RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS
BEHAR-BECHUKOSAI

A SPOUSE WITH NO "SPARE" TIME

The *sefer Siach Sarfei Kodesh* brings a *vort* in the name of the Rebbe Reb Bunim of Parshischa, who once asked his chassidim: "What's a chassid?" One person answered: "A person who goes *lifnim mishuras hadin* — who does more than he is required to." The Rebbe was pleased with his answer, and cited the *passuk* in Parshas Behar where the Torah tells us, "*Lo sonu ish es amiso* — do not fool your fellow man," noting that *lifnim mishuras hadin* in this *mitzvah* would consist of not fooling oneself either. That's a chassid!

In the area of relationships, it's so easy to fool ourselves without even realizing what we're doing. In fact, people are judging, interpreting, and assuming virtually all day long, which is why we need a *mitzvah* to be *melamed zechus*. It's also why we all need to engage in regular introspection and question our habitual behaviors and our tendencies to see things a certain way. If we don't, we may never realize the truth of what we're doing, because wrong interpretations are invisible to others, and no one's going to call us out on the unspoken assumptions we make. That's why it's so vital to be determined not only not to fool others, but also not to fool oneself.

I often discuss how important it is to focus only on what *you* can do to help yourself in any situation, rather than waiting for others to change. If there's something you can do, do it. What the other person *should* do, or should have done, or the fact that what you know you should be doing is simply very hard for you, shouldn't affect the truth of a situation or the way you present it. You need to be honest with yourself and examine whether you could be doing better, or whether you're making the situation more complicated in any way.

We can all use the occasional moment of honesty to contemplate: Am I really the husband I should be? The wife I should be? The parent I should be? There may be a lot going on and being overly self-critical isn't helpful... but don't fool yourself either.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED IN HONOR OF A DEAR FRIEND
R' YOEL SCHLESINGER AND FAMILY
לרגל אירוסי בנם הבחור המופלג משה נ"י
ויה"ר שיזכה לבנות בית נאמן בישראל לתפארת בית אבותיו וירוו הוריו רב נחת דקדושה ממנו ומכל יוצ"ח

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

I feel like my husband doesn't enjoy spending time with me. I think it's because we don't understand each other emotionally.

My husband has a full schedule, leaves the house at 5:30 AM and comes home after work and *kollel* at 7:30 PM for supper. At 8:30 he goes back out to daven and learn, and comes back home at 10:30 exhausted and rushing to bed because he has to wake up early.

I am very appreciative that he works hard and has such a full schedule (and I make sure he knows that), but he also knows that I dream of us having some more time to talk...

He recently got his Sundays off. I was so excited knowing that we'll have some time to spend together. The first two weeks, he took on another job (as a favor for someone else) and then he started a course that has classes on Motzaei Shabbos and Sunday afternoons and evenings. (He did ask me before signing up, but knowing how much he wanted to do this and that he was being offered the course for free, I gave him the go-ahead. I still let him know that I wasn't so happy about our Sundays being cut short.)

Monday after signing up but before attending his first session, he told me he's happy it worked out because he wouldn't be able to spend a full day just with me! I left the room and went to bed crying. After a while he apologized and we had a long talk mostly of me explaining how I feel, and him acknowledging.

On Motzaei Shabbos after his first session, he wanted to sit down and start studying. I asked him if we could schmooze as he hadn't been home the entire evening. His response was, "I enjoy spending time with you but not *so* much time!"

That night I decided that I would change my attitude and show him how happy I am that he is enjoying himself and that he works so hard. I decided never to ask him for more time. I will learn to treasure whenever he does give me time of his own free will. Is this the right way to go about it? (When I told him this, although I probably shouldn't have, he said, "thank you.")

The reason why I think it's an emotional misunderstanding is because he had a difficult childhood and learned to bury his feelings (or he just doesn't have any strong emotions naturally). I have very strong emotions, like to feel them, understand them, and discuss why I'm feeling the way I'm feeling. Sometimes I feel totally misunderstood. He never felt the way I feel and has no idea how to respond. For example, take the example above when I left the room crying, he came and said, "If you want to discuss something we can talk about it." If I would have taken him up on it, he would have excused himself and explained why he said what he did, coming up with reasons why it was okay. He wouldn't have said, 'I'm sorry I hurt you, please don't cry, I don't like seeing you so upset...'

We've discussed this emotional difference and he is trying to work on it but maybe he feels too much pressure and therefore doesn't enjoy my company.

