

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

LESSONS ON LISTENING

After the Aseres Hadibros are repeated, Hashem tells Moshe, "Go tell them (lahem): Return to your tents; but as for you (ve'atah), stand here with me and I will speak to you of all the commandments..."

In a play on these words, the Imrei Chaim conveys an important lesson on communication. Those people who insist on being addressed with respect, he writes, with the more deferential plural form (as is customary in Yiddish when communicating with someone important), can stay home. But as for "you" (singular form), since it's easy to speak to you as one friend to another, you can stick around.

It's very hard to maintain a relationship with people who insist on being spoken to nicely at all times and demand apologies for any misstep, however innocent. Such people still manage to find fault even when we try our hardest. It's so much more pleasant to build a relationship with someone easygoing who doesn't rush to draw the worst conclusions and who readily forgives when we slip up and want to make amends.

So much of shalom bayis depends on communication. Although both spouses need to do their best to speak in the right tone of voice, using the right words, and at the right time, we also need to be receptive to the other's words even when they don't get it quite right. No one should feel a need to obsess about perfecting their communication skills and no one should punish anyone else for "misspeaking" from time to time.

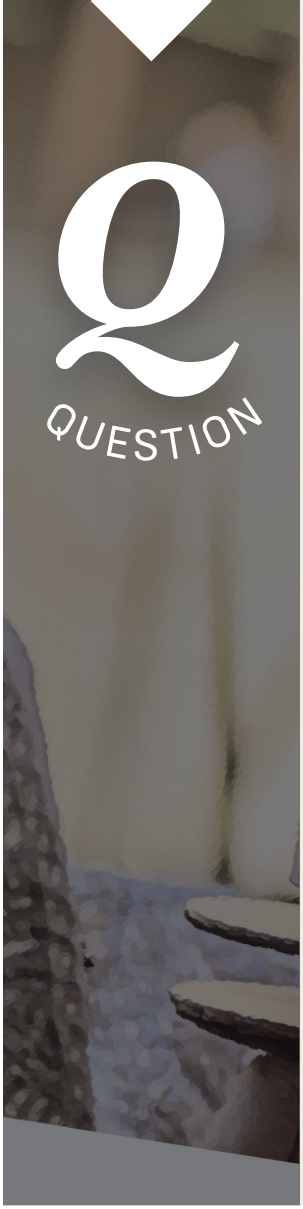
This week's essay is kindly sponsored and dedicated by a wonderful friend

in memory of

מוה"ר שמואל עמרם
ב"ר משה דוד ז"ל

תנצב"ה

Parshas
Va'eschanan
VOL. 8 | ISSUE 38



Q QUESTION

Thank you, Rabbi Gruen, for your wonderful work.

I have taken your chinuch classes and enjoy listening to your Q&A weekly, and I have a question of my own I'd like you to address, please.

My husband is a sensitive and gentle person. He has baruch Hashem an excellent, well-paid, and prestigious job. They demand a lot of him, and he keeps complaining about how hard it is to comply with the boss's demands. He often mentions that he wants to start up his own firm, saying that if he puts in so much energy he wants to do it for himself.

My question to you as his wife: After months of hearing his almost daily complaining, I'm feeling very pressured by it. Sometimes, the pressure overwhelms me and shleps me down for the day. I started feeling that by listening to him vent, I am holding back from him doing anything to change the situation.

I also have my own fears about him leaving his job, such as financial security, and who knows if he won't have other reasons to feel down then? All jobs have difficulties and who knows if after working painlessly for months or years to make the salary he is making now, he will then be pressured by clients, money, and all that comes with it, especially as he has a tendency to fall into some kind of depression every time he has difficulties.

I have a gut feeling that he has to either accept his situation with all its benefits and difficulties, or open his firm. All this complaining is just not helping anything.

But I don't know what my role should be in this. What is the wisest way to be there for my husband and yet be okay with it without feeling that it is MY problem?

I've tried taking myself out emotionally, meaning, telling him that I am here with him and I support him on whatever he decides is right to do without feeling that it's MY problem. He didn't take it well, as he is used to me being there all the way emotionally with him (which I believe is holding him back from doing anything).

