RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS KI SEITZEI

SHALOM BAYIS OR CHINUCH – WHICH COMES FIRST?

In this week's *parshah* we find several *pesukim* related to marriage, beginning with *"Ki yikach ish ishah* – when a man marries a woman..." The Divrei Yisroel asks in the name of his grandfather, the Rebbe, Reb Yechezkel of Kuzmir *z"tl*, how can the Torah expect people to get married? "*Ish*" and "*ishah*" are like *aish* and *mayim*, fire and water. How can the two mix? Or as the popular stereotypical myth goes, is it possible for a man from Mars to coexist with a woman from Venus?

The Rebbe of Kuzmir answers the question by noting that marriage takes place beneath a *chuppah*. The word *"chuppah"* is related to the word *"choffef* – to cover." When two people, a man and a woman, both acknowledge that there's something above them and are prepared to be *mevatel* themselves for a higher purpose, this enables them to combine their two opposite forces without destroying each other.

Reb Yechekel proves this from the *seder kiddushin*. The *chassan* says, "*Harei at mekudeshes li*," yet we don't find that the *kallah* verbalizes her acceptance, which hints to the idea of self-nullification and "surrender" which constitute the basis of a healthy marriage.

All too often, people focus only on their own thoughts, feelings, and opinions. No one would express himself in such an arrogant manner, but comments like, "I can't handle it when he..." or "I don't like it when she..." are very common. When we focus too much on ourselves, we don't leave enough room for the other person. But when we acknowledge that marriage starts specifically under the *chuppah* and that something greater than us exists, that's when we create the space in which we can coexist with a spouse. When you stop to think about it, your spouse has, and is entitled to, his own opinions and needs, no less than you. Our own thoughts, feelings, and opinions always loom larger in our eyes, but that cuts both ways. When we remember that and acknowledge that we have to be *mevatel* ourselves and make room for the other person, this creates the happiness that both spouses crave.

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Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I have two sensitive children – one of whom is extremely challenging and is struggling in many areas of his life and emotional and spiritual wellbeing – and I am implementing the ideas you talk and write about. I see many shifts and am grateful for that. My husband, though, isn't on board at all. He is a real disciplinarian; maybe even a bit critical. He also claims that parenting comes from a place of intuition and can't be based on instructions...

My question is: Children gain security by parents being on the same page. In this case, we clearly are not. While I know that I can't control his actions, do you have any guidance or feedback? I assume I'm not the only one struggling with this dilemma.

Thank you.

Answer:

I want to comment on your last sentence first. You're right. You are not the only parent dealing with what is a very common problem. I would like to suggest that you listen to a class I gave at Keiravtuni 9: "Chinuch / Shalom Bayit: Which Comes First?" The main idea I discussed there was that often, a *chinuch* problem can become a *shalom bayis* problem or the reverse. This is an idea that I now discuss frequently, after seeing how relevant it is to so many people.

In general, a healthy *shalom bayis* is crucial for healthy parenting. Not only will it make your messages go over better, but your children's emotional health is somewhat dependent on it too. It's sad to see adults struggling with various issues that are so obviously rooted in what they experienced as children.

I was once in touch with a man who lived in a distant community. His wife wasn't comfortable with the level of kashrus of the local bakery and was *mechanech* her children never to eat there. She made sure to provide home baked goods for them instead, and the children were fine with this arrangement and didn't feel deprived. This man discussed the issue with his Rav, who was of the clear opinion that the bakery was just fine, but nonetheless, the man never brought bakery goods into his home. He never challenged his wife about it either. In private, he told me that when he was at work and needed something to eat, he would buy something at the bakery. He didn't feel hypocritical doing so, as he knew the kashrus wasn't problematic. But he felt that it was important for his children to see a united front with him supporting his wife on this issue, so he was happy to be *mevater* on his own feelings for a greater good. This man is certainly to be commended for sacrificing on something where he feels he is right in order that his children should see that both parents are on the same page.

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Before addressing your specific question, I'll start by discussing the topic in general terms, focusing on families dealing with children who are struggling and therefore much more in need of parents who are determined to "get it right."

