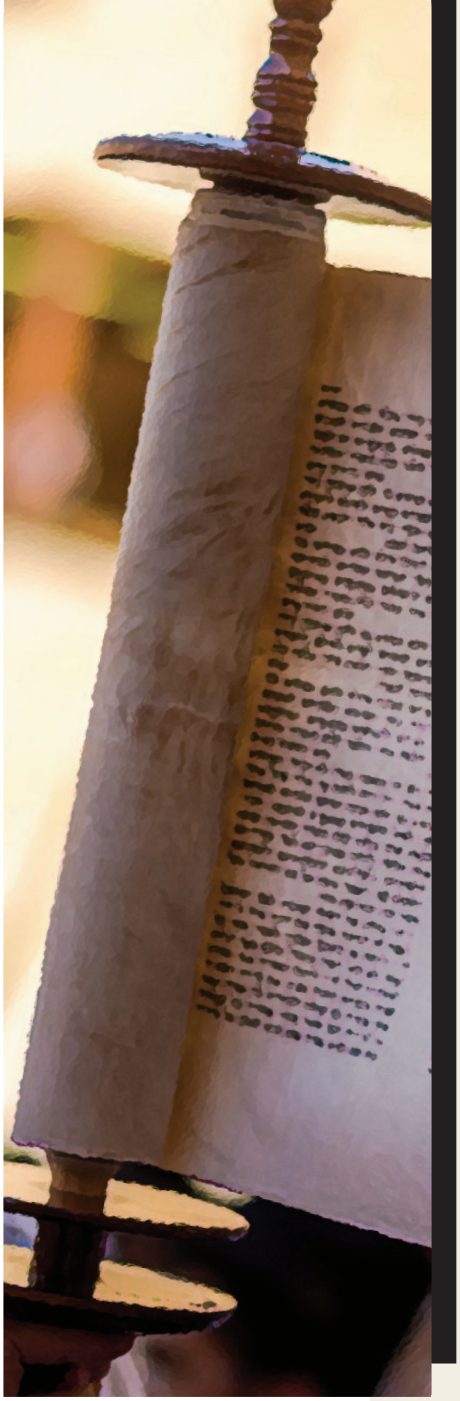


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHO IS THE REAL ME?

Just before Yaakov Avinu passes away, he summons his sons and gives them his blessings, following which the *passuk* tells us: "This is what their father spoke to them and blessed them." However, when we look at the *pesukim* where the *brachos* are described, we see that the first three *shevatim*, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, were in fact severely rebuked. Where are their blessings?

In his *sefer Yechahen Pe'er*, the Bendiner Rav *ztz"l,* a son-in-law of the Sfas Emes, explains that in the Torah, there is no such thing as rebuke—*tochachah*—given without an accompanying *brachah*. Before rebuke is given, a person has to be provided with the *keilim* he needs to accept the harsh words the right way: he first needs blessing, encouragement, and support. Therefore, the Bendiner Rav says, it was unnecessary for the Torah to describe the *brachos* given to the first three *shevatim*, as the fact that they were rebuked already tells us that they must have first received *brachos*.

Sometimes, perhaps surprisingly, when someone isn't doing something the way they should, simply giving encouragement and support is often enough, without open rebuke. But if *tochachah* is still needed and is going to be given, then it must be accompanied by the support the person needs to accept it the right way. Otherwise, our words are likely to backfire and cause resentment, despair, or worse. If we want our words of *mussar* to have a positive impact, we must always remember to accompany them with encouragement and *brachah,* in order to instil in the person the confidence that he can improve his ways. Our words of criticism must always be constructive, and never *chas v'shalom* destructive.

The essays for the month of Teves is generously sponsored by

The Schlesinger family
in honor of their Simcha

May they be Zoche to an abundance of Nachas from all their children!

Parshas
Vayechi
VOL. 6 | ISSUE 11



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you very much for all your amazing *shiurim*. I will be very grateful if you can answer my question.

My husband is a fraud. He dresses like a frum Yid, but he spends his time with not-frum Jews and does things against *tzniyus* and against the Torah.

In the early days of our marriage, I once found a ticket to the theater in his jacket pocket when I was doing the laundry. I asked a rav what to do, and he told me not to say anything. The rav didn't tell me why, but I assumed that the reason was that as long as my husband didn't know that I knew, he had a better chance of doing *teshuvah*.

