

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

IS IT MY HUSBAND'S FAULT?

The *Kedushas Levi* explains that *hachna'ah*, feeling subordinate to someone else, generally brings a person sadness. We want to feel independent, rather than smaller than another person or under their control. Yet *hachna'ah* before Hashem brings the opposite feeling: submitting ourselves to Him can be a source of true *simchah*.

He finds this idea in the words of the *pasuk*, "*Vayeitzei Yitzchak lasuach basadeh*"—Yitzchak went out to converse in the field. Yitzchak's name expresses joy, as in "*Tzachok asah li Elokim*." *Lasuach* alludes to *hachna'ah*, while *basadeh* alludes to *kedushah*. When does *hachna'ah* bring happiness? When it is directed toward Hashem.

In marriage, too, there is a healthy, Torah-directed *hachna'ah* between husband and wife, and especially from wife to husband. Nevertheless, nobody enjoys feeling controlled. Nobody likes to feel that someone else is controlling their actions, and certainly not their moods, attitudes, or behavior. However, as adults, we need to recognize that the independence we value comes with responsibility. A child asked why he is fighting with his brother immediately answers, "Because he..." It's easier to assume that someone else must have done something that caused a mistake on our part. But we cannot insist that our decisions are our own while holding someone else responsible whenever those decisions lead us somewhere we do not want to be.

Healthy independence and responsibility go hand in hand, and when we take responsibility for our actions, we are truly independent. This allows us to benefit from relationships and build connections while making our own decisions and behaving as appropriately as we can.

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ב"ר אהרן ע"ה
בערגער (ניימאן)

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for taking the time to answer everyone's questions. I really gain a lot from it.

Whenever something bothers me about my husband, the first place it affects me is emotional eating. I eat a lot, and then I'm even more resentful toward my husband because he's the cause of my gaining weight. What can I do?



The cycle you describe is understandably frustrating: something bothers you, you eat, and the resulting weight gain gives you another reason to be upset. Before addressing it, though, I need to clarify what you mean by something bothering you "about" your husband. Is it something he does to you, or something about him that you don't like but that he may not even be responsible for? If, for example, he snores despite trying to address it, that is different from speaking to you disrespectfully or failing to provide properly. I will assume that you mean behavior toward you that is wrong or inconsiderate, but if I'm wrong, please bear in mind that this would be another topic worth clarifying.

The first thing worth clarifying is that there may be two separate issues: your eating and how your husband treats you. I definitely understand the connection; it's just that without learning to compartmentalize, the issues become more complicated and harder to resolve.

Your emotional eating is one struggle, and perhaps we can call it your own. That does not mean that your husband has done nothing wrong, or that you should accept mistreatment. It means separating his responsibility for how he treats you from your responsibility for how you respond, for the sake of dealing with each issue effectively. Otherwise, the resentment about your marriage and the frustration about your weight keep feeding into each other, making it harder to address either one.

Taking responsibility

Some people would compartmentalize issues if it didn't feel so challenging to do so. The problem is often that it doesn't feel good to be unable to blame someone for a problem, no matter how personal. Looking for someone to blame is very natural. There is a joke that computers have not reduced the number of mistakes; they have simply reduced the number of people there are to blame. In our own lives, too, it is easier to explain what led us to behave a certain way than to acknowledge that the behavior is ours to address.

When Hashem asked Adam about eating from the *Eitz Hadaas*, Adam pointed to the wife Hashem had given him. Chavah had indeed given him the fruit; he was not inventing her involvement. Yet that did not make blaming her the proper response, as Rashi points out. Recognizing another person's part in what happened does not remove our responsibility for our own actions.

I've heard many people describe a difficult parenting situation in terms like these: "My spouse makes me nervous, and I take it out on the kids." That may describe what happened, but it does not answer what the parent needs to do about it. There are many other examples too. A husband may explain that he cannot motivate himself

to earn a living because of how his wife speaks to him, or a wife may attribute her difficulty functioning at home to her husband's behavior. Their spouses may indeed be treating them badly. They may even have ways to prove that they functioned better when treated better. Nevertheless, they still need to ask themselves what they are supposed to be doing and how to address their own behavior.

Recognizing a problem is already something. It's worse when someone denies that anything is wrong, as when a parent insists, "I'm not screaming; the children love me." But recognizing the problem does not always lead to taking responsibility for it. Blaming someone else for a problem you admit to isn't going to solve it. On the contrary, it can leave you feeling absolved of taking the next step in the right direction.

It is particularly troubling when a person receives professional validation that reinforces this position. Understanding why someone is struggling can be helpful, but if the person leaves feeling justified in continuing harmful behavior and more resentful toward a spouse—or anyone else they can blame for their difficulties—what has been accomplished? The behavior remains, and now the person feels that addressing it is someone else's responsibility.

In your situation, recognizing that your husband's behavior upsets you should help clarify what needs attention, and I feel that it's important for you to address it openly in a healthy manner. Just be careful that it doesn't become the explanation that prevents you from addressing the eating.

Two independent responsibilities

You wrote only about how your husband's behavior affects your personal choices, but allow me to connect this to how people describe relationship issues in general: "Because he does this, I do that." "Because she spoke to me like that, I did this." Taking responsibility for your personal choices, as well as for how you treat your spouse in return, does not require pretending that your husband treats you properly. If he is hurting you, you can work on addressing that. You do not have to choose between acknowledging his wrongdoing and acknowledging your own responsibility. Both can be true.

Rav Avraham Genachovsky, *z"l*, used to point out that the Rambam presents a husband's obligations toward his wife and a wife's obligations toward her husband separately. Each needs to learn what is required of them. A husband cannot refuse to provide because his wife is disrespectful, and a wife cannot justify disrespect because her husband is not providing. Otherwise, each person waits for the other to become deserving, and neither fulfills their own obligations.

