

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

DEALING WITH DEFICIENCIES

The Midrash on this week's *parshah* describes how, when faced with disaster after Yosef's silver goblet was found among Binyamin's possessions, Yehudah appealed to the apparently Egyptian leader, asking why he would want to take his youngest brother as a slave. He reasoned that according to the Torah, taking Binyamin made no sense, as he had the money to pay for the goblet, and the Torah only allows selling someone who lacks the means to repay what was stolen. But why did Yehudah think that a gentile king would care to take guidance based on the Torah?

The *Ohel Yaakov* explains that the Torah teaches that if a thief is caught and "*ain lo*" — he has nothing with which to repay his debt — then he should be enslaved in order to repay it. However, if he does have the wherewithal to repay, he isn't sold. The logic is that if he stole even though he has money, this indicates that he did so due to his evil character traits, and not out of necessity. Such a thief is not the kind of person one wants in one's home, even as a slave. In all probability, such a person will steal again and the slave owner will wake up one morning to find the slave gone, together with all his valuables. Someone who "*ain lo,*" by contrast, is not a thief by nature and once his needs are provided for, it can be assumed that he will not steal again.

Therefore, what Yehudah was telling Yosef was that if he really believed Binyamin to be a thief, then given that he was in no need of the goblet, he must be a thief by nature. In such a case, he must not be the kind of person anyone sensible would want to have as a household slave, and it would be better to take someone else in his place.

From the perspective of a person whose possessions have been stolen, it might not make much difference whether the thief stole out of necessity or for pleasure. But the Torah teaches us that it should. Some people simply give in to their *yetzer hara* and allow themselves to enjoy the experience; others do constant battle with the *yetzer hara* and still lose the fight on occasion. What's sadder than that, however, is that some people wage war and find that not only are they opposed by their *yetzer hara*, but also that other people in their lives are actually making it harder for them to do the right thing. It's not an excuse, yet it can be helpful when people are more understanding of each other.

We all have deficiencies, and we all deal with the deficiencies of others. We must try to do what we can to minimize the hardship our deficiencies cause others, and at the same time ensure that we don't make it harder for them to overcome their own struggles.

לעילוי נשמת

מרת דבורה בת
ר' יום טוב ע"ה

ולע"נ

רבי אברהם שמואל בנימין
בן רבי משה זצ"ל
(כתב סופר)

יאה"צ י"ט טבת

Parshas
Vayigash
VOL. 8 | ISSUE 11



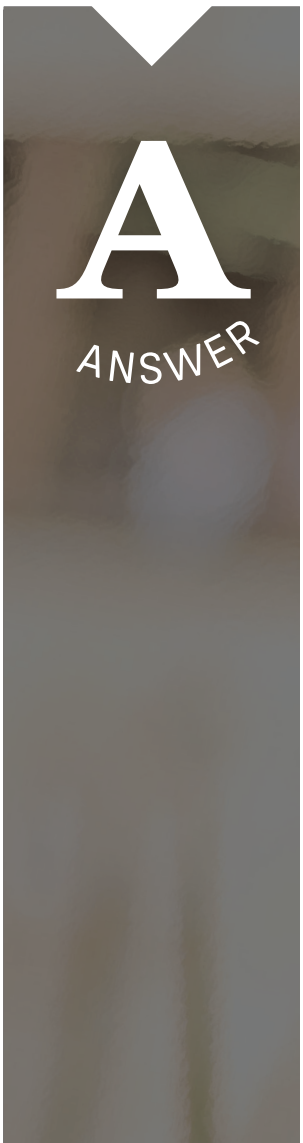
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

This is my question, in short: What do I do when my husband is suddenly not okay with the way I am after years of him gladly accepting my shortcomings?

Let me explain: I have been dealing with ADHD my whole life, sometimes doing better and at other times struggling with the most basic tasks. My husband has always taken the stand that my ADHD is not a big problem and he was always happy to step in wherever necessary to keep our household running smoothly. I often complained that ADHD was leaving me handicapped and that I wasn't doing well as a housewife, but he always dismissed it.

