RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS
ACHAREI KEDOSHIM

A CRITIQUE ON CRITICISM

In describing the *avodah* of Yom Kippur, the *passuk* mentions the *sa'ir laHashem* and the *sa'ir l'Azazel*. The two goats were selected by lottery, and Rashi explains that Aharon Hakohen stood between the two animals, placing his right hand on one goat and the left hand on the other. Chazal teach us that it was a good sign if the goat "for Hashem" came out on the right while the goat "for Azazel" came out on the left. Why? The Avnei Nezer explains that the purpose of the *sa'ir l'Azazel* was to push away our sins, whereas the purpose of the *sa'ir laHashem* was to bring *neshamos* closer to Hashem and to *kedushah*. This is in line with the *passuk* that teaches, *"Leolam yehei semol docheh viyemin mekareves* — One should always have the left push away and the right draw close." If so, why couldn't the *kohen gadol* simply conduct both lotteries with his right hand? The reason may be that too much of the *yemin* isn't good. It's important to have both the "left" and "right" present in a certain balance, in order to create a healthy relationship.

Most of us use both pushing away and drawing close, but we don't always get the proportions right. The reason the right hand should be used to draw near is because the right hand is naturally stronger, and more emphasis needs to be placed on drawing close than on discipline and structure, although those are definitely needed as well. People often tell me that they compliment their wives and children, adding that they also try to ensure their homes are run the way they should be, with everyone doing what he's supposed to be doing. It's great to be on top of things, and certainly being nice and complimentary should not come at the expense of order and proper behavior. The question is usually about the way the two aspects are balanced. If we can focus on using the *yemin* when being *mekareves* and specifically use the *semol* when it's necessary to be *docheh*, this may bring about more of the results we're seeking.

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

My husband and I follow along with each *shiur*. We're working on improving our relationship with our children. B"H we are seeing positive results.

I know that the idea of understanding people's personalities and seeing why some people are more sensitive or critical applies to *shalom bayis* as well, not just to *chinuch*. I was wondering if you would be able to advise me as this situation has been bothering me since the beginning of our marriage.

We have been married for over ten years. Baruch Hashem, we have a very good *shalom bayis*. I respect my husband very much for who he is in every area. I hold him in esteem and love giving him the last word and letting him make decisions, since he has a clear, deep, *Torah'dik* understanding. My husband is very deep, analytical, observant, *meivin davar mitoch davar*…. This makes him a great learner, and he understands people and situations very well. I deeply respect this side of him.

As always it comes with a flip side. He is critical of other people (B"H I don't feel that this is true about myself) and it bothers him when others do something wrong to him or to others. When others have an incorrect *hashkafah*, he'll tell me all about it. His reactions and comments about other people are very critical. He also enjoys tearing apart other people's *hashkafos*. I do appreciate his end result since he has a very clear approach. However, the conversation is usually talking about other people, saying *lashon hara*….

My husband is quite sensitive and critical by nature (he tells me it all the time and I appreciate that). Therefore, I know it's important for me to understand him and validate him — but what about *shemiras halashon*? He's already an adult; it would be different if we were talking about a child. I know clearly that I am not supposed to change him and therefore have not done so all these years. However, it truly bothers me since I am the opposite nature; very forgiving, love to make *shalom*; totally unobservant [when it comes to other people's faults], very easy going etc.

Please advise. Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

As you mentioned correctly, I truly believe that understanding, respecting, and appreciating personality differences is a tremendous thing and a great starting point for any issue in every relationship. The fact that you're quite different from your husband and you are still so respectful and forgiving of him after over ten years of marriage is a great thing. It's important and commendable to understand that people are different and that trying to change a person won't get you anywhere. It's okay to be different. Your acceptance is something everyone can and should learn from.

Of course, there are situations where your differences play a greater role and it becomes more difficult to get past those issues, but even then there are still ways of dealing with questions that arise. You might be surprised to learn that in many cases, it's not the differences themselves that cause problems, but rather the very notion that one's spouse is different in the first place. People can get very upset at the idea that their spouse doesn't agree with them, or think or feel like they do.

It's important to accept that people are wired differently. Differences aren't a personal attack and shouldn't be taken personally and certainly shouldn't be seen as a challenge to the relationship.

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The example you're mentioning touches upon a question of *shemiras halashon*. Obviously, we all have

the same Torah and we're all obligated with the same *mitzvos*. It's wrong to say that any one thing "is not so important to me," or that "it's not my thing," when talking about a *mitzvah* or *halachah*. At the same time, it's important to realize that people gravitate to different *mitzvos* or *inyanim*. For some people, it's a natural pull; their personality makes them more careful with certain things. Other times, it has to do with the *chinuch* a person received. Families and communities can have different standards. Of course, we have to be as careful with seemingly minor *mitzvos* as we are with more major ones. Still, sometimes, what appears to one person to be "terrible" due to the sensitivity they developed toward it, is not so outrageous to another. We are all like that. We feel comfortable with familiarity and threatened by anything strange. I once heard a story about a man who settled in a new community and was horrified at a certain laxity in a matter of *tzniyus* in which his former community was very careful. However, his perspective changed after he noticed that when a certain person was called up for an *aliyah*, the townspeople protested, "How can you give him an *aliyah*? He lied yesterday!"

Lying is *assur mid'Oraysa*. It shouldn't be taken lightly. But how many people fudge the truth a little bit?

I'm not excusing or justifying, but we all gravitate to different things because of our natures and upbringing. It's important to understand.

Your husband isn't *being* critical. He *is* critical, by nature. Maybe even a negative person by nature. Good for you that you can accept him just as he is.

