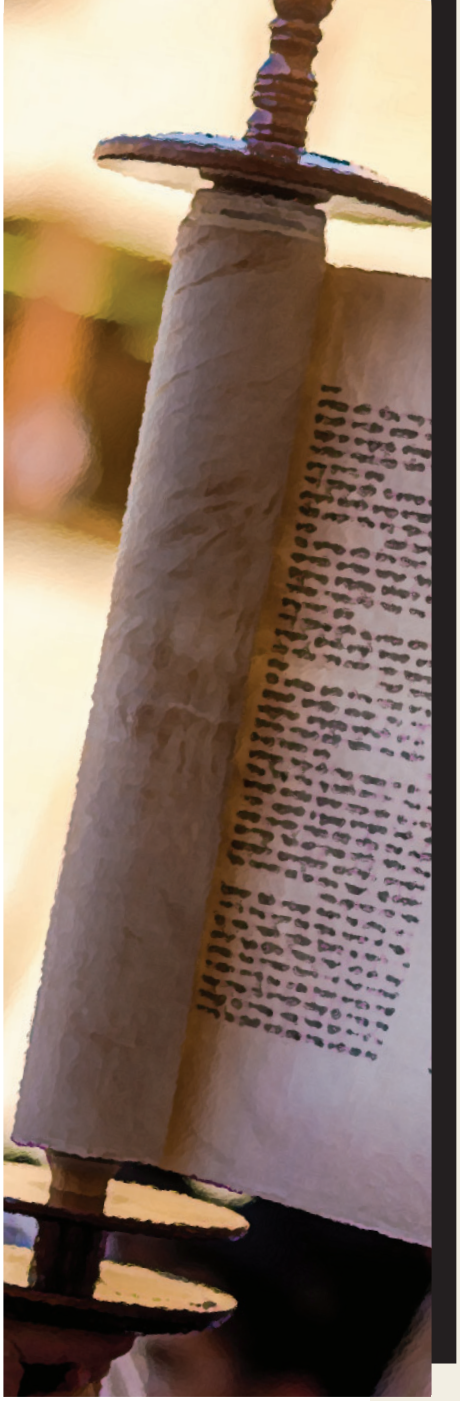


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Parshas
Devarim
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RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

EVERYTHING AT THE RIGHT TIME

In this week's *parshah*, Moshe Rabbeinu rebukes Klal Yisrael for their lack of respect for their elders and leaders — for gathering together in a disorganized crowd in which people pushed themselves forward without showing deference to others. Rashi notes that when the Torah was being given, Klal Yisrael didn't act in the same way — then, the younger people stood back, allowing their elders to stand before them, and the elders in turn made way for the leaders.

The Chiddushei Harim explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was not presenting Klal Yisrael's behavior at Matan Torah in order to hold it up as an example of how things should be done. Rather, their behavior at that time was also being criticized. While the Torah was being given, it would have been commendable for Klal Yisrael to eagerly push forward, and being orderly during such a momentous occasion was a sign that they did not properly appreciate the enormity of what was happening.

Knowing how to behave in any situation depends on the context and this applies to everything in life. There are times when it's appropriate for a parent to take a firm approach with a child, and times when it's better to step back and use warmth and understanding instead.

The same is true between husband and wife. While their relationship should be one of mutual respect, there are times when it's appropriate for one spouse to take a firm stance and not yield. This will actually benefit their relationship, even though it may not seem so at first. There are even times when slightly "rocking-the-boat" and being less tolerant than in the past is what enables the necessary reset, creating the possibility for things to come back into healthy balance.