Now, however, 12 years into our marriage, he told me that he is feeling burned out and frustrated. He feels that I need him to walk me through everything and that I can't deal with daily life without him. He says he still loves me and loves taking care of me, but it's draining him, and he's falling apart emotionally.

How am I supposed to react to this sudden change? I am happy to work on my executive functioning skills and speak to a therapist about how I can become more emotionally independent, but all of that will take time. What can I do for my husband in the meantime? I don't want the resentment to keep building up, but there's not much I can change overnight.



Facing up to a challenge rather than running away from it isn't easy. It's commendable that you're reaching out for help. The question is, what kind of help do you need? You give too few clues for me to know whether what you're describing is genuine dysfunction or just a struggle to cope with things in an optimal way.

While it doesn't sound like this is the case for you, there are times when a demanding husband accustomed to a certain (possibly unrealistic) standard expects his wife to be able to meet it and dismisses her as dysfunctional (or emotionally unstable) if she can't. There's a huge difference between, for example, a wife who cooks plain suppers with no fancy trimmings, and one who always has dirty dishes piled on the counter and resorts to sandwiches or take-out food, as cooking is just too much for her.

Additionally, much of how we categorize and assess issues in general has to do with what kind of person one is.

A woman with a personality type that tends toward the doer and accomplisher will generally have a far easier time getting things done and feeling good about it, than a woman of another type with a more laid-back nature who rarely feels a sense of urgency about anything.

There are also people who are "late" by nature and only get going when a deadline looms. If there's always someone there to step in and take charge before their internal clock starts ticking, they may just learn to take it easy and let someone else save the day.

Similarly, a husband with a more happy-go-lucky nature will have an easier time tolerating (and picking up the slack for) a wife who finds it hard to deal with

everyday challenges; a husband who is fastidious and punctual by nature will struggle far more to overcome his frustration and disappointment.

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You describe how until now your husband was "stepping in wherever necessary" and how he's cracking under the pressure. He wants your help, not mine, and hasn't asked for advice. But let me address anyone in "his shoes" first.

While it's true that all marriages come with their challenges, having to step in on a consistent basis to keep the household running smoothly is a significant *nisayon*. It's commendable that you've been doing this for so long. In fact, not only have you been doing so without complaining, you've also been offering your wife reassurance and protecting her from feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

If someone in such a position were to ask me whether he should continue even though he feels so burned out, my advice would be two-fold. On the one hand, filling in for a spouse's deficiencies is what we do for someone we love. As long as you feel you can do that, you should.

However, there's an important caveat, which is that if your filling in is actually preventing your wife from stretching beyond her comfort zone, you should probably take a calculated step back. Running a household is hard, even for women who truly are fully functional. While husbands should help where necessary, it's rarely a good idea for them to take on the responsibility themselves.

Taking that step back is often very difficult, especially after many years of being the one who "gets things done." It isn't easy to accept that (for example) your wife will be lighting candles at almost the very last minute for the next few weeks (or months) while she becomes accustomed to setting and adhering to a timetable for Fridays. But what is certain is that if you continue to step in, every single week, she may never learn to cope with Erev Shabbos on her own. In any case, I understand if you've reached your breaking point. The next step, however, is for you to decide where to step back first.

Your wife is rightly concerned about how she'll cope with a sudden change, and the two of you need to discuss the shifting of responsibilities that lies ahead. I understand that you may feel that you need to step back from everything all at once, and without knowing more about your situation, I can't judge whether that's reasonable or realistic. But what I can tell you is that if you do so, you will have to come to terms with weeks and probably months of your wife struggling to acclimatize herself to a new reality, during which your household will likely be on wheels.

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While you certainly meant well in keeping your feelings to yourself until you reached breaking point, it's probably a shame that you weren't more open with your feelings as your frustrations mounted. As a result, it appears that a far greater adjustment is now needed in order to reset the situation. You'll do best by being more patient and understanding with your wife, giving her time to adapt and come to terms with the new reality.