Baruch Hashem this does not affect our love and devotion to one another and we have a beautiful happy loving relationship.

Your work is unbelievable and so very much appreciated! May Hashem bless you with lots of Yiddish nachas.



A ANSWER

It's wonderful that you describe your marriage as beautiful and happy. One stressful issue certainly shouldn't change that. It's crucial to consistently appreciate the brachos in our lives. This is not just because we should be grateful for them, but also because having a strong shalom bayis and appreciating that fact, is the foundation for resolving anything that comes up. When a relationship is secure, problems can be handled together and solved with relative ease; when a relationship is shaky, even the smallest issue threatens to capsize the entire ship.

It's very common for people experiencing challenges to see them as one big issue, and unfortunately, this makes it much harder to find solutions. Another mistake is allowing one issue to spill over into another area and create additional challenges. A common example is allowing a shalom bayis issue to spill over so that it becomes a chinuch habanim issue too, or vice versa. This is why I feel it's important to properly identify and compartmentalize challenges, distinguishing one from the other and dealing with them one at a time.

To clarify, in your letter, you've outlined not one issue but three. The three issues I notice are: the challenge of listening with empathy; the danger of falling into

codependency; and the question of financial security. Let's address them one by one.

• • •

Almost everyone feels the need to vent from time to time—both men and women. What you are describing is a very common dynamic. The reverse scenario is equally familiar: a husband comes home after a long, exhausting day, only to be met with his wife's understandable frustrations and an account of how difficult her day has been. In either case, both spouses are often seeking the same thing—to feel heard, understood, and supported—but the timing and emotional needs of each person may not always align. It is hard to hear the same complaint again and again, day after day, especially when the dissatisfied person seems not to want to actually do anything about the situation. In fact, responding to their complaints with suggestions and advice is often the last thing that seems to help.

Hard as it is, that doesn't mean that a devoted spouse doesn't have to listen and empathize. Having someone to listen to you with patience and caring is a basic human need. While some people do go to therapists, even for years, simply to vent, that doesn't mean that anyone who isn't being paid to listen is absolved of responsibility for their fellow Yid. How much more so when that person is their spouse. Telling one's spouse that they should go to a therapist instead could, understandably, give rise to a great deal of resentment, not just for feeling that their spouse "isn't there" for them, but additionally that they are being viewed as a "problem case."

It isn't practical to expect a spouse to be available around the clock. That said, taking this to the opposite extreme where one imposes strict boundaries or even insists that one's own spouse make an appointment to get things off their chest, is also incorrect as well as impractical. Similarly, ruling out talking about certain topics that make you feel uncomfortable is likely to make things worse. If your spouse is looking for a solution in an area where you have no expertise, it's fine to gently suggest that they seek out someone more qualified to answer. And if it's a circular conversation that has been repeated numerous times and leads only to the same arguments and quarrels, you probably need to find a better approach. But if all your spouse wants is a sympathetic listener, that's what you need to try to become.

• • •

Many people do just that, starting out with all the right intentions, as you clearly did, only to start to feel burned out after a while, wondering whether their patient listening is even achieving anything. While they realize that their spouse isn't looking for a solution, they still feel that after weeks of venting, something should have changed; when that doesn't happen, it's natural to wonder whether they should be doing something different.

In many cases, the venting is a direct result of the stress, and ceases when the situation changes. Interestingly, though, a perceived need to vent isn't always linked to the stress itself. There aremany reasons why people continue to vent even when they have a listening ear, and why they hold back from taking positive steps to rectify the situation. It's possible that they're not actually looking for a change in the situation. Rather, and perhaps without even realizing it, the person complaining simply wants to be appreciated for persevering in their job, or whatever else it is, and to have their efforts noticed and acknowledged.