On the other hand, he does want to go on vacation with me and spend three-to-four days just in my company...

Thank you

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Your letter contains many important points, and I'll try to address as many as possible. Before I begin, however, I would like to note that although I strive to avoid making sweeping generalizations about women and men, it's not uncommon to encounter couples in your situation. Each couple has their unique approach to spending time together, some enjoying an unlimited amount of time with each other and others trying to balance different ideas about how to use their spare time. In many situations, it's the husband who feels threatened by his wife's not having time for him, and who complains that she's always busy with friends and sisters, while others complain that their wife simply doesn't know how to make conversation. It's worth noting though, that in very many marriages, it's the wife who desires more time with her husband, so you're in good company and dealing with a normal and somewhat typical issue.

Another point, one that I often make, is that trying to appreciate even more what you *do* have can often make things easier for you. A husband who has a full schedule and is responsible about making the best use of his time, who feels good about himself, and who is accomplishing, is quite a rarity these days. In fact, even taken separately these are all great things, which can often go un- or underappreciated. Some people struggle with the exact opposite: a spouse who doesn't have a schedule, isn't productive, and doesn't feel fulfilled. Although there are certainly challenges in your situation too, it can be helpful to recognize that having things the other way around is generally a much bigger problem. I've seen many a truly intolerable situation involving a lack of schedule, structure, and purpose.

You mentioned that you do appreciate this; you also said that you let your husband know that you do. That's great. There's the old Carnegie rule of avoiding the word "but." Whenever you say "but," you don't realize how much of the first part of the message is negated. "I love that you're so busy *but* I would love to spend more time with you." The "but" just killed it. You can say the same thing without the word "but," by making two separate statements. "I love that you're busy. I'd love to have more time with you." It's not a contradiction — you don't need to feel bad about his being busy, even if it means that you get to spend less time with him. You can still love that he's busy, and he can still feel good about himself. Make sure he knows that you appreciate his hard work and impressive accomplishments, even though you find his busy schedule challenging.

That said, it could be beneficial for you to make a clear decision on whether to accept this style of living or not. If you opt to admire your husband's busy schedule and accomplishments and grant him free rein to continue in his current course, it may be more helpful not to dilute or confuse your message by also wanting him *not* to be busy. If your heart sinks as he walks out the door on Sunday afternoon, it may be better for your *shalom bayis* to simply say: "I understand how you love to be busy and really admire how you're always striving to do more. I'd also really love to spend more time with you, and I'd so much appreciate it if you put off this course for another time." Alternatively, you could ask him to set aside a specific time-slot on Sundays for you to talk (and this is something I will discuss further below), which could make your feelings easier.

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You didn't write how long you've been married, but I have the impression that it's more than a few months, time enough certainly to have realized that your husband is a person who feels the need to fill every moment of his day. And yet, when your husband got his Sundays off, you *assumed* that would mean more time together. I understand why you would want that, and it's entirely normal to, but bearing in mind your husband's nature, it might have been more realistic to expect him to at least initially find ways of filling that day, not because he cares less about you, but because that is his instinctive response to having "free" time. Although you were (understandably) upset, it's possible that your husband had no idea that you would react that way, and may have assumed (!) that you were already used to his super-packed schedule and would accept this as a matter of course.

Having expectations and assumptions without communicating them can often be a source of tension. While you did mention to your husband that you weren't happy about having your time together on Sundays cut short, it may be that he didn't immediately realize just how much the time together means to you. Sometimes, it can be helpful to be much more direct, saying something like, "You're having time off. It would mean so much to me if we could spend some of that time together."

In any relationship, it's wise to avoid anything ambiguous and not assume things unless you know for sure. While your husband is probably quite aware that you would like to spend more time with him, that doesn't necessarily translate in his mind to making space on Sunday for whatever you have in mind. Things that concern both of you shouldn't be assumed and must be discussed, if you want to avoid misunderstandings.

From your perspective, you wanted your husband to spend more time with you on Sundays and you hoped that he would fall in with your wishes. Perhaps that's also the way your husband sees things — that is, he wanted to take a course on Sundays and hoped that *you* would understand and comply with *his* wishes? In fact, even though he may have assumed this, he didn't just take your consent for granted but instead asked you for your input, which speaks to his sensitivity and consideration.