The next few months may be a challenging time for both of you. What will help you to get through them is reminding yourself that your relationship consists of far more than getting the household chores done. Just as you are far more than your ability to keep the home running smoothly, your wife is far more than her "ADHD."

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Now turning back to the person asking for advice: transitions are never easy, and after so many years of relying on your husband to get things done and done in time it can be challenging to make a big change.

You don't mention it and I don't want to make assumptions, but I do wonder whether you have become so accustomed to your husband stepping in that you simply took him for granted. While you may find running a household more challenging than other women, if your husband has been facing that challenge instead of you for so long, that is something to be incredibly grateful for.

Things do change over the years, even if only one spouse notices. It's possible that when you only had one or two children, things were easier, and that now, with more tasks to complete, your husband is feeling the strain. It's possible that factors you aren't even aware of (such as issues at his workplace) have contributed to his feeling that he just can't go on like this. But regardless of how well you understand why, you should accept that this is the way he feels, just as he accepted for so many years that you felt incapable of doing so many things that he then felt obligated to do instead.

It's true that he seems to have sprung his feelings on you very suddenly, which could make accepting them more challenging for you. However, that doesn't detract from all the years during which he not only kept things running, but did his best to protect you from feelings of inadequacy. Just because he did so uncomplainingly doesn't mean it was easy for him, and it definitely doesn't mean that he has to continue.

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The truth is that in any marriage, even without any "issues" and official "labels," spouses need to constantly adjust the balance. Families grow, financial situations change, people move to different neighborhoods, and so forth — and people need to know how to adapt.

Even when nothing changes outwardly, sometimes internal changes, tiny ones building incrementally, eventually combine to reach a tipping point. Long years of picking up the slack while feeling underappreciated or not appreciated at all may have chipped away at your husband's willingness to keep extending himself beyond what he feels obligated to do. It is hard to keep saying thank you for days, months, and years, but it is even harder to keep doing more than one's share for days, months, and years without receiving any thanks.

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Getting back to the practical, my first piece of advice to you is to express your gratitude, even if you may have expressed it often enough already. Your husband has been going above and beyond for years, willingly and apparently cheerfully, and no one should ever take that for granted.

Next, tell him that you understand that he simply can't continue. It'll only work to your benefit to accept his feelings, just as he has accepted yours for so long. He may not have a nice tidy label to use as a justification, but that doesn't make his emotions any less real or valid.

Part of accepting what he is telling you is accepting the ramifications for you. After so many years of seeing him step in for you, you *do* know what needs to be done. If you genuinely feel that you cannot do it yourself, you have to reconsider your options. It could mean a cleaning lady, or any number of other things. It will almost certainly mean you taking responsibility for seeing that things get done, even if you don't physically do them yourself. You may need a coach or a mentor to give you advice and encouragement.



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What you don't need is someone reinforcing your "inability" to cope, or "explaining" why you feel so challenged. Other than the therapist being paid to commiserate, no one stands to gain from such an approach.

Dealing with sudden changes is hard. Many people resist change, which rarely has good results. It's wonderful that you're looking for advice on how to move forward rather than hoping that someone will justify staying put (or moving backwards). Don't just make me, or a coach, your ally. Make your husband your ally and let him know that you want to move forward together with him and find a new way of dealing with things that works for both of you.

Of course it will take time, and you must ask for his patience and understanding as you learn to adapt. He's demonstrated for years that he's willing to invest in your relationship, so you have every reason to feel confident that he won't abandon you now.

And my final piece of advice to you is to leave all the labels behind. It doesn't matter if someone calls your struggle ADHD, residue of your childhood trauma, or plain laziness. All that matters is how you meet the challenges you face, challenges that are just a variation on a theme that all of us deal with. Every single person needs to work on overcoming his own shortcomings and on tolerating those of others. That's just part of life, of serving Hashem with the tools and tests He has given us.

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