In many cases, one parent feels that a softer and more understanding approach will help the child to do better (and this is often what professional and experienced *mechanchim* advise). The other parent, meanwhile, feels that a stricter approach will be more productive and that being softer means giving in to a child who needs to be disciplined rather than understood. Whenever parents are at odds with the preferred approach, they are likely to blame the other spouse for blocking the use of what they believe to be an effective method, leading to stalemate. Ironically, their being at odds in itself is enough cause for failure to achieve results, making it impossible to know who is "right" or "wrong."

One important thing I feel is often necessary to point out is that the two ways of dealing with challenging situations aren't as contradictory as people assume. While certain children need more understanding and love, this does not mean that parents should give in on everything the child asks for or demands. What it *does* mean is ensuring such a child feels good about himself *before* you try to "teach him a lesson." Being too tough on such a child in the hope that he'll respond by "buckling" is generally wrong and is also usually unproductive, which is why I want to first address the parent who finds it difficult to focus on patience and understanding rather than doing "what he feels is right."

Much of *chinuch* is indeed about results. That doesn't mean that if you don't get the results you intended, you failed as a parent. What it does mean is that your focus is to achieve a certain goal and that this should guide your actions. Always stop to assess where a particular message or action is getting you and your child. Some people practice "reactive parenting" where their focus is on dealing with each situation as it arises. A child is *chutzpah'dik*? He gets a potch. Misbehaved? I'll call him out on it. A disciplinarian parent may be "right" about what the child "deserves," but may not be taking the ultimate goal into account. If short-term results are achieved at the cost of how things develop in the long-term, you may want to rethink your approach. Where do you want to see your child in a year from now? Will this method of parenting bring you closer to your destination?

It's true: Your child may not "deserve" special treatment, especially if he really is misbehaving. But a baby who wakes up during the night may not "deserve" to be rocked back to sleep either. It's our responsibility and privilege as parents to be *mechanech* children – it's not simply a dreary task that has to be undertaken because they "earned" it. A challenging child doesn't deserve more, but you should give more because it will bring you closer to your goal.

I was recently at a meeting about challenging children and kids at risk. One of the presenters brought up the issue of codependency and how parents are afraid that catering to the needs of a child can sometimes be the result of a codependent relationship in which they fear allowing the child to deal with the consequences of their behavior. I realize that the phrases and terms he used may be controversial, but I feel that the idea he expressed is worth repeating. He explained that *wanting* to do everything possible to help a child even when his behavior doesn't seem to warrant it, could indeed be a sign of codependency. But if your behavior is guided by trying to do what's right and necessary (and you sometimes have to battle your instincts to achieve this), you're usually doing the right thing. It's not natural to *want* to bend over backwards for someone who doesn't deserve it, and normal people don't *enjoy* doing that, but as parents, we have a responsibility to do what's necessary for our children.

I also want to mention that often, challenging children can cause their parents to feel a great deal of pain and anger. "I can't handle him... I told her not to... He's trying to control me..." In such cases, the situation gradually descends into a battle of wills which has of course nothing to do with *chinuch*, even if it's couched in such terms. As parents, we are obligated to take a deep and honest look inside to make sure we're not parenting from a personally challenged place. If you have an agenda with your child because of your own emotional difficulties, don't turn it into a *chinuch* debate with your spouse. And don't destroy children in the name of *chinuch*. Do all you can to overcome those feelings, if at all possible, and give your child what he needs but doesn't deserve, even if it's difficult. You're likely to see more success this way – but if you feel that this is advice that's just too hard for you to implement, consider trying to find it within yourself to step aside and let someone else do what's right, and thereby gain the advantage of the positive results without having to do what's too hard for you.

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Now back to the original question of the parent who wants to be more understanding and whose spouse is not on board. You cannot sacrifice your child's best interests in the name of *shalom bayis*. However, I cannot recall a situation that was dealt with properly and ended up being a choice between either the spouse or the child. So how can we make this work?