This brings us to another assumption that could use some testing: You assume that he doesn't enjoy spending time with you because of a personality clash. It's true that personalities often do clash, simply because people are different. Being different is a fact, but it doesn't have to become a problem. You and your husband have different natures and like different things. You also may feel and experience things very differently. All of this means that it's only natural for the two of you to see an open Sunday in entirely different ways, but it doesn't need to mean that your personalities *clash* to the extent that you are even slightly incompatible. Perhaps all it would take to bridge your differences is open and vulnerable communication.

You cannot change someone's personality, but you can work on flexibility and understanding. You could be right that some of this has to do with his childhood and nurturing, but I believe it has more to do with his innate personality. Either way, it's important to understand that it's okay for the two of you to be different, and that marriage doesn't have to make you more alike. Marriage unites a couple in some areas, but should also permit both spouses the space to remain different in other areas.

That said, can you be sure that the reason your husband doesn't enjoy spending a lot of time with you is the difference in your personalities? This is your interpretation of what you're experiencing, but there are other interpretations that you may not have considered.

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To explain this a little better, consider the case of a mother who loves her child unconditionally and enjoys telling him a bedtime story, but nonetheless finds it challenging to spend long hours playing with her son.

Should you ever tell your child that you don't enjoy spending so much time with him? No (and it was probably a big mistake on your husband's part to say this to you, if that was what he meant to say and it didn't somehow come out wrong). But is it still normal to love a child tremendously while only having a certain amount of patience to spend time with the child? Yes.

People have an easier time accepting this in a parent-child relationship, due to the age gap and other factors that make it understandable (at least to the parent, that is), but they don't so readily accept it when a similar dynamic occurs between spouses. All the same, it really *is* normal for spouses to love each other *and* express that love in very different ways, with different ideas on how much time to spend together and what to do with that time.

This is especially the case given the very different emotional needs of men and women when it comes to connecting with others, discussing feelings, and the like. There is nothing in your account to suggest that your situation is any different from that of so many other women today who wish that their husbands would make more time for them. Our lives are often very solitary and healthy social contact is hard to come by, leaving women, who have a greater need for communication than men, often feeling that something important is missing from their lives. Looking to one's husband to fill this gap that is more naturally filled by women is only natural, but it doesn't follow that husbands are actually suited to the role, and more often than not, they are very unsuited to it.

Gender differences could also be responsible for how the two of you understand this topic of "spending time together." It's not unusual for husbands to feel quite intimidated at the idea of spending time together in the abstract, when they don't know exactly what is expected of them (especially if their past attempts at initiating such connection have been unsuccessful). While some men have no problem making conversation, it's more usual for them to be more focused in their communications, and this would seem to be especially pertinent with your husband, who comes across as extremely focused and purposeful.

For all these reasons, having a concrete suggestion for how you'd like to spend your hour or two, or more, together is a more practical way to go about things. Husbands generally react very differently to the idea of "spending time together on Sundays" as opposed to, "How about we take a walk in the park every Sunday morning between 10 and 12, or thereabouts?" A clearly defined time-slot is likely to work much better for a husband like yours, who likes to account for his time —

and as I've mentioned earlier, being accountable for his time is a very admirable trait.

Once he's agreed to spend this time with you, make sure it's simply an enjoyable time, not a time to bring up problems or "issues"; save those for other times, not when you're enjoying each other's company. You'd be surprised how (if initiated and done right) you may even find that your husband appreciates the idea that he has a few hours of respite from his constant (self-imposed) pressure to keep moving forward, and he'll actually be grateful to you for asking for it. Even if he isn't, that doesn't matter; the main thing is to make sure that the hour or two you have is a relaxed time, and that afterward, you thank him wholeheartedly.

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You mentioned that your husband would like to go on vacation and spend a few days with you. That's amazing, and also suggests that he finds the idea of a defined period of time easier to deal with. Sometimes, such concentrated periods of spending time together can make up for other times when you don't have much together-time. But sometimes people turn down such offers because they were hoping for something else instead. That's a shame, because you never know how one thing could lead to another. Once your husband realizes that he can spend time with you without feeling frantic that he "should be getting things done," he may be willing to do so much more often. Even if that doesn't happen, why not enjoy this opportunity you're being offered? Things rarely happen exactly as we would like, but many times, we realize after the event that they were exactly what we need. I don't share much of the huge amount of feedback I receive from my readers and listeners, but a while back I gave a class based on a similar question, where a wife was upset that her husband could "only" give her one hour a day. I suggested there that an hour can be a significant amount of time and that she could try utilizing it and appreciating it for what it is. Just recently, I got feedback from that questioner. Here's her response:

Hi again. It was a very hectic few months here and I finally found the time to write to you. Thank you so much for giving me the right insight and the positive way to look at the situation that I really thought was unfair. Ever since, I have only tried to see the positivity of even spending some time with him, even if it isn't a lot, and made the most out of it!