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

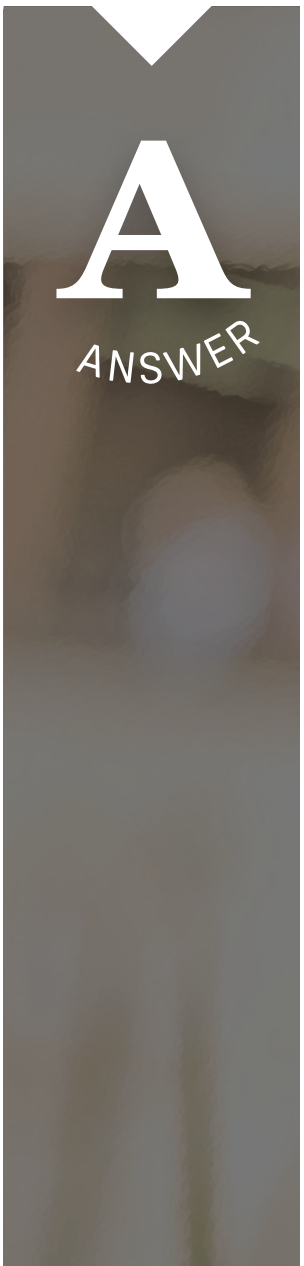
I listen to your classes every week and gain so much from them, and I would like to thank you for this project.

I have a question. I've been married for over ten years, with children, and I would like to ask your advice about a certain problem I have. I'd like to know if you think there's a way out for me.

I love my wife a lot and I do everything for her, but I feel it's a one-sided relationship. She doesn't respect me at all, and she doesn't share anything with me either. She simply isn't interested in what I have to say or what I do.

I would like to know how to deal with it.

Thank you



I'd like to begin by answering the first part of your question: Is there a way out for you? I'm unsure if you meant a way out, a way in, or simply a way to change things. Just about every relationship can change and be improved with *siyatta diShmaya*.

The saying goes, "It takes two to tango." Many difficulties do involve at least two people, but that doesn't mean that both people are needed to solve them. Even if one of the two is responsible for virtually the entire problem, it's often still possible for the other to respond wisely and resolve things, or at least cause a big shift in the right direction — and this can make it easier for the other person to change as well.

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Although wives are generally more obligated to accord their husbands respect than vice versa, all relationships should be built on mutual respect, love, and consideration. Your letter could equally have been written by a woman — in fact, such a letter could express how many people feel, as such situations are not at all rare.

That said, if anyone reading the letter is wondering whether their spouse could have been the author, it may be time for a moment of introspection. Although this is a common problem, that's no reason to discount it as insignificant. Many relationships would benefit from stepping outside the picture for a moment to see things from a more objective perspective and consider whether their spouse has reason to be unhappy about anything that's going on. It's a shame to rely on a spouse's reactions to imbalance, when many problems can be preempted and resolved.

This can most often be done without the involvement of a third party, which keeps things simple. There is unfortunately a tendency among some

therapists and "armchair counselors" to complicate matters unnecessarily. While there are cases where a lack of respect has deep-seated causes that might need to be addressed in order to solve the problem, there are many more cases where it's as simple as it's been presented here. And even when there *are* deep-seated causes, they don't necessarily have to be thoroughly investigated before dealing with the actual manifestations of the problem.

Situations of (typical) disrespect in a marriage aren't something to be alarmed about or turned into a bigger issue than just that. It's almost like a mother whose young child grabs the last cookie off a plate and she starts to panic at his "terrible *middos*" and "what's he going to look like when he grows up?" It's normal for a young child to behave that way. Such behavior shouldn't be ignored, but blowing it out of proportion will only make it harder to address.

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Relationships can get confusing. I've seen situations where a wife is very close with her family, and is used to asking her mother or sisters (or friends) for advice, and doesn't realize that her husband (who perhaps doesn't come from such a close knit family, or doesn't relate to that kind of relationship) feels sidelined by being somewhat out of the loop. Similarly, I've seen families where a wife doesn't have many close friends and wants her husband to be her "best friend," while he has plenty of friends and doesn't feel the need to spend much time just "hanging out" with her. While such situations can be painful, they aren't necessarily problematic, nor is a solution hard to find.

Improving such relationships starts with the recognition that a relationship is mutual. Although a husband is generally the *mashpia* and the wife the *mekabel*, the giving of love, respect, consideration and attention should most definitely be two-sided.

