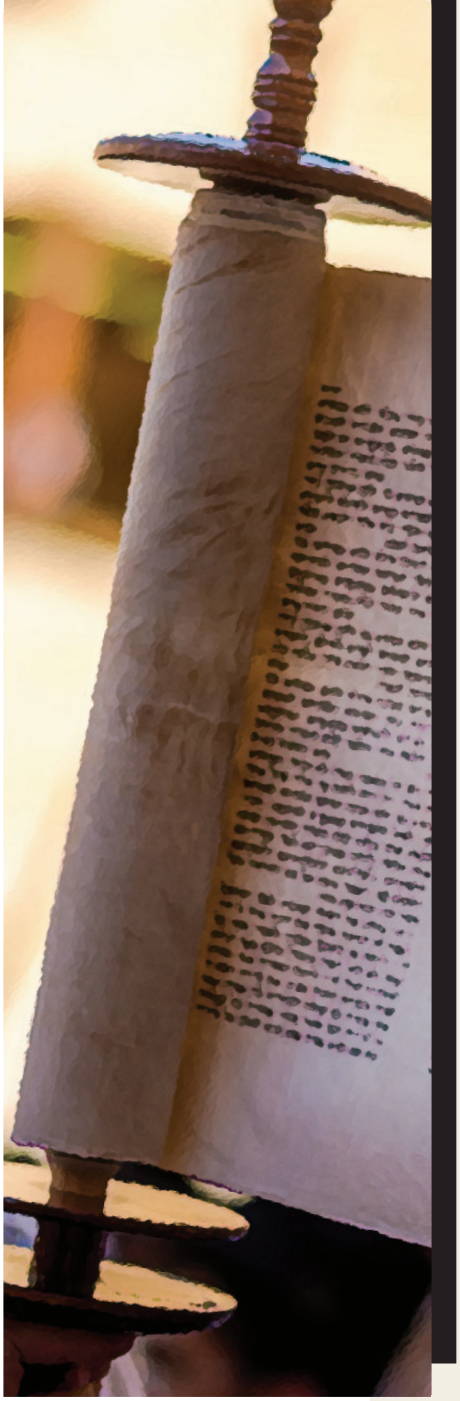


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

BENEFITS AND PITFALLS OF THE WRITTEN WORD

At the start of Parshas Vayikra, Hashem calls to Moshe Rabbeinu and then speaks to him. Rashi tells us that by first calling to summon Moshe and only then speaking to him, Hashem was demonstrating His affection. By contrast, whenever Hashem spoke to foreign prophets, He "chanced upon them" without any introduction.

The Chiddushei Harim explains that introducing an idea before implementing it is the right approach for everything holy. A *mitzvah* should be carefully planned before it is put into action. This is also clear from the laws applying to voluntary fasting. If a person specifies his intention to fast in order to do *teshuvah* for a certain thing, his fast will *be'ezras Hashem* achieve its purpose. However, if he fasts with no specific intention in mind, it will achieve nothing.

Everything worthwhile needs thoughtful preparation and planning in order to succeed. While acting spontaneously can appear natural and appealing, the truth is that often, it isn't helpful to "just do it" without first thinking it through. As with so many ideas, balance is key. Not everything spontaneous is suspect, but every concept needs to be implemented in moderation.

It's not uncommon for "professionals" to encourage couples to avoid anything that happens on the spur of the moment and to carefully schedule all interaction with a spouse. This might be good advice at times, but it is certainly not always applicable or feasible, especially if a spouse is asking to talk about something that genuinely needs addressing. It can be extremely hurtful for a person in such a situation to be told, "I can't, not now. Let's set a time for this." Being overly and artificially formal with someone you love can feel distancing and end up being counterproductive.

We must learn how to avoid both hasty and poorly considered language. By learning to think before we speak, we can avoid so much heartache and maintain healthy, respectful, and loving relationships.

