Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Behar |

Add Empathy

Suffering and Writing a Check

In this week's parsha we find a *passuk*: וכי ימוך אחיך, when your brother falls into poverty, ומטה ידו עמך, and his hand (his means of earning money) falters 'with you', והחזקת בו, you must support him.

That word עמך 'with you' always seemed strange and out of place to me. After all, if I'm also faltering, how will I support him? Perhaps we can offer the following explanation: In order to support your brother, it is not enough to merely write a check. His suffering must be 'with you', you need to feel along with him before you can help him.

Don't Skip the Important Step

This is a very common stumbling block in marriages. Some people immediately come up with solutions when hearing their spouse's problems. As soon as they hear of a problem they immediately begin suggesting solutions. But they're missing the very important step of ומטה ידו עמך.

Often people will not take your advice; they cannot accept a solution before they feel validated and understood. It could be that your spouse is just as smart as you, he can come up with the solution just as well. However, before he can think of possible solutions he needs your empathy. In essence, he's not asking for a solution, he's asking for validation!

Don't Dismiss My Feelings!

When you devise a quick fix to your wife's pressing problem, she won't be able to accept it. Here she was struggling with this issue, she thought it was the end of the world, and then before she could finish describing the problem you already thought up a solution?!

Even if your advice is very helpful, and your spouse would willingly take the same advice from someone else tomorrow, she won't be able to accept it from you. She was hurt by your dismissive attitude. If you tell her that you need forty eight hours to think about this major problem, she might accept your advice, but she cannot receptive if you solved such a formidable problem in a minute!

It is important to remember that people's problems are most often emotional to begin with. But even when not, the validation of the problem, as well as the commiserating, is more important than the solution. It could be that your

brain is more technical than your spouse's. It could be that you're naturally a better problem-solver; but ומטה ידו עמך is essential for any solution. When you empathize, and you're not condescending, that's when it's עמך, and that's when you can achieve והחזקת בו!

An Expensive Piece of Plastic

There may be a different reason why your spouse cannot accept your solution. It could be that it's simply not a good solution; perhaps you have not grasped the full extent of the problem. Part of the reason you solved the problem so quickly was because it doesn't bother you as much.

Take the example of the child who lost his contact lenses while playing outside. After a few minutes of futile searching he told his mom that they was lost. She went outside and returned a minute later, contacts in hand! She explained to her son: "You were looking for a piece of plastic, I was looking for a hundred and fifty dollars!" The effective solution will only come to you when you personally grasp the full extent of the problem.

Pity Party

It is common to hear a man say, "Why is my wife constantly *kvetching* to me? I'll pay for a therapist, and let her leave me alone!" This is a flawed attitude. We need each other in marriage. Your wife doesn't need a therapist, she needs *you*. The Torah says עונתה לא יגרע, which means, among other things, that you need to dedicate time to your wife. You need to give her your time, to listen to her, and to empathize with her.

Let the other person enjoy the sympathy, we all need it sometimes. If a neighbor would come over and say "My husband is out of town, and my therapist just cancelled on me. Do you mind if I *kvetch* to you for fifteen minutes?" Wouldn't you be willing to give your neighbor some time to *kvetch*? So why not do it for your husband too (even though he's too proud to ask for it outright).

When someone is asking for assistance, you have to know what they're really asking for. Sometimes you can solve the problem, והחזקת בו, just by ומטה ידו עמך, with empathy alone. On the other hand, sometimes your spouse just wants advice. Don't philosophize and get lost in analogies and verbiage. Just give the advice! You have to know your spouse and understand what he wants.

Solving It

When you feel that your spouse needs the empathy but also a seeks a solution, try to guide her so that she can solve the problem on her own. Very often, after soothing someone, they can solve their own problems.

Whenever possible let your spouse feel he solved it on his own. Rashi here compares this *passuk* to the *mitzvah* of עזוב תעזוב עמו, sharing a fellow's burden. The *mitzvah* of sharing a burden is only accomplished when it's shared, not if your fellow expects you to take the whole burden upon yourself. The same rule can apply here as well; share in it, solve the problem together.

The Rambam says that the greatest form of *tzedakah* is training a pauper to earn his own livelihood. "Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, teach him to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime!" Similarly, when you help someone solve his problem on his own, you're accomplishing more than when you merely offer advice.

She's Just Kvetching

Menashe* lived closest to his elderly parents, and he needed to host them more often than any of his siblings.Every time when he would have to host them, his wife would begin complaining. Menashe would get very uptight about it; "What does she want from me?", he asked, "Doesn't she realize that there's nothing I can do about this situation?"

I was able to help Menashe understand that his wife did, in fact, realize that there was no other option. It was simply difficult for her to host her in-laws, who were very demanding, and she

just needed his empathy and understanding.

Even if she really did want to stop hosting her in-laws, she deserved to be taken seriously. Menashe would have to empathize with her, and tell her that he'll try to come up with a different solution. Once her complaints were taken seriously, the situation became easier to handle...

Don't Recommend Torah Lessons For the Home

What if you feel like you need a sympathetic listening ear, but you feel that your spouse isn't giving you what you need? First of all, don't show her this essay and say: I really think you should read this… Not a good idea!

You can train your spouse, as there is no need to be ashamed to say that you're looking for a sympathetic listening ear. Tell him, "I would like to discuss this issue, but just the issue, without practicalities." Once he knows that all you need is a listening ear, he will be glad to provide it.

Chinuch: Appreciating Your Child's Problems

This topic is equally important when it comes to raising children. Parents are on a completely different wavelength than their children and may find it very difficult to identify with a childish problem. But your child is the first one who needs your empathy! Your spouse is an adult who can hopefully deal with the disappointment of having his problems dismissed, but an immature child who is alone with his problems, feels terrible. It is so important for children to feel understood.

A child may be desperate for a certain toy. Sometimes you don't even have to get it for her; just take the time to discuss it, and hear why she's so desperate for it. Let her tell you all about the toy and how good it would make her feel. Sometimes that's enough! Let's do our best to make our families feel validated and understood, ומטה ידו עמך, והחזקת בו

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question:

In a fit of anger my wife told me that she never wanted to marry me and she feels like she was fooled into the marriage. I actually feel the same way, and I want to tell her so that she knows she's not the only victim.

Answer:

You know how hurtful it is to hear something like that from your spouse. It is probably *the most hurtful* thing you can say and it can cause long-term damage. A spouse will never forget hearing something like that. Even if you apologize later and say "I didn't mean it", there is no erasing a comment like that.

When it comes to something like this we must recognize that it's not just about "me and you". There is a third party here, which is the Marriage, the relationship. Whenever you cause pain to your spouse you must realize that you're not only causing your spouse pain; you're also hurting your marriage. It can only work against you to tell your spouse what she said to you.

Practically speaking, especially since you mentioned that this was said in the heat of the moment, I'm sure your wife regrets what she said but is embarrassed to bring it up. Give her a chance to apologize. Express your feelings to her, say: I'm sure you didn't mean it, but I was really hurt by what you said". Hopefully she will quickly apologize and goodwill will be restored b'ezras Hashem!

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