

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the Home

## WHEN DISTANCE DRAWS US CLOSER

We know that of the two sisters, it was Rachel Imeinu whom Yaakov Avinu loved more. And yet, in this week's parshah we find Yaakov actually becoming angry at Rachel, which we do not find in relation to Leah. When Rachel begged Yaakov to "give me children," the passuk tells us that, "Yaakov became angry with Rachel, and he said, 'Am I instead of Hashem...?'"

In the sefer Chaim v'Shalom, a curious incident involving the great tzaddik Reb Hershele Zidichoiver is related. A certain man came to him asking for a brachah for children; the rebbe replied, "You have to argue with your wife and get into conflict with her if you want to be blessed with a child."

The man was taken aback, especially as his wife was a tzaddekes and they were not at all accustomed to quarreling. But he did as the Rebbe advised him, raising his voice at his wife without telling her why. He indeed succeeded in provoking an angry response from her... and they were blessed with children.

Sefer Chaim v'Shalom explains that sometimes, too much love and closeness between spouses prevents added blessing from reaching them. This was true of the constant and intense love Yaakov Avinu had for Rachel Imeinu. Looking at the example of the unjustly accused Sotah we find a similar concept; after being distanced from her husband and then reunited, the couple is blessed with exceptional children.

While this may sound counterintuitive and not even admirable, perhaps it contains a lesson that we can apply and gain from. Of course, spouses should not actively seek to distance themselves from each other, but sometimes closeness that is taken too far, to the point where one or both spouses lose their individuality, or feel suffocated and smothered, is not the ideal. The Gemara tells us that the fact that a woman's cycles naturally incorporate distance and reunion, is intentional, in order to preserve freshness in the relationship. Perhaps the same can be said about allowing individuality and independence when appropriate, within married life.

In general, almost everyone simply needs some private space in their lives, and no matter how close and loving a relationship, it still benefits from the occasional distance. It certainly does not need to result from quarreling, but there's something about giving space that we can all benefit from.

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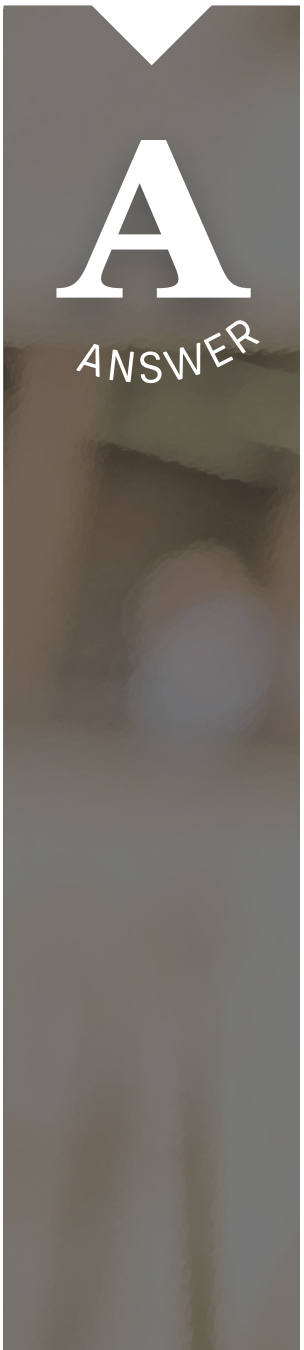



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I wanted to ask if you could clarify the inyan of men going away with friends on vacation, and also whether this includes visiting kivrei tzaddikim.

My husband and I have frequently disagreed on this topic. He wants to take trips once or twice a year, but I don't understand why this is appropriate for married men. My husband feels I'm controlling him and that I'm being unreasonable and unfair because "everyone does it." I'd really appreciate some clarity on what the right approach is.

Thank you.




