RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS CHUKAS

CAN EMOTIONS BE SCHEDULED?

In this week's *parshah*, we learn about the "transgression" of Moshe Rabbeinu at Mei Merivah, when he hit the rock to bring forth water. Rashi and the Ramban debate whether the problem was calling Bnei Yisroel "*morim* – sinners," or the actual hitting of the rock.

The Kedushas Levi explains that both these explanations are directly connected, as calling the Yidden "sinners" is what led to Moshe hitting the rock. There are two ways of helping people overcome their challenges and encouraging them to mend their ways, he continues. The first way is making a person feel special: "You are such a great person. Hashem is so proud of every good thing you do." This method motivates a person to rise above behaving in a way that should be beneath the dignity of great people and makes him long to do Hashem's will. The second way is rebuking the person, telling him how lowly he is given the terrible things he has done, until he feels compelled to fulfill the words of the Torah.

Focusing on the positive has the added benefit of alerting the entire creation to the greatness of Klal Yisroel, which then compels creation to fulfill Klal Yisroel's wishes, due to the fact that their greatness was highlighted. Giving rebuke, however, and pointing out weaknesses focuses on the fact that Klal Yisroel is not currently doing what Hashem wants, and therefore creation will not want to fulfill their wishes and needs. When Moshe Rabbeinu said "*Shimu na hamorim*," he gave tough rebuke and the rock did not want to give forth water to a nation of sinners. Had Moshe given *mussar* by raising our opinion of ourselves, he would not have needed to hit the rock.

How apropos that it is Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev who teaches us this lesson, as he is legendary for always searching out and emphasizing the goodness of every Yid.

What an important lesson for our daily interactions! Whenever we "have to" rebuke another person, whether a spouse or a child, we have the option of telling them how wrong they are, how wrong they've always been, and how much they have disappointed us. Here too, not only does all of creation hear the rebuke, but the person internalizes it as well. Even if such a method has short-term benefits, in the long run, it gives people the feeling that whatever they do is no good. Instead, we can focus on a person's innate goodness, telling them how special they are and how much they mean to us. Show appreciation for every little thing – and it will make them want to do more. And sometimes, the appreciation will help you avoid the need to rebuke in the first place.

There's another important point here. Whenever you feel the need to "rebuke" your spouse, realize that – aside from it affecting the world and creation at large – your family definitely hears and feels it. You can't compare children who grow up in a home where parents are always respectful of each other – even when there's a need to bring up something negative – to children who grow up in a home of disrespect and negativity. Always balance the "need" for the rebuke and criticism, against the damage of the likely repercussions.

This week's essay is dedicated by a good friend
Rabbi Chaim S. Berger and family
in honor of the marriage of their son Hersh Meilich
ויה"ר שהזיווג יעלה יפה ויזכו לבנות בית נאמן בישראל לשם ולתפארת

Disclaimer:
Although worded with care this essay contains sensitive material and is intended for married men and women only.

Question:

(the explicit details have been omitted and edited for obvious reasons)

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Firstly, I want to thank you for your public lectures. They are a great resource for myself and my wife and enlighten us in many aspects. I also took your Shalom Bayis telecourse and found it very helpful.

I don't know if you will discuss my question in a public forum, but I would appreciate it if you could address it in some way since I think it can be helpful to many listeners. I am married for more than ten years, b"H. My wife is a wonderful person, but like all human beings, we had our share of issues over the years. I'm grateful to Hashem that we are now on a good path.

We had a hard time building a personal connection in the beginning of our marriage. My wife found it especially difficult to become close. Over time, I learned how to make her comfortable and now she is b"H very happy being with me. Still, she will never reach out, request, or even hint that she wants that relationship. I've asked her about this many times, but she just brushes away the question. Is it normal for a woman not to express such feelings?

It's hard for a person to keep on giving without being asked. It's even harder when it doesn't seem to be appreciated. Any advice you can offer on this topic will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you.

Answer:

This is truly a delicate and sensitive topic, and as you wrote in your question, many people can benefit from added clarity here. I'll try to address your question with the required refinement, but with enough detail and encryption between the lines to be clear and hopefully helpful.

The first thing I want to note (as I do often, for those who notice...) is that your situation is absolutely normal. When it comes to paying bills or dealing with sick children, we know that differences between the way men and women deal with things are normal because everyone discusses them. When it comes to deeply personal and intimate issues, however, which shouldn't be (and hopefully aren't) discussed with others, we often have no way of knowing how many other people are dealing with similar things. As someone who works with couples, I can tell you that what you're describing is totally normal. Normal doesn't mean that all couples experience this issue, but it certainly is normal for a woman to feel uncomfortable mentioning, discussing or initiating certain things, even if her husband expresses clearly how much he wants her to.

The Torah sets the parameters for the marriage relationship, starting with what is stated in Parshas Bereishis: "*Vehu yimshol bach*," which grants the right to demand connection in a relationship to the husband and not to the wife. Whether that makes it prohibited, unrefined, or uncomfortable for a woman to behave in such a manner is a matter of debate among the commentators and *poskim*. The Gemara mentions the *bnai chatzufah*, children of a woman who was overtly direct in her requests. In order to avoid such a situation, the *Elya Rabba* writes that if a husband sees that his wife is about to request,

he should preempt and be the first to offer so that they don't get into problematic territory.