I have already mentioned the importance of identifying any emotional difficulty that could be making it harder for you as a parent to understand your child. But as the *other* parent, your obligation to your spouse is to recognize that he may be dealing with a very significant emotional challenge due to this child's behavior. For whatever reason, you might not be challenged in exactly the same way, and that should prompt you to empathize with your spouse, not condemn him or trivialize his feelings. Once you understand him better you might find it easier to tolerate his different way of seeing things, and this will also enable you both to communicate in a more effective way.

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That said, once you and your husband have learned to tolerate each other's views, it will help if you can then set aside all debate over ideology and principles, what's right and what's wrong. You can even stretch the truth a little and tell your spouse, "You're absolutely right. That's how it should be and I wish our child would get it." Then you can move on to the practicalities. "I feel that we may not have a choice at this point and that this is what we have to do now."

Make sure that you draw a line on the past before agreeing on a method going forward. If necessary, you can mention your husband's previous approach, saying, "That was probably the right thing to do until now. I feel strongly that we should try something else next."

Now that the two of you are somewhat on the same page, should you feel vindicated? No. Can you even be sure that you're 100-percent right? Probably not, and "proving" how right you are is totally wrong, and will also prevent you from being open to new ideas, even when what you're doing is working.

It's actually unnecessary to be *totally* on the same page as your spouse. It's worth giving in a little (on issues that aren't fundamental) if that enables your husband to give in a whole lot more on the more crucial points. You should also recognize the very real challenges that your spouse is overcoming in order to meet you a long way past half-way. You can even tell him how much you admire his strong principles and that you understand how hard it is to be forced by circumstances to adopt a different approach. You can also offer to take on most of the practical aspects of this new approach yourself without implying that you're somehow a better parent for doing so. But avoid taking the full responsibility which could be interpreted by your spouse as you pushing him out of the picture. In addition, you may come to need your spouse's help at some point and you don't want him to be resistant.

Another good idea, if your spouse has difficulty accepting a certain approach, is to set a time frame within which you'll reevaluate the situation. "Let's talk about this again in a month." This could make it easier for your spouse to cooperate.

But *more than anything else*, when it comes to sensitive and important topics like these it's crucial to have a Rav or someone you both trust to go to for guidance – provided you approach the Rav with humility rather than just seeking confirmation for "how right you are," which will only add fuel to your dispute with your spouse. If you take care to be respectful in your communication and allow your spouse to feel right in theory, principle, and intention, then the clear objective advice a Rav can provide can help you and your spouse to achieve a unified position. You can then use your creativity to give all the credit for the outcome to your spouse, and everyone will emerge a winner.

What if, despite everything, this doesn't happen and you remain at odds? I want to mention a sensitive point, and I encourage you to please discuss it with your Daas Torah: If, after everything I've mentioned here has been accurately and correctly applied without success and you feel you have to make a choice between your child and your spouse, your primary obligation might be to your child. This doesn't mean that you and your spouse need to remain in a permanent state of tension *chas ve'shalom*. You can join forces with your spouse on many aspects of *chinuch* without agreeing on the approach you use in this specific area. There are so many areas where you no doubt see eye-to-eye – most fundamentally, that both of you care very much about this child and want to do your very best for him, and will continue to daven for him. You can both agree that the child isn't easy. And you can agree on another thousand things going on in your lives, some of which are just as important as this question that divides you. If you focus on the broader picture, you'll realize that both of you really are united and working towards the same goals, and this could end up bringing you closer to being on the same page on this issue too.

It's actually possible that you'll never end up on exactly the same page with your spouse regarding *chinuch*. Your child may even realize that, but you should never speak disrespectfully of your spouse to your child. You don't have to justify his behavior, and certainly if there is anything that could be understood as abusive you must reinforce your child's belief in himself as good and valuable and show him that you understand his pain. In the long run, your child will benefit from hearing healthy, respectful messages from you.

Hashem should help us avoid challenges, solve the ones that exist by joining forces to overcome them, and enable us to keep the problems that remain in proportion and prevent them from spilling over into the rest of our lives!

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TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
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