RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Vayechi

Communication From the Heart

In this week's parsha Yaakov Avinu mentions that he conquered Shechem... *with my sword and my bow."* Targum Onkelos renders these last two words: *"with my prayers and my supplications".*

It seems like an interesting translation, what's the connection between a sword and bow and prayer? The Imrei Kadosh explains: Tefillah can be compared to a bow and arrow; the closer you pull the bowstring to your chest, the farther and faster the arrow will fly. The same can be said of Tefillah. The closer your prayers are to your heart, the greater the impact it will have in Shamayim.

We never know why one person's Tefillah is answered over another, but when someone Davens with all his heart it's something that can surely bring salvation sooner.

This does not only manifest itself in our relationship with Hashem, we can also see it clearly in our interpersonal relationships. We all know that *"Words that emanate from the heart, penetrate the heart."* When we say something or do something with genuine feeling and devotion, it usually has the desired effect, entering sooner and deeper into someone else's heart (See Mishlei 27:19).

We may often hear of people who do the right thing and say the right thing, but are still struggling in their relationships. If they would take an honest, hard look at themselves, they might realize that their heart wasn't in it. Their spouse and/or children felt that and responded accordingly.

When you do something because you have to or you were told to, without infusing it with emotion or caring, your efforts can fall flat. Because it is not WHAT you do, it's HOW you do it.

As always, it's important to add that when we write something like this, it is for *you* to take away a message, not so that you can think how *your spouse* can change. So think about it, can your family see that you genuinely mean your kind gestures? Is it possible that *your* actions can be infused with a bit more feeling? That's the takeaway!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband has a smartphone that he needs for business, and I trust that he only uses it for that, and not for anything inappropriate or prohibited. However, I still think he is too busy with it. Whenever I or the kids want to speak to him, he doesn't make eye contact because he is on his phone. At night, he takes it with him to bed, and I feel like he has no interest in me.

How can we make our relationship a positive one, even while a smartphone is necessary? Why can't it be used only outside the home?

Thank you in advance,

Answer:

Before I address the question, I'd like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that, while this woman trusts her husbands and his self-control, smartphones do pose a grave danger to Yiddishkeit. Not everyone can say with conviction that they trust their spouse on the internet. The risks and dangers are very real and all too common.

But even if you trust your spouse, the spouse shouldn't trust themselves. The *mishnah* (Avos 2:4) says "Do not believe in yourself until the day of death". The *gemara* (Niddah 30b) says "*Ein aputrupos le'arayos* — There is no one strong enough to be a guardian against sin". For this reason the great *poskim* of our generation have made filters obligatory and constantly remind us of the dangers of the internet. This is not a halachah sheet, but I feel responsible to mention that it is not just a matter of trust.

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Putting aside the spiritual pitfalls of smartphone usage, the questioner touches upon an entirely different issue. The challenges to relationships that a phone addiction creates are a universal problem that has nothing to do with Yiddishkeit.

People often confuse the two. They argue that their phone is 100% kosher, so what is their spouse's problem? Their spouse's problem might have nothing to do with the 'kosherness' of their phone, they may simply feel like they are married to a phone and not to a person! Even if one has a fully kosher phone, it can still jeopardize his relationships if he is constantly on it.

There is no question that addiction to technological devices, whether they are phones, tablets, computers or whatnot, take away our focus from the most important things in our life. And as the saying goes, "The most important things in our

life are NOT THINGS". The people around you, those most dear to you, are being hurt and sidelined by your addiction. Even if you *have* to constantly be on call and available, it still doesn't justify never being around or tuned in to the goings on in your home.

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It's also important to clarify that this problem is not specific to any gender. There are plenty of husbands who come to me with the identical problem. Compounding the situation is the fact that many women just have the phone – often without the business excuse. Plenty of women spend large chunks of their day glued to their phones, too distracted to care for their children or tend to their homes and families.

Many women justify themselves by saying that they're so overwhelmed by all their responsibilities and they need to unwind and have some space. Ironically, one husband once said to me, "What does my wife need to unwind from? All I see are neglected children and a dysfunctional home, while my wife is in bed all day on her phone." Take an honest look at yourself and think whether behind your excuse is really a very dangerous addiction.

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Now before I go on to address the questioner, I want to address the reader