On the other hand, the Shulchan Aruch brings that if a husband sees that his wife is trying to make herself attractive and hint to him, and he acts on it, they will merit having good children. For each scenario there is an appropriate Torah response for who should and shouldn't initiate that closeness and how to go about it. There are different behaviors and attitudes outlined for husbands and wives, a concept that people can find challenging to accept. In addition, some women have an inherent *eidelkeit* that makes it difficult to behave vulnerably even at times when this *is* acceptable. I hope that this makes a woman's resistance in these areas somewhat more understandable and easier to accept .

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Examining the differing roles of husband and wife in their joint relationship is fascinating and instructive. The husband is obligated to gladden his wife, as the Torah clearly states, "*vesimach es ishto,*" while the woman should satisfy her husband's needs, providing what is referred to as "*pas besalo*." This creates an interesting phenomenon of two people coming together with different motives, each having the other person in mind. That's exactly how it's supposed to be. A husband is supposed to be concerned primarily with making his wife happy, while a woman's intentions should be different, which is why it's an injustice on her part if she's not available when her husband is interested in her. It's important for each spouse to focus on what he or she is supposed to contribute to the relationship in general and specifically in this sensitive area as well.

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That's all very well when both spouses are equally committed to the relationship, but in real life, one or other of the spouses is always more invested in the relationship or capable of change – that's just reality. All too often, that can result in feelings of resentment. Let's discuss this first in broader and more general terms.

What happens if, for example, you want supper at a certain time, or you'd like to hear an expression of appreciation when you bring home your paycheck – and your spouse doesn't comply? Most people in such situations have already tried to say *something* at least once or twice, and it hasn't helped. (If you've never tried communicating about an issue, and simply waited for someone to read your mind, that's a discussion of its own, but please don't wait while standing...)

It's easy to become discouraged when this happens, and to decide that, *nisht iz nisht*. However, trying to just swallow the resentment while continuing to hope that things will somehow improve only leads to yet more resentment which damages the relationship. Instead, you have to find the balance between saying something and communicating it in a way that doesn't bring about the opposite of what you're looking to accomplish.

In such a case, the first thing to do is ask yourself if what you want is both reasonable and realistic, not just in general but also with regard to the specific person you're asking it from. Are they capable of providing it? In this case, you have to consider whether your wife is able to show vulnerability and openness in something this personal, at this point in time.

Next, a lot has to do not with *what* you're asking for, but *how* you ask for it. Stating that "this is how it should be... that's not normal... why can't you..." sounds like it will bring quicker results, but usually doesn't. The more you show dissatisfaction and disappointment, the harder it becomes for your spouse to change and make you happy. Showing understanding by saying things like, "I know this may be hard but I would appreciate it if you could..." or "I don't think you're doing this wrong; it would simply mean a lot to me if we can do it like this..." is usually far more productive.

Anytime your requests aren't being fulfilled, stop and try to assess how the request sounded and what the other person may have understood as the unstated implication. Did the person feel put down? Criticized? Blamed? Do they feel controlled? If you find a problem with the way your request was framed, try changing your language.

One simple tip: Whenever you ask for something that you know is hard for the other person to provide, focus on yourself and not them. Remember the terms: "I would appreciate it if you can... It would mean a lot to me if..." Don't overuse this technique as it can become or appear manipulative, but just bear in mind that expressing your own needs often goes over better than demanding your due, as people become defensive at the mention of what they're supposed or not supposed to be doing.

What is even more important is that when you do get what you want, even if only partially, you show appreciation and acknowledge the other person's efforts, without adding any criticism or even mentioning the fact that you still aren't entirely satisfied. Appreciation is the best way to encourage progress.

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It goes without saying that the Torah approach to marriage is the healthiest. Any other way is going to fail, sooner or later. If anyone ever advises you to do something that contradicts the *Torah'dige* way, run! Besides being wrong, it won't help your marriage.

The Torah approach in the specific issue we have been discussing is connected to *"ve'onasah lo yigra*." "Onah" means "time," and here it refers to the structure of the marriage relationship. The Gemara brings various options for how often a couple should connect, but what all have in common is the underlying schedule (which day, how often).

Some people are resistant to the idea of schedule in a relationship as they feel it's not natural and robs the connection of its spontaneity and emotion. In fact, there is no inherent contradiction. There are many things we do on schedule and still invest emotion in them – in fact, adhering to a schedule in things like serving supper on time only demonstrates your love and concern. Food should be served on schedule, not when you're in the mood. Similarly, and closer to our discussion, we don't kiss our children because there's a rule to do so; rather, we do so to demonstrate our love for them. And yet, we often kiss "on schedule" when our children leave in the morning or when they go to bed at night, or after *licht benchen* etc. (as well as spontaneously).

When it comes to the specific issue we're discussing, a schedule makes it easier for both spouses to know what to expect. It's rare to find two people naturally on the same emotional schedule, which is why deciding on a schedule in advance helps to avoid the problem of too much or too little, where one spouse is in the mood more often than the other.

I want to reiterate that both husband and wife have to understand their specific obligations and roles regarding the intimate relationship. A man signs up for giving and fulfilling the needs of a wife, and a woman does the same when she commits to being available as well as providing. There's no, "If you do, I will," or "Since you didn't, I don't have to," etc. It's a halachic obligation on both spouses. I won't elaborate on the sources and details, but this is not something to take lightly. I know it isn't always simple and there can often be emotional blockages and challenges involved, but the basics should not be challenged or neglected, and the importance of this should not be underestimated.

If there's an issue, it must be dealt with and you should get the advice you need. Don't shove things under the rug and assume she's too tired or he's stressed out. People should be understanding of one another, but issues concerning this delicate matter must be resolved. It's very important for men. It's very important for women. And it's very important that every part of the relationship be guided *al pi Torah*.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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