It's understandable that you're troubled at frequently disagreeing with your husband, although a certain amount of disagreement within marriage is certainly normal. No one should get married with the expectation of agreeing with one's spouse on everything. Not only is it unrealistic to aim for an absolute unity of opinion, it's not even necessarily optimal. Husband and wife are supposed to remain two separate and distinct people and to nonetheless find ways to get along and build a bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael.

While this is something that people understand in theory, in practice things can get confusing when people fail to compartmentalize the issues they're dealing with. People often interpret differences of opinion as personal attacks, or even as a threat to the relationship itself.

To take a simple example: A wife wants to spend Yom Tov with her family and her husband objects. What is the real issue here? Too often, a wife in such a situation will globalize it and accuse her husband of not caring about her feelings at all: "If you really loved me, then you'd do what I wanted! You only think about yourself." If she stopped to think, she'd realize that what she's really saying is, "If you loved me, you wouldn't love yourself — only me. You'd stop having your own opinions and preferences and adopt mine instead." And if she thought a little more, she'd also realize that while she apparently thinks it's perfectly reasonable for her to demand that her husband set aside his needs and desires for her, she's not at all willing to do the same for him.

The problem isn't the issue — it's not defining the issue properly. Once we get the picture into focus and crop out all the extraneous factors, all the pixels line up and we realize that there may very well be nothing deeper there than the basic issue itself, and perhaps a solution isn't as far away as we thought.

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In your letter, you've presented the situation very reasonably and haven't fallen into the abovementioned trap. It really is simply about a husband going away and nothing more. Is it reasonable of him to want to do so, or not? Nothing more.

I'm not familiar with your circumstances or circles, and I assume a lot of this has to do with culture and social norms, as different communities and families

have different opinions and standards when it comes to this specific question. That said, what I have myself observed is that when it comes to women going on vacation, be it with sisters or with friends, or summer vacation away from home, there seems to be more of a broad societal acceptance. Husbands are expected to understand (and mostly do) that women need to go away from time to time and recharge their batteries. I'm often left to wonder at the double standard which doesn't grant husbands the same courtesy.

If your particular community is one in which husbands only very rarely go on vacation with friends, then it's possible that your husband's expecting to do so is unreasonable. That doesn't mean that he can't discuss it with you, however. There may be very good reasons why he, personally, does need the space and time to himself. This has nothing to do with the quality of your marriage; it's just the type of person he is. In any case, there is absolutely nothing wrong with opening a discussion and sharing a desire. No one should feel unable to voice their opinion or express an interest, out of fear of being labeled selfish or uncaring.

What if he doesn't "need" a vacation and merely "wants" one, and would appreciate experiencing one with friends; is that okay? The question now becomes, "Is he allowed to have a preference regarding how or where and with whom to have a good time?" I would suggest that the answer is: Yes.

Enjoyment must not end once we get married, and our ideas about what and how to enjoy may not change entirely even after we get married.

Enjoying going on vacation with friends doesn't mean that your husband doesn't enjoy going on vacation with you, as well. But it's such a shame when young singles assume that marriage is all gloomy responsibility and that their days of personal pleasure must end under the chuppah.

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I don't mean to imply that your husband can simply inform you that this is what he's decided to do and fly off, leaving you with the sole option of acquiescing. While it's wrong for you to run your husband's life and dictate what he does or doesn't do, for him to fail to consider your feelings is also wrong. Married life is about two people learning to live together and take each other's needs, preferences, and opinions into account. Neither spouse should control the other in any way, or resist truly being considerate.

In my book, Get Along With Everyone, I dedicate a chapter to understanding boundaries, and classify topics that come up in relationships in three categories: mine, yours, and ours. There are things in your life, even once you're married (believe it or not), that still pertain primarily to you, those that pertain to your spouse, and those that are essentially shared. While almost everything either one of you does will affect both of you to a degree, it's essential to distinguish between things that directly concern you and others that only have a tangential impact.