I always appreciate feedback, but this was especially meaningful. I'm impressed to see that this woman still wants more time with her husband, and perhaps rightfully so, yet her change of attitude changed the whole situation.

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Changing one's attitude is often helpful in so many ways. Being open to a different interpretation than the one you are used to can open the door to creative solutions. One of the things you write suggests that this could work here: "He never felt the way I feel and has no idea how to respond." You're so right — he really never did feel the way you feel, and that's not his fault, of course. And you also feel misunderstood, which is also very natural. You left the room crying, wanting him to respond in a certain way, and when he didn't, you were disappointed, and also assumed that even if you had discussed the issue, he would only have justified himself.

That's possible, of course, but then again, he might have been silent, with "no idea how to respond." Whenever that happens, you have the option of being proactive rather than hoping that he'll read your mind and know exactly what you want to hear. You could instead, gently, *tell him* how you would like him to respond. If discussions don't go the way you want, you can try to guide your husband as to what you want to hear from him. Tell him what you would appreciate hearing.

If you want him to say, "'I'm sorry I hurt you, please don't cry, I don't like seeing you so upset…" then you could tell him how much it would mean to hear him verbalizing his concern for your feelings. Although he doesn't express his feelings the way you would, this doesn't mean he doesn't *have* feelings, and it certainly doesn't mean that he doesn't care about *you*. It's very possible that he feels terrible seeing you crying, and just doesn't know what to say or do.

The famous idea of there being different "languages of love" may help you to understand that his different style of communication doesn't mean a lack of love, just a different way of showing it. You can certainly try to teach him your language of love — and you can also try to understand his. When a little child says "*Ay luf oo,*" you don't correct him. You enjoy the sweet expression and accept that he's expressing his feelings the best way he knows. When your husband is communicating his love in his own language, you can also take it from him without question. And you can also learn to communicate your love to him in the way that he understands best.

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I have no particular reason to suspect that you may not be fulfilled or busy enough, but since this can apply in other cases, I'll mention another point that I've

often seen to be relevant. Sometimes, relying on others to fill a void in our lives can go beyond what's healthy and constructive. Your husband has a very busy life and although he needs his wife, he doesn't seem to feel that he needs you to fill any specific void. What about you? Do you have a full enough life? Is your husband perhaps subconsciously pulling away because he feels that you're too needy and that however much time he gives you, it will never be enough? If a husband knows that his wife doesn't spend much time with family or friends, he may be very aware that his wife is lacking emotional support, but that doesn't mean that he's willing or even able to fill the role more usually filled by a mother, sister, or close friend.

In general, the more someone relies on another person, the more that person may instinctively withdraw. If that applies to you, it could be helpful to seek out other fulfilling relationships. We sometimes assume that having a good relationship with one's spouse means that the spouse is the only right address for emotional support, but why should this be true? If a wife in this position can take some of the pressure off her husband to be her sole provider, she may find that they both end up enjoying the time they have together far more.

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I am very hopeful that a combination of more understanding of your husband's perspective, better ways of communicating your feelings, and the resolve to make your quality time together enjoyable and pleasant, will lead to the two of you looking forward to and enjoying each other's company in a way that satisfies both of you.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

I'd like to take this opportunity to let you know about a unique fundraising campaign being offered by TorahAnytime.com. They are giving people the opportunity to sponsor millions of hours of Torah learning generated through their site.

As someone who has benefited greatly from their platform, I am extremely appreciative of their help in spreading the word of Torah, Chizzuk, and helpful Shalom Bayis and Chinuch ideas.

Without their assistance, I would never have been able to reach so many listeners. I believe that most of my readers and listeners found out about me either directly or indirectly through their platform.

I am grateful to those who supported me during their last campaign, and I would like to ask for your help again. This is a great cause close to my heart, and I would be personally grateful to anyone who can contribute. Please consider acquiring the tremendous Zchus of sponsoring hours of Torah, which will surely bring forth all Hashpaos Tovos for you and your family.

Here's my personal page for donations:

https://raisethon.com/torahanytime/shimon-gruen

Thank you for your consideration, and Tizku Lmitzvos!

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!