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Parshas **Vayikra**

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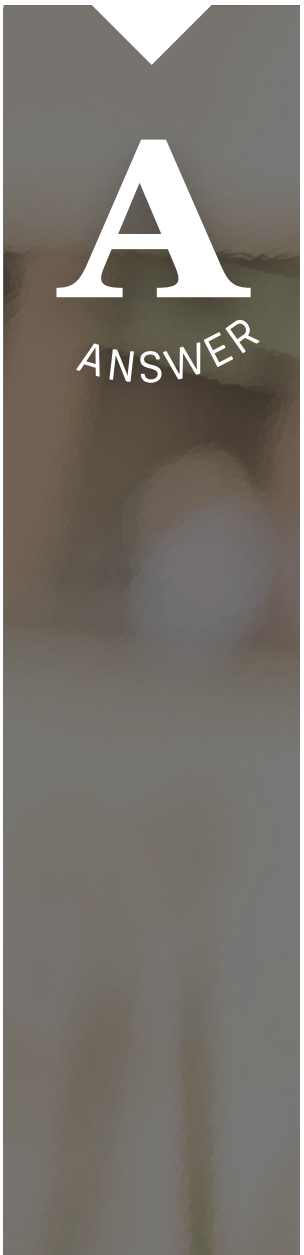
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I so much enjoy listening to your *shiurim.* They are so eye-opening, down-to-earth, easy to understand, and easy to implement.

I wanted to ask about discussing a certain issue with my husband. I really want to discuss it, but even just reviewing it in my mind makes me teary-eyed and I know that I'll get all choked up as soon as I start to talk to him. This isn't because it's a major issue; it's just my personality.

What I wanted to know is: Is it okay to email my husband, or to write him a letter about the issue and then, when we discuss it afterward, it will be easier because I'll already have said what I wanted to?

Thank you again



The short answer is: Yes. It's perfectly fine to open up a discussion with one's spouse, or anyone else for that matter, in writing. However, there are many issues one should be aware of before choosing this course of action. Let me use this opportunity to discuss various points of effective communication.

Marriage (and every other relationship) is about communication — real communication that goes far beyond, "Did you take care of that bill?" or "What's for supper?" Especially when there are children and all kinds of practical matters to take care of, couples have to make sure that they still have meaningful conversations beyond those that are simply necessary for the functioning of the home.

If this means setting aside time for such conversations, that's what should be done, even if it feels a little stilted at first. People who are particular to make time for this type of communication and then let it lapse, for whatever reason, generally soon discover that the relationship deteriorates, if only subtly. Making time to "just talk" is a key way of connecting, as well as showing someone you care.

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The power of speech is what distinguishes man from the animal kingdom. The Zohar Hakadosh also tells us that the power of a king is in his words. Even though he may have a mighty army or a treasury full of gold coins, if he cannot communicate then he is not truly a king. But the way in which we communicate is also vitally important. Speech is so powerful that it can be tempting to use it to control or intimidate. We should always take the utmost care to use our words for good purposes.

Communication should always be pleasant, and that starts by allowing it to happen pleasantly. If your spouse wants to talk, make sure

to be receptive, regardless of whatever might have happened beforehand. Sometimes, husbands or wives play "hard to get," saying things like, "*Now* you want to talk? Where were you when...?" or, "I can't now. You'll have to wait till tomorrow. Oh, tomorrow you're busy?? Well, if it's important enough to you, you'll find the time somehow."

Finding or making time for one another is something that couples should always do if it's at all possible. And aside from having when to communicate, so much is about the how. Communication should be respectful and pleasant, and not conducted in mumbles or grumbles or complaints.

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The importance of discussing things rather than shoving them under the carpet is so well illustrated by your letter. Burying topics, even the ones that are hard to verbalize, is almost never advisable. People don't forget about things just because they don't mention them. Painful thoughts tend to turn to resentment and things that started out as minor can become major over time.

You mention that even though the topic you want to discuss with your husband isn't a major one, you are still very anxious to get it out in the open — and this is the correct approach. If writing a letter helps you to prepare for a discussion, then by all means do so.

But I would like to mention several points that anyone in such a position should bear in mind.