Essentially, the question of whether your husband may go on vacation with friends concerns him most, and he should be allowed to decide rather than have someone else decide for him. Your input begins where his vacation impacts you — things like whether you'll need outside help with the children when he's away, whether the funds are available or you'll be left short on household necessities, when it would best work for you to have him take the time away, and so forth.

Clearly, if you can't actually afford the vacation, it's a different question entirely. If you can't manage everything at home without him, then it affects the "ours" area and he should help you find a solution to that.

If you are concerned that the people he'd like to travel with are unsuitable friends who will exert a negative influence on him, then certainly that's something you should discuss. The discussion, however, is about how he can have the vacation he wants without harming you. It's not about how you can convince him to stay home or control his decisions.

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It's possible that even after discussing things exhaustively, you still won't feel entirely at peace with the idea of him going on vacation with friends. Confronting him, constantly, with your disapproval and hurt feelings, however, is very unlikely to have any positive outcome for either of you.

Often, a husband or wife who has to accept that their spouse is doing something they dislike, is tempted to make the spouse feel guilty and rob them of any enjoyment. "If I let him enjoy this vacation," the thinking goes, "he'll feel he can get away with it again and again. At least if he feels guilty about leaving me at home he'll think twice about going the next time."

Intentionally making a spouse feel guilty for doing something that isn't intrinsically wrong is manipulative and unwise. Far from being remorseful about taking the vacation he was looking forward to, a husband in such a situation is more likely to resent the wife who doesn't fargin his enjoyment. He will resent the wife's

attitude even more if, while away, he notices how his friends' wives let them go happily and even willingly. While spouses should never compare each other with other couples, the reality is that people do. In your own interest, it's often better to hide your hard feelings and focus on showing your husband how glad you are to be giving him this opportunity.

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It can be difficult to allow someone to do their own thing, especially when you really aren't happy about it. It can be easier, however, when you look at the bigger picture and admit that there are things you do that he isn't entirely happy with — and yet, he doesn't stop you from doing them. It will also be easier if you really try to get to the bottom of what is truly bothering you, rather than letting your feelings cloud your understanding.

What is the essence of your opposition to your husband's vacation? Is it the fact that he didn't consult you on the best time to travel? You're fully entitled to raise this issue with him and ask him to take the vacation at a time that suits the entire family. Perhaps what you object to is the way he asked — maybe he didn't ask, but instead "informed" you of his plans. You certainly should tell him, calmly and reasonably, that given that this is something that affects you, you'd appreciate a bigger part of the decision-making process.

Even if your objections center around emotional issues, such as the feeling of being abandoned, or your fear that your husband prefers the company of his friends to you, it can still be discussed in a calm manner. When one spouse is calm and reasonable, the other one is far more likely to cooperate and compromise is easier to reach. And, if your husband does compromise in deference to your wishes, tell him how much you appreciate it.



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For any husbands reading this, I would like to stress how important it is for you to involve your wife in the decisions you make, even if you feel that you're perfectly entitled to do as you please. And this applies even if your wife went on vacation just last month, or has been staying summer after summer in the bungalow colony at your expense...

It may seem at first that compromising will only limit you, but the truth is that a happy wife secure in her husband's love and concern for her is far more likely to agree to you taking vacations with friends again in the future. Make sure to tell her how much you appreciate her "letting" you go, and tell her how much you'll miss her while you're away. If there's something you can do to make life easier for her while you're away, then do it. And don't forget to bring her back a gift.

There are so many misconceptions in marriage, and most of them are easy to resolve once we learn how to view things from the correct angle. This question of how much "distance" and independence to allow and incorporate into marriage is a key area of conflict for so many couples, especially as people often get married with the mistaken idea that husband and wife should ideally never be parted and should want to spend all their time together.

Spouses should give to one another and want to give to one another. Sometimes, the greatest gift they can give is the permission to be themselves and put themselves first. While it may seem that allowing distance to emerge between them will only drive them further apart, the truth is that ultimately, it is what helps people connect with each other in a stronger bond than ever before.

## **TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME**: VAYETZEI 5786

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