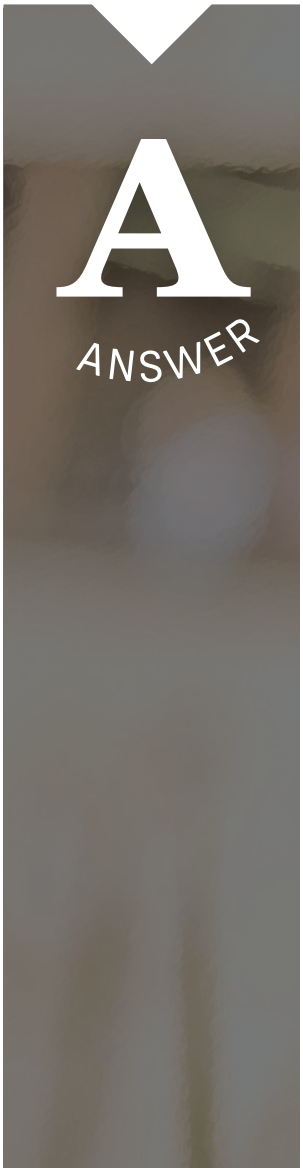
Recently, however, someone found out that my husband is involved with a certain non-Jewish concert, and they told me about it. Apparently, he has been helping the organizers with the technical side of things, and since the project is still running, most likely he plans to continue working with them.

My husband doesn't know that I know about his involvement. I really don't want him to continue associating with such people, and I think that maybe, if I tell him that I know about it, he'll be ashamed of himself and stop.

My question is: What's the best approach to take? I'm *ehrlich*, frum, *tzniyusdig*, and I care very much about living according to the Torah, and I don't know what to do here.

In one of your *shiurim*, you mentioned that spouses shouldn't mix into each other's *frumkeit*, but here this is having a strong effect on our children, and on me too. Also, people see us as a couple, as if we're on the same page in this area, and I don't want to think about the effect this will have when we are trying to make *shidduchim* for our children.

Thank you for helping.



This is undoubtedly a very painful letter, from a wife who sees her husband involved in things that are not in line with, or appropriate for, someone living a Torah life or trying to raise a Torah family. What should she do?

While the specifics of this question are thankfully not common, several of the issues raised affect many of us, and one of them is an issue I often mention in various contexts. The wife writing the question notes that after she found a theater ticket in her husband's pocket, she asked "a rav" what to do. Was this her rav, her husband's rav, the family's rav, or "just" a rav? I often mention how important it is that a husband and wife have a rav, their own rav, who addresses their questions. So many issues can be resolved by having a rav who is trusted by both spouses and whose advice they both accept. I know it's not always so simple, but it's worth investing the effort to find someone acceptable to both husband and wife, so that they can start to work on the challenges caused by a lack of clear guidance.

Just recently someone approached me after a *shiur* and asked how I could say a certain thing was not permitted — after all, "There are *rabbanim* who allow this." I said that the person could be right, but the real question is: What does *your* rav say?

• • •

The wife in this question also writes, "In one of your *shiurim*, you mentioned that spouses shouldn't mix into each other's *frumkeit*," and wonders whether this general rule applies to her situation as well. In normal, regular situations, I would say that this guideline definitely applies, and it's generally neither obligatory nor appropriate for either spouse — husband or wife — to become the other's *mashgiach*. However, there are situations where (without wanting to "mix-in") a wife and mother has a responsibility to address anything that may affect her home and family.

When there is a rav in the picture who knows the family, this question is something that he can probably guide you through. Personalized guidance is always better than general rules that may not be applicable in a specific situation. When posed with this question, your rav, being familiar with the circumstances, might advise you to ignore the issue, or perhaps suggest saying something nicely, gently, and just once — and then dropping it. If it helps, then good; if not, leave it alone. Or, he might tell you to persist and not relent.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu didn't impose an obligation of *chinuch* on a husband to educate his wife, or vice versa. Nonetheless, in situations where a specific issue is having a detrimental impact on the family, it often does need to be addressed in the correct manner. Without knowing many more details about your family, there is no way I could possibly give you advice on whether or not to intervene.

• • •

Now to address the specific issues in the question. The wife starts by describing the theater ticket in her husband's pocket, presumably some years ago; now, things have apparently progressed

to his involvement in a certain production. In such situations, where one spouse is hiding his or her behavior from the other, it's common for the other spouse to wonder what else is being hidden that they have yet to find out about.

Being naive and assuming nothing else is being hidden isn't always realistic. On the other hand, it is possible that what this wife has found out is actually the sum total of her husband's involvement with undesirable projects, and until she knows for sure that there are other things he's not telling her, she should give him the benefit of the doubt and not come to the conclusion that this isn't the whole story.

