regardless of how he responds, show respect for his opinion and taste! (If he likes them, of course I'd love to hear about it — no need to let me know if he doesn't!)

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Another thing that's so important is making sure your husband doesn't feel rejected. We don't always realize when we're rejecting someone, and it's actually rarely done maliciously or even intentionally. But here's an example that happens often: A child comes home and runs to their parent to show them something — but the parent is on the phone. If the parent says, "Not now, please. Go away, I'm busy," the parent doesn't mean anything bad but the words are still interpreted as a rejection. It takes so little for a child to arrive at the conclusion that "mommy doesn't care to see what I bring home so I'm not going to share anything with her again…" It would be so much better if the parent said, "I really want to see what you have to show me. Right now I'm busy, but I'll call you over in a few minutes because I want to see it."

Another option, when possible, is to preempt the situation if you know that it's going to arise, and tell your child when you'll be available before they ask. This not only avoids the perceived rejection but also builds good feelings, all without even diverging from your schedule. That's in line with the idea mentioned above: *"nason titein."* Set aside the time and let them know it's coming. It's so much more satisfying that way.

You can try the same with your husband. Instead of shutting him down or shutting him out when he gets into what you call "silly talk," you can tell him, "I enjoy our conversations in the evenings," and then guide the conversation in a direction you think will work. Alternatively, you could say, "Let's talk during supper. Afterward, while I'm washing the dishes, I appreciate having some quiet time." This doesn't give a feeling of rejection, whereas giving a cold shoulder or one-word answers most certainly does.

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Furthermore, if you tell your husband about your need for some quiet time, he might be less uncomfortable when there's no conversation. Maybe he doesn't like the silence because he doesn't know when it will end. Maybe the silence makes him feel like you're not interested in

him. If you can give him the feeling that you *are* interested and that you think highly of him, and that you're looking forward to having time to talk to him, maybe he won't feel so intimidated by misinterpreted silences.

Be creative and be flexible. Try to come up with things that you can both relate to. You can talk about the children — beyond the technical aspects. Talk about things you're both interested in. Sometimes, it's also okay to write a letter — not just a one-line text — if it's easier for you to express your emotions in writing and easier for him to take it.

Don't let the difference of preference and style prevent you from communicating. Don't let it cause resentment. And if you're doing what you can correctly, don't feel bad if he does feel resentful.

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Your question also touches upon certain general ideas about relationships that I would like to take the opportunity to address.

You mention that you're more opinionated while your husband is more insecure. I'm not sure that firm opinions derive from security or that being less opinionated is a sign of insecurity. Sometimes, people who are insecure become *more* defensive about their opinions. These classifications and associations may not be accurate.

In any case, try to ensure that your husband isn't intimidated by your security. Overconfidence can be very intimidating, especially if it doesn't leave any space for other people's views: "I already made up my mind. I don't need to hear from you." If you seldom ask for your husband's opinion or usually don't listen to him, that's not good for your relationship, especially when it's your husband — someone you're supposed to respect.

It's okay to have strong opinions as long as you recognize that they are just opinions and remain flexible about them and open to hearing what others have to say.

It's not right to see your husband as silly. I know it's clichéd to say that you should respect everyone and that you can find something to learn from everyone. That's more of a challenge for people who are critical and opinionated. But when it comes to your spouse, you must want to see him and his opinions as important.

When a person is enamored by a *gadol* or, *lehavdil*, by a politician, people become subjective. Suddenly everything that person does is interpreted as brilliant. Even their mistakes are often viewed as positive in some way. Try to become subjective about your husband. Try to see him as a king and interpret everything he does in the best possible light. "Wow. My husband doesn't just let the quiet stretch on and on. He tries to fill it by taking an interest in what I do. I wonder if he listened to a *shiur* about this and is doing what he can to enhance our relationship. He's really trying to build the connection. I'm so impressed by him." There's so much good to see if you start looking for it.

If you see him as silly and find his talk trivial, there's something about him that you're not impressed with. Take a pen and paper and write down some of the various qualities you see in him. It might not work magic but you might still come up with things you never noticed before.

I once worked with a man who was in a very difficult situation. He put in a great deal of effort and over time, he became more of a man and started demanding respect in a healthy way. *Baruch Hashem* things really changed for the better and he told me that his wife started noticing and complimenting him for things he had always been doing — she had just never realized because there was no respect. When you look at someone positively and try to respect them, you suddenly notice things that were always there. Hashem should help you both find favor in each other's eyes!

*Rabbi Shimon Gruen*

# TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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