In fact, there are communities and Rebbes who are more critical of others. While this doesn't in any way excuse any *lashon hora* aspect that may be involved, it is true that when a person is very passionate about a certain *hashkafah*, he may become very passionate about people who are not in line with it. There are others who are more forgiving and accepting, not because they *are* actually forgiving or accepting, but because they couldn't care less about the topic in the first place. It's possible that your husband grew up and was taught to be passionate about all matters of *hashkafah*. There are and alway have been *Gedolim* who are passionate about Yiddishkeit and passionate about people who hold differently, and at times they can even talk aggressively. Perhaps we aren't meant to emulate this aspect of these *Gedolim*; perhaps we are.

There's a story about a well-known Rebbe who was told that the children learning in his *mosdos* were talking negatively about a great *tzaddik*. The reason for this was a rift caused by a fundamental difference in *hashkafa*. Rebbe thought about it for a moment, and then replied, "It's better [that they talk against him] than that they be influenced by a wrong *hashkafah*." Not everyone will agree with that approach, but sometimes it really is the right thing to do to condemn a *hashkafah*, and in such cases, it's much harder to overlook things.

If a person is belittling aspects of Yiddishkeit and putting people down because he's *not* interested, it can be a far greater problem. But if a person believes in what he's doing, and he's doing it — or at least believes that he's doing it — *lesheim Shamayim*, it might still be wrong, but it's important to understand the difference.

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On the other hand, it's possible to be very passionate and yet not put people down. Great *tzaddikim* knew how to balance this. They knew how to be opposed to a mindset without being opposed to the people who embodied it.

A *vort* from the Ahavas Yisroel of Vizhnitz relates that every *tzaddik* is shown from *Shamayim* that his *derech* is the correct one. The smart person knows that all the other *tzaddikim* are shown the same vision regarding their paths and ways as well.

An older Chassidishe Yid who had seen many Rebbishe courts before the war once told me how he had taken his daughter to a certain Rebbe in America after the war and after they left, his daughter asked him, "Tatty, is he for real?" The Yid's face was beaming as he recounted the incident, and he told me with a twinkle in his eye, "You see? You can't fool a smart *Poilishe maidel*." He appreciated that she wasn't buying into just anyone and was questioning the authenticity of the Rebbe they had just seen. Of course, some parents would be horrified at such a response. People have all kinds of different attitudes. You can appreciate a person who isn't gullible and sees through deceit, and you can also appreciate those who are more straight-forward and accepting. Knowing that there are different ways of looking at life makes it easier.

In general, as long as people are passionate and even critical about *ideas* and not about *people*, it's not a problem at all. It's okay to have strong opinions and debate them. It's only a *shemiras halashon* problem when they start talking about *individuals*.

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I was once *menachem avel* a son of a Rov, who shared with me that his father once said that he never spoke negatively about another person. He added that he was sure he wouldn't get *sechar* for that, because it wasn't a *nisayon* for him. He simply couldn't stand talking negatively about a Yid.

Different people have different *nisyonos*.

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Of course, you're not supposed to be your husband's *mashgiach* or *mechanech*. However, there are ways in which you can clearly convey to your husband how

you feel about his critical attitude. It's okay to voice an opinion, but it must be done politely and intelligently.

Someone once told me that his grandfather was very critical of others and often spoke out against them. His grandmother, a much softer person, couldn't handle this. Whenever the conversation meandered down such a path, she very softly and respectfully said, "Why is it necessary to talk about other people?" She managed to do so without being condescending. She always spoke gently without being critical or challenging, and never made it personal. All the grandchildren knew what happened with such conversations — they simply stopped in their tracks.

This wise grandmother wasn't being *mechanech* and she wasn't putting her husband down. She didn't actually end up changing him either. But she made a statement, and she refused to go along with something she felt wasn't right. So often, things like this can be done right if we avoid judging the other person for having such an attitude or temptation, and also take care not to be critical.

I believe that in your situation, your motive shouldn't be to change your husband. You shouldn't put him down. You can be understanding of the way he sees things. You even recognize that he's right sometimes. You can figure out how to isolate the problematic aspect of his speech, perhaps saying like the grandmother did, "Maybe let's not talk about other people?" That's much easier for another person to hear than, "Why do you always think you're right?" or "Why do you talk that way?" I think it's fine to discourage the *lashon hara* as long as it's done wisely.

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As I discussed above, a good idea is to make sure you have enough of the *yemin mekareves*, enough of the warmth and love in your relationship. Emphasize the respect you have for your husband and his opinions. Mention it often. "You're right. I'm so happy I married you. I'm glad you have such a clear *hashkafah*. I'm glad you're following the right *daas Torah*. I feel so comfortable with the way you see things."

When you overload on the warmth, you can then occasionally slip in the fact that you don't appreciate talking about other people. You can say that you prefer for the children not to hear names mentioned. As long as this is cushioned by the fact that you're not questioning or challenging your husband in any way, you can even do this in a direct conversation about the topic.

Without enough of the *yemin*, however, the other person may be unable to take even a correct message of *semol*. Without enough warmth and respect, your husband may take your message personally.

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After investing all this thought and effort, it may still be that even your softest message won't be taken right and ends up causing friction. If that happens, you may have to back off. The Toldos Yaakov Yosef brings a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov on the *maamar Chazal, "Gedolah hachnassas orchim yoser mikabalas penei haShechinah* — Having guests is greater than greeting the Shechinah." The Baal Shem Tov teaches that it can be greater to welcome guests into one's home even if those guests talk *lashon hara* and actually banish the Shechinah from one's home.

The Baal Shem Tov didn't say that we should talk or sanction *lashon hara*. But when a person can't control himself, it may be more important to keep him comfortable than to keep the *Shechinah* in one's home.

The more you make a person feel comfortable and respected — even when you're firm about something you don't like — chances are, your message will be taken well.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557**
or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**

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