Furthermore, if the husband were to discover that his wife knows, and he then provides her with some kind of explanation, the wife should also give him the benefit of the doubt and accept his account of things and not dismiss his words as mere excuses. If, for instance, he tells her, "Yes, I was involved in that project, but only in a very minor way — they consulted me on something and I gave them information, but that's it," then she should certainly accept his version of events, unless she has real reason not to.

It's important to remember that even when our imaginations try to persuade us that things are much worse than we realize, the worst-case scenario is not necessarily the reality. So, as much as burying your head in the sand is unwise, it's just as unwise to suspect the worst and then build up a mountain of accusations regarding things that may be non-existent. Unfortunately, I have seen many people make this mistake and treat relatively innocent people as villains and perpetrators and thereby cause way more damage than was necessary or proper.

• • •

Aside from not making erroneous assumptions, in such situations you also want to be very, very careful not to make things worse.

The wife suggests that the reason the rav told her not to say anything about the ticket is that her husband is more likely to do *teshuvah* when he thinks his wife is still in the dark. That's one possibility, but the issue is more complex than that.

There are times when however much we feel we simply have to speak up on a certain point, it's still not a good idea, even if the other person is most certainly doing something wrong and it is having an impact on others. If your words are not going to be taken the right way, it's not just that they won't help — they could actually do harm.

Sometimes, a person knows he's doing something unacceptable, but he is taking care not to let anyone find out and therefore, he is also being careful not to let things go beyond a certain point. The minute his actions are out in the open, however, that's no longer a consideration, and his red line could shift in the wrong direction.

One can usually assume in such situations that the spouse who is going beyond what's acceptable truly doesn't want the other spouse to find out, because they still want to be considered *ehrlich* — and so they take precautions and hold back from doing certain things that would bring a greater risk of exposure. Once that's gone, they could easily start to slide downhill.

The wife in this question thinks that her husband would be so mortified to discover that she knows about his involvement in this project that he would stop. I don't know the husband, and certainly his wife knows his nature better than I do, but from my experience it seems to me that his shame at being found out would last around a day or two, no more, and then, he would simply come to terms with the new reality.

What then? Essentially he would be saying, either in word or deed, "This is who I am. Deal with it." There's no reason to presume that he would suddenly find the *kochos hanefesh* to do *teshuvah* simply because his wife knows that he did something wrong. If there are no genuine consequences, no leverage that you have in the event that he doesn't mend his ways, then you do have to consider the likelihood that he will continue doing whatever it is and that it's probably much better that you don't confront him.

This is presuming that the wife would protest, beg, or order him to stop, and so forth. If instead she says nothing, and hopes that just her knowledge of his *aveiros* will stop him in his tracks, this too could have negative consequences. Seeing someone take the wrong path and saying and doing nothing very often falls into the category of enabling, as the person isn't experiencing any genuine repercussions.

This is why one has to be so very careful when addressing such issues.

• • •

Going a step further, if the wife does decide, after consulting with *daas Torah*, that the issue has to be brought out into the open, she has to be very clear about what the issue is.

Anyone in such a situation — a very difficult situation—should first ask himself: What is my goal? What am I trying to achieve?

Here there are three main possibilities and it's crucial to recognize which apply.

The first possibility is: I care deeply about my spouse, and I can't bear to see him falling into such terrible ways. I want to help him do *teshuvah*.

The second possibility is: I, personally, just can't bear this situation. I can't handle the idea that my husband is doing such things; I simply can't tolerate it.

The third possibility is: This is having a terrible effect on our children. How can I protect them; after all, I am responsible for their welfare, and I can't just ignore the impact on them.

It could also be a combination of factors, but usually there is one aspect that is more troubling than the others and until that's clarified, it's much harder to know how to go about dealing with it.

• • •

If the main issue is your concern for your husband's level of *ruchniyus* for his own sake, it's possible that it's not your place to intervene if your words are not likely to help. What could you possibly achieve? If he isn't ready to do *teshuvah*, he will only feel shame, before getting used to the idea that you see him as "less-than," which is unlikely to have any positive impact. Debating or explaining usually tends to be futile and unproductive; worse still, it will actually cause even more resistance and build greater barriers.

Even if you feel there is a good chance that your words will be taken well, you still have to tread very carefully and make it very clear that you aren't judging him, that you understand his difficulties and challenges, and that you are simply trying to help him, not control him. You should also be careful to keep yourself out of the picture.

If the issue really bothering you is your own level of tolerance for the situation, then you must approach it from that angle. When speaking to your husband, you would do best to use phrases such as, "I find it very hard to deal with…" or "I'd appreciate it if you could try to understand how I feel." After clarifying that his personal decisions are his to make, you can simply ask that he feel for you and take you into consideration as well. Here, too, you have to make it very clear that you are not trying to control your husband — you're only trying to find a way to deal with the situation for yourself, so that you can continue being a good wife and mother. (In some cases where a spouse is dealing with something unbearable or inexcusable, the situation allows for and actually calls for that spouse to state exactly how they will go about no longer tolerating it. This is something that needs to be dealt with individually; it cannot be elaborated on in writing.)