True, the most effective way of getting appreciation when it's not forthcoming might simply be to ask for it. But since it's you writing, not your husband, I will suggest that you take the first step. Instead of waiting for him to complain when he gets home each evening, greet him warmly and tell him how much you appreciate the long hours he spends at a job he finds so trying, and add that you know he only does it because he cares so much about his family. You might just find that he starts complaining less often, or with less intensity.

And you might find that he continues to complain. There are two ways in which to understand the passuk, "Da'agah b'lev ish yasichena." The first, is that one should simply try to put the troubling situation out of one's mind. The second is what we do when the first method doesn't work, namely, talk about it to someone.

Going out to work, whether for a boss or for one's clients, is stressful. It could be that venting is the way your husband survives the daily grind. And it's possible that your listening to him patiently and showing him that you care is a vital contribution to your shalom bayis.

• • •

As mentioned, this doesn't obligate you to be constantly available. If your husband wants to talk at an inconvenient moment, you can certainly ask whether it's okay if you discuss things later. Add that you want to listen with your full attention, and that once the children are in bed (for example), you'll be able to focus properly.

It's possible that all you can realistically do is show him how much you care, and offer a solution if one is asked for and you're qualified to provide it. Finding the right balance between empathy and codependency isn't always simple. You'll know that you may have overstepped the line if you start feeling responsible for your husband's feelings or ability to cope. You'll also know that you've gone too far in the other direction if you start feeling apathetic about his challenges.

You should care, even though it's sometimes uncomfortable to do so. While maintaining some emotional distance may be appropriate in relationships where our level of commitment is more limited, emotionally distancing ourselves from a spouse is almost always counterproductive. A healthy marriage depends on emotional connection, empathy, and shared burdens. Withdrawing emotionally rarely solves problems; instead, it tends to deepen hurt, create greater distance, and make difficult situations even worse.

• • •

What if one's spouse demands that you join them in finding a solution when you truly don't know what they should do? Certainly you should make the effort and take the time to do what you can. But once that's done, there's nothing wrong with saying, "I'm really sorry, but I just don't know. I wish I did and could help you solve this."

The next step might be, "I just don't think I'm qualified to answer this question. Perhaps you/we should consult with ___ ? I really hope they'll be able to help."

And the last step might make the most difference: "I know how hard you're trying and I appreciate it so much. I believe in you — I'm sure you'll find a way to make this work out. And I'm in this together with you."

• • •

From the information you give, it really isn't possible to know what your husband should do. In fact, in many such situations, no one is really qualified to answer, because there are just so many unknowns.

Furthermore, as you point out, each different job situation comes with its own set of challenges. Being a salaried employee with a difficult boss can be difficult; being self-employed can be equally if not more stressful in different ways. It's hard to know whether setting up his own business will actually solve the issue of your husband's "chronic complaining."

There are still ways to make a responsible decision, but that doesn't necessarily mean there is only one right answer. It could be that doing it "right" means nothing more than the way you and your husband react to whatever happens as a result of the decisions you make.

Realizing that ultimately questions of parnassah are mostly about emunah and bitachon, can make it easier to make a choice and accept the consequences. Obsessing over the details is usually a sign that one is forgetting that Hashem is the one really deciding. Even when it's "simple," it's not. For example, if it's raining outside and you leave the house with an umbrella, it might feel natural to assume that you're covered. But Hashem could send a strong gust of wind that collapses the umbrella, or a hailstorm that punches a hole in it, or you could slip and fall into a puddle and get drenched.

Things are only really simple when we have emunah in our hearts, as R' Mordechai of Lechovitch said: "With Hashem, we can cross the ocean; without Him, we can't even walk out the door." When dealing with questions of parnassah or trying to figure out what the future holds, it's crucial to remember that we aren't expected to be able to predict anything at all. We simply try our best to make responsible decisions and trust in Hashem Who sustains us.

• • •

Most of the problems we encounter in our married lives aren't so complicated that we require faith in miracles to resolve them. But it's not the presence or absence of problems that matters as much as the way we approach them.

A husband and wife who see each other as adversaries will be felled by even the slightest storm; when husband and wife stand together, doing what they can to help each other, almost every challenge can be met with success.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VA'ESCHANAN 5786

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