To take a sensitive example, a husband may be deprived of basic marital needs and then behave inappropriately. When confronted, he blames his wife. He is right that she has responsibilities toward him and that failing to meet them can have consequences. He is wrong to treat that as an excuse for his own conduct. His responsibility does not absolve her of hers, and her failure does not absolve him of his.

Now, back to your question. Accepting that the eating is your struggle does not mean giving your husband permission to mistreat you. Nor does it mean that you should simply swallow whatever bothers you. You can look for ways to address his behavior and have him treat you better. But when you add resentment about your weight to resentment about what he did, the two problems become entangled. Addressing how he treats you and addressing your eating need to remain separate responsibilities and discussions.

Understanding the struggle

Emotional eating and weight gain aren't fun, and they deserve a discussion of their own, although I'm not sure if that's what you wanted to hear from me. I am no addiction specialist, but I've worked with many addicts on relationship issues and have learned a thing or two about the topic. As Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski describes in his book *Addictive Thinking*, a recurring difficulty is how a person explains compulsive behavior to themselves. There may be denial, self-justification, or a succession of explanations: "I don't really have to do this. I stopped today. It only happened because…"

With eating, for example, the explanation may be, "If you wouldn't upset me, I wouldn't eat," or, "If you didn't buy junk food, I wouldn't touch it." When there was no junk food the previous week, there was another explanation. Each incident has its own account, while the underlying struggle remains unaddressed.

The starting point is to recognize, "This is a struggle I have. It is affecting my life, and I need to find a way to deal with it." That is very different from assuming that the eating will resolve itself once everyone around you behaves differently. You can work on finding other ways to respond to what hurts or bothers you without continually renewing the resentment about what it leads you to do.

To be clear, overcoming compulsive eating or losing weight is not easy. The enormous range of diets, programs, procedures, and other approaches, alongside the number of people still struggling, should make that clear. Different people find different approaches helpful, and it is worth pursuing ways to overcome behavior that is making life unmanageable. Taking responsibility begins with honestly acknowledging that there is a problem, rather than denying the difficulty or blaming someone else entirely.

In general, it's important to interpret correctly how someone "makes you feel." People often use expressions such as "You make me feel like a failure," or worse.

Sometimes someone really does speak in a way intended to make another person feel small. At other times, a comment does "cause" a feeling, even unintentionally, and the person attributes that feeling entirely to the speaker. Whether it has brought an existing feeling or difficulty to the surface or created a new hurt, it is important to distinguish what was said or done from what it brought up in you. That does not excuse hurtful speech; it once again helps you identify what each of you needs to address.

Responsibility and understanding

You were brief in your letter, and at the risk of going off topic and discussing something even less relevant to you, I'll point out another related idea. You have not said whether your husband is bothered by your weight, so I do not know whether this is part of your situation.

I do hear from husbands who are upset that their wives have gained weight. A husband may care about his wife's appearance and be bothered by a change, but he should never make her feel bad about it. Most often, she is more troubled by the weight gain than he is, even if her response to his comments does not show it. Difficulty losing weight does not necessarily reflect a lack of concern for what matters to a spouse. It may simply be very hard to overcome.

And while a husband should never say anything hurtful to his wife, there should be room to understand his feelings without interpreting them as a judgment of your worth or accepting that your struggle means you do not care about him. It is much easier to see how someone else could solve a problem than to overcome our own. People readily suggest a program, a course, or more consistency. You may understand those suggestions perfectly and still find them difficult to carry out. Likewise, you may see clearly what your husband should change while finding your own struggle much harder to manage. Recognizing that can help you understand both yourself and him.

Feeling understood can make a big difference. A woman who feels that her husband recognizes the difficulty, rather than judging or looking down on her, may find more courage and confidence to work on it. At the same time, understanding should not become another condition used against a spouse: "If you believed in me, you would pay for another diet." I have encountered that argument even after a husband has paid for diets for many years. The point is to develop understanding, not to find a new way of making someone else responsible.



In any case, you can acknowledge the effort your struggle requires without continually criticizing yourself for not overcoming it. Taking responsibility is compatible with recognizing that you are dealing with something very difficult and may need help.

Sometimes the way a struggle is explained becomes a reason to take less responsibility. Recently, I referred to a maamar Chazal while speaking with someone about an addiction he had struggled with for a long time. He objected because he had been told that his difficulty was a sickness and had nothing to do with that teaching. Yet Chazal seemed to be describing the very struggle he was experiencing. Without settling those broader questions here, recognizing the severity of a struggle and taking responsibility for dealing with it do not have to contradict each other.

Addressing resentment

Finally, there is value in learning to express what bothers you rather than allowing resentment to build inside. When you can communicate properly and get something off your chest, there is less unexpressed hurt to deal with through eating or another escape. This does not replace addressing the eating itself, but it is part of working on the relationship while taking responsibility for your personal struggle.

To clarify what proper compartmentalization would look like here, your husband's behavior can be addressed as a relationship issue, and your eating can be addressed as your own difficulty. You can seek better treatment without making your progress dependent on his changing, and you can work on yourself without declaring that his conduct is acceptable. Keeping those distinctions clear gives you a way to approach both concerns without allowing each to become a reason that the other cannot improve.

We began with the desire to feel independent rather than controlled by another person. That independence comes with the responsibility to acknowledge our own choices and struggles. With greater understanding, honest communication, and less blame, may Hashem help you and your husband live happily together for many years to come.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: CHAYEI SARAH 5787

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