RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI

REASONS FOR RESPECT

Parshas Bechukosai is known as the parsha of the Tochachah, but the seforim teach us that the curses are actually all brachos, only that they're hidden. While it looks like it's all Din, we are taught that in essence it's all Rachamim, and it's left for us to discover that.

The Zera Kodesh of Ropshitz points out that Hashem showed us great rachmanus in general, by delivering the Tochachah privately. The parsha of of Tochachah begins "Eileh hachukim vehamishpatim... baino uvain Bnai Yisroel," only between the two of us, between Father and son. The mekatrigim knew nothing about it.

The Skvere Rebbe z"l used to tell melamdim who wanted to bring boys to be farhered to make sure all the boys know the answers to the questions so nobody will be embarrassed in front of the Rebbe. But he also cautioned them that in the classroom, when he wasn't present, the teachers should make sure to test each boy so they shouldn't think they got away with anything. That's the job of the melamed, the balance of knowing when to make a child feel like they can do better, yet watching out for their feelings in all settings.

While this is a beautiful concept and we should emulate it in our day-to-day life, it's important to know how to do it right. Unfortunately, many people do just the opposite, they behave "nicely" in public. When people are watching, they're respectful and nice, but at home they become irritable and nasty.

Besides for being wrong, such behavior is very hurtful. People often complain to me that "you should see the way she talks to me in public! You can't convince me that she doesn't know how to talk to a husband - but at home..." It's not easy to always treat people in private the way we would in public, but we should try. And this is true for both our spouses as well as our children.

This week's essay is dedicated by

a wonderful, caring, and very supportive friend

Y.S.

whose constant anonymous Chesed endeavors are a true inspiration!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

In past shiurim, you spoke about the different roles of men and women. I would appreciate if you could elaborate on one point: The husband's role as head of the household.

If the woman is supposed to make the man her king, it seems like this is in her hands! What should this look like at the beginning of the marriage? What should this look like when there are children in the house?

We can all think of situations where this is not happening, but I want to know how to make it happen in my home.

Thank you.

Answer:

I have discussed this in the past but as this is a very fundamental issue, your letter provides a great opportunity to discuss it again from yet another angle.

You mention that it's a woman's role to make her husband the king at home. That's definitely true. However, it's not only her role. Often, interestingly enough, the man is just as much at fault for not being the king.

Sometimes the husband isn't doing what he's supposed to, or is in some way or other causing himself to not be respected. Of course this doesn't absolve a wife from being respectful, it's just interesting to see how there's two parts to it, and each in the marriage should be focusing on the part they can do better, and not what their spouse can improve on. Sometimes the woman needs to understand what she's responsible for and what she can do to build him up. Both the husband and wife have what to offer in various roles in the home, and can both contribute in helping the other do their role as well.

You're right in pointing out that it's important to set up this foundation early on in marriage. Often, when a relationship starts out wrong, it just continues that way for many years and it's hard to change. It's important for all those new at this to realize that, and not take the early blissfulness for granted. But it's never too late.

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For starters, let's understand what the role of "king of the house" really means. Chazal teach us that a man should not generate excessive fear in his home. If you're afraid of your husband, or might I say: if your wife is afraid of you, something is probably wrong. But just like the Torah commands that we have a certain level of fear for our parents, there's a certain element of fear that is in place when respecting a husband. It's a respectful yiras hakavod.

General respect needs to be practiced more today. Simply being cordial and polite is something people can still relate to. But then there's the added respect for a husband and father. "Are you okay with this?" "I want to run this by you." Even when you don't have to ask, asking is a mark of respect. Respect means

willingly giving the reins to the one in charge. If he gives it back, which he may, that's also fine.

Think back to your parents' relationship. Was there a healthy respect toward your father? Was he simply the chauffeur in the driver's seat or was he the one driving and leading the family? Some fathers are okay with being told what to do. Others are simply pushed into the position of follower. If you're still "setting up" the dynamics in your home, do your part to make sure this is done right by showing respect on a consistent basis.

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Once there are children in the picture, this respect has to grow along with the size of the family. When a wife is respectful of her husband, it is usually passed down to the children automatically. Teaching children that they must respect their father or mother as part of 'chinuch' is not as effective as children seeing genuine respect in the home. And when the opposite happens it just makes everything harder and contradictory. When children see their mother deferring to their father and they know that Mommy will check with Totty to see if it's okay, it's much simpler to understand what respect for a father is.

Some people use a father's respect in the wrong way. "I'll tell Totty what you did! Just wait until he comes home..." Turning Totty into the bad cop is not respect. It may sometimes be necessary based on dynamics in a home, but it's not ideal. Brushing off every request with "because Totty doesn't let," isn't helpful either. Communicating your husband's position with acceptance and respect – and children can tell the difference - goes much further. Respect is not something you can "teach your children to do," and can't be used as a warning stick.

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People may think that respect for the husband comes at the cost of respect for a wife. We recently explained that the Rambam discusses these topics in two separate places because both are true on their own and there's no contradiction. A woman's respect for her husband must be almost parent-like and a husband is required to be very respectful of a wife. It goes both ways.

Why are there situations where the husband isn't respected? Perhaps if we understand why, we can preempt it. Let's discuss four (of the possibly more) reasons:

One of the most common reasons why a woman doesn't respect her husband enough is because she didn't see it at home. Many girls grow up in homes where the mother has the last word to one degree or another. These girls grow up with an attitude that it's not in a husband's place to tell them what to do. In some cases, it even goes so far as the mother telling her married daughter not to listen to her husband. "Your husband told you that? Who's he to tell you what to do?" It's terrible when parents mix into their children's shalom bayis, and even more when the advice they're giving is directly the opposite of Daas Torah.

A young lady getting married has to know to be extremely respectful of her husband, whether she saw it at home or not. Don't carry on the tradition of such a fundamental mistake.

A woman is certainly not supposed to be a shmatteh or invisible. Even suggesting that a woman completely surrender is often short lived and unrealistic. Part of being an aishes chayil, is being respected and taken care of too. But it starts with giving the kavod that the Torah demands of us.

I recently dealt with a couple where the husband asked his wife to adopt a certain small minhag from his parents' home. She complained to her father that her husband is telling her to adopt a minhag she didn't grow up with. Now, besides for the mistake of sticking to her father's minhagim after her marriage, this surely wasn't the right way to deal with it. Her father went to his Dayan, who then spoke to the son-in-law about the importance of not changing mesorah.

How ridiculous! This young man also has a mesorah, and this idea was specifically against Halacha. But the irony of being strong in the name of not changing mesorah, and not listening to her husband's Mesorah was so ridiculous and counterproductive.

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A second cause for lack of respect is when a husband doesn't behave in a way that deserves respect based on her prior expectations, what she was told is required of a husband, based on what she saw in her husband, or any of her other criteria. She wanted him to be in Kollel and he's only kove'a itim, for example.

This is wrong. Besides for the unhealthiness of unrealistic expectations in any relationship, a husband's respect does not depend on him living up to your expectations. If your respect is contingent on meeting your expectations, it's never going to happen.

He doesn't have to earn your respect the way you want him to.

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But what happens when a man really doesn't deserve respect? He's really not doing what he should be doing, whether davening, lifestyle, financial, or anything else?

In that case, he's not deserving of respect from anyone...

...other than his wife. A wife must be respectful of her husband just because he's her husband. Of course, issues should be dealt with and discussed. And the husband should change his behavior and make himself deserve respect. The requirement of respect doesn't give a man the leeway to stay in bed and not pay the bills.

I was recently involved in a situation where a husband really wasn't doing what he was supposed to and his wife was clearly above him on every level. But her respect, encouragement, accommodation, understanding and support brought about such a change, that I couldn't believe it. This is a credit to Chochmos nashim bansah baisah.

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The fourth cause for lack of respect can be the opposite: a husband who's too kind and easygoing. He lets her call all the shots and goes along with everything. Works his schedule entirely around hers. This is wrong in principle. If you're afraid to voice your opinion, and you're just the sidekick or driver to be used, there's something wrong with that. Accept and even clarify how you'd appreciate the respect due to you. And if you're the wife of a husband who's okay with everything, you should still take him seriously.

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The fact is, there are marriages that are unhealthy or unsustainable and the Torah suggests that they be terminated. But as long as a couple is still together, he's the husband, you're the wife, and you should be respectful. I've seen situations of divorced couples who were so respectful of each other, especially in front of the children, that I wish all married couples would be as respectful. It's important to understand the role of an aishes chayil, the role of a husband, and how that affects marriages.

I want to reinforce the fact that being respectful doesn't mean being controlled or losing your individuality. You can and should express your feelings and what you want. But be a wife. Be a respectful wife. You'll be building your home. You'll be building the healthiest place for yourself and your children.

Wishing you much hatzlacha,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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