If the main problem is the impact on the children, then of course that will be the focus of the conversation, without recriminations against your husband or any discussion of your own emotions, and the goal will be attempting to find solutions that work for all of you.

Chances are that the clearer you are about what your message is — and isn't — the more success you will have in bringing about the desired results, *im yirtzeh Hashem*.

• • •

With that said, it's very often how something is said that makes all the difference, and often a spouse is too close to home to get it right. The preferred option is for the wife to find someone else to address the issues for her. If it's at all possible for her to remain outside the picture, and for her husband to continue to believe that she views him as a frum Jew, that's what should be done.

If that's truly not possible, she has to be very careful not to embarrass her husband, for aside from being wrong, it's unlikely to be helpful and could be very harmful.

• • •

Whenever addressing difficult issues, it's very important to avoid getting stuck in the past. The issue is the present and the past is just background, and the wife should attempt to give him the benefit of the doubt regarding how he got himself into such a situation: "I know you didn't realize that you would get dragged into this…" or "I'm sure you didn't intend for things to go this far," or simply "I don't mean to judge you over what happened or how this came about. All I would like to do is discuss where we go from here."

Then, move on and focus on the present and the future, and your confidence in him that he will work together with you to find a way forward.

(As an aside, if it's you on the receiving end of constructive criticism, and/or being questioned about something you did wrong, it's also important to keep the focus on your genuine intention to improve things. While of course you should express regret, you should stress that from now onward, you will do your best to make sure that the problem doesn't recur. You should also thank the other person for bringing the problem to your attention.)

• • •

This can all seem very challenging when dealing with such a situation. There is, however, a way to reframe it which will give both spouses a lot more hope and confidence to face the future.

The wife in her letter describes her husband as a "fraud." Many people reading the question would see things the same way. The question is: Who's the fraud?

Is it the man who gets up in the morning, gets dressed like a frum Yid, and goes to shul to daven — and later in the day, does things that he knows he shouldn't?

Or is it the man who is doing the things he knows he shouldn't, who is pretending to be a frum Yid when davening in shul?

Who is the real man?

Answering this question is something all of us can and should do, because we all have internal contradictions; we all sometimes do things that we know we shouldn't. This question is at the core of many *sefarim* that describe our constant battle against the *yetzer hara*, and answering it can give us all the encouragement and hope we need in order to look at ourselves positively, and start moving in the right direction.



To the wife in this situation, I would say: Please, don't call your husband a fraud. He's not trying to fool anyone. He's a Yid who is *nebach* struggling and falling into certain bad ways, but that doesn't mean that the bad ways define him and that the good things he does are just his disguise. Maybe, when he gets dressed in the morning, when he goes to shul to daven, when he does any of the *mitzvos* he does, he thinks to himself, "If only I could always be this *ehrlich*… If only I could always be *misgaber* over my *yetzer hara*…"

It's certain that there are many red lines that he isn't crossing, even if he is doing other terrible things. He isn't *chas v'shalom* a secular person dressed up as someone religious — far from it.

• • •

I certainly don't want to minimize the seriousness of the situation the wife is describing in this question. It's a very challenging situation. And yet, the Torah teaches us that, "*Chochmas nashim bonsa beisa*—A woman's wisdom built her home." A wife can help her husband in life so much more than anyone else can, if she has the right guidance and her approach is *al pi Torah*.

We only have to look to the example of Rochel *eishes* Rabbi Akiva to see what a wife's *emunah* in her husband's potential can achieve, even when he doesn't believe in himself. But if a wife belittles her husband and shows him that she looks down on him, the results can be terrible.

The wife writing this letter doesn't mention the positive aspects she sees in her husband, but I assume that she does see them, as most likely otherwise she would have described negative traits. If she can focus on the good things he does and her *emunah* in his potential to improve, as well as her faith in his good intentions and her appreciation of the limits he already is placing upon himself even though he is slipping in some areas, this will almost certainly help.

Things are unlikely to change overnight in any situation, and certainly not here, but I do believe that with the right approach, a way forward can be found that will bring husband, wife, and children closer to one another and to Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

May Hashem help us all to see each other's strengths and encourage each other to fix what needs fixing, and to be *zocheh* to the Geulah Sheleimah *bimheirah beyameinu.*

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYECHI 5784

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