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Written communication is almost always better than no communication at all. However, it is still a very poor substitute in many ways.

Firstly, when writing to someone, we usually omit all the "little" things that make communication personal and emotional, rather than a technical connection. Little things include the smile we add when saying, "Oh, what a lovely idea," or the facial expression we instinctively make when expressing sympathy and telling someone how much we feel for them.

Consider the loss of tone of voice or facial expression, which convey so much and simply cannot be portrayed adequately with the written word. Furthermore, if we aren't careful — and most people aren't — misunderstandings are so common. "Remember to buy milk on your way home!" can be read humorously, or as criticism ("You forgot last time, after all...") or as an insulting command.

In our day and age, so many people are accustomed to "communicating" in a highly abbreviated written form — as if the few seconds saved are worth losing out on the nuance that spending a little more time and effort would have added. While writing can seem like a more economical use of time than speech, so much is lost with this substitution. To convey the same message, we would really have to write much, much more than most people ever do.

So, if you want to make a request in writing, be careful how you make it and take the time to put the "tone" into your words. Do this even if you want to say something complimentary. After all, if you were saying something nice to a person, your facial expression and the warmth in your tone would convey a lot more than just the plain words themselves.

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Another drawback to writing rather than speaking is that it becomes so terribly easy to be nasty. When sending a letter, you worry less about how the person is going to react when they read it. As a result, many people write things they would never dream of saying, or which they would quickly stop saying before backtracking with an apology once they see how badly the other person is taking it. In person, hurt feelings can be soothed with a smile or a hug. None of that is possible with a letter.

On several occasions, people have shared with me incredibly hurtful things their spouses wrote to them. I'm often shocked by the degree of hostility expressed. Interestingly, it has happened that they later admitted telling me — upon which the spouse lambasted them: "How could you tell Rabbi Gruen? I'm horrified you could do such a thing!"

Without getting into whether it's always appropriate to share correspondence, I would like

to stress that being horrified is totally appropriate — being horrified that you wrote such words in the first place. How is it that you weren't ashamed to write such hurtful words and only figured out how shameful it was when a third party read it?

An added point to consider is that the recipient of such a hurtful letter may decide to keep it. Rereading a letter from years back has so much more impact than recalling words once spoken. You may later come to regret what you wrote but once the letter has been sent, it's impossible to retrieve.

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Writing has its benefits, however. Writing gives you the unique ability to plan ahead without distractions. You can write, rewrite, and edit before sending. And anyone who finds themselves angry or disappointed with someone can draft a letter and set it aside. Schedule a time to send it — a few days, or even a week later. Once the heat of the moment has cooled, you may find you want to tone down the language or rephrase the message. You may even realize that you don't need to send the letter at all. Or you may decide that a well-thought-out compliment would achieve the purpose more effectively.

Another advantage of writing is that the recipient will almost always read the entire letter. Even the best planned conversations can be waylaid by the other person's responses, and you may find that important issues you really wanted to discuss were either forgotten due to heightened emotions, or sidelined when the conversation took an unexpected turn. In a letter, you can include absolutely everything you want to say.



Writing can also free a person to express ideas that they find impossible to spell out in words, such as how deeply they care for their spouse, how much they regret something that happened, how much they want to improve a certain situation — all without feeling too embarrassed or vulnerable. Don't be sparing with your words. If you're already writing, write as much as you can, inserting as much emotion as you can.

So, now that you are about to write your letter, do so with these considerations in mind. Get the full benefit and avoid the pitfalls.

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One last thing to keep in mind is that when choosing to write rather than speak, you should make sure that it's an enhancement of communication, not a replacement. If you can't say something in speech, tell your spouse in writing that you really wanted to tell him verbally but you just couldn't bring yourself to open the discussion in person. Then add that you so much hope your letter will enable you both to have a deep and meaningful conversation.

Don't hide behind your letter. Make it clear that you are writing in order to improve your relationship, to bring you closer to your husband and not to create distance between you. Proper and effective communication will *be'ezras Hashem* help solve problems and enhance our relationships.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYIKRA 5785

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