In relationships where things have become lopsided, people are sometimes tempted to "even things out" by stopping to give and provide and letting the other person come forward instead. There are even so-called professionals who encourage this, although it usually proves to be a grave mistake. Marriage is not a business partnership where each side gives 50 percent. Holding back your 50 before someone provides theirs isn't helpful. Spouses should each give 100 percent of themselves. Giving less, generally, isn't the way to get more.

But giving your all doesn't mean giving everything. You describe "doing everything" for your wife and not getting anything, or very much, in return. At the very least, you should be getting appreciation and gratitude in return, and these are things that you are entitled to want and also request. Hakadosh Baruch Hu sent Moshe Rabbeinu to make Bnei Yisroel aware of the great gift of Shabbos that He gave them, and similarly, the Gemara says that one should make others aware of what they are being provided with.

It's fine to want to feel acknowledged, and your wife shouldn't take what you give her for granted. You can and should point out many of the things you do for her; you can and should tell her how much it would mean to you to hear a genuine and heartfelt "thank you." It would be a shame to be resentful about this without clearly expressing your feelings and allowing for change. When you do so gently, and without making demands about how she "must" respond, hopefully she will learn to understand what is important to you.

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When it comes to gaining your wife's respect, it's important to stop and think: How much do you respect yourself? I don't mean to imply that you are to blame for your wife's apparent lack of respect. However, it's not uncommon for one spouse to gradually fade out of the picture and stop expressing himself, thereby actively losing respect and consideration.

It can be hard to start to express your opinion again, especially if you don't get any encouragement to do so from your wife. But it's important that you learn to do so. After all, how can your wife respect your opinion if you don't respect it enough yourself?

You should gently, yet confidently and assertively, communicate that having decisions made for you, without your input, is hurtful, and that from now on you'd like to have a voice in all areas that are either "mine" or "ours." Clarify that your wife's opinion is equally as important and you don't mean to change the dynamics in such a way that her voice is any less significant. All you want is for decisions to be made together, after you both have had a chance to express your opinions, desires, and preferences.

Implementing these changes will be challenging, but it's important that you do so, while showing confidence in the new direction things are moving. Once you see changes, you should be careful to stress how much you respect and take into consideration your wife's input, and also thank her for respecting the decisions you make (especially when they are in your domain) even when they go against her preferences. There's no reason for things to become a battle of wills, or to make her feel discounted, even when the decision only affects you.

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Although it may appear that your wife doesn't care what you think and is quite happy to run the home herself without your input, I very much doubt that this is the case. Even after years of doing things this way, I'd assume that your wife realizes that you should be the head of the household and doesn't feel good about having taken up that space herself. Interestingly, once a wife senses that her husband is ready to move back into his natural position, she will often accept the new situation with a lot more willingness than you imagine.

Even "strong" wives who seem to enjoy running things themselves usually prefer to have a strong husband with firm opinions to take responsibility for the home. It's also important to make sure you haven't unwittingly contributed to this situation by asking her or allowing her to take on a great deal of responsibility, and only then complaining that she's taken things too far. Being a man and a leader often means being ready to take on a bit more and setting a personal example of what it means to be responsible and confident.

I also suggest that you broaden your concept of giving. There are forms of giving that will tend to demean you and turn you into a shmatte, and you should try to avoid them. However, other forms of giving — such as offering compliments and praise — will build you up and create a win-win situation for you and your wife.

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You mention that your wife isn't interested in your life and doesn't share anything with you. I don't know how this situation evolved, but I can suggest some ideas for you, being that you are the one looking for solutions (and I commend you for being willing to make the first move).

You write that your wife doesn't share things — but you don't have to wait for her to do so. She has become accustomed, for whatever reason, to either share with others or not to share at all. So *you* start sharing things. Start conversations about things you would like to talk about, and about things or topics that you think could interest her too. Then, ask for her input, her opinions, and her feelings. Change won't happen overnight but you can probably get things moving.

Be'ezras Hashem you will be able to take the reins of your marriage and create a relationship where both you and your wife can flourish, with both of you giving and taking, and building a wonderful home.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: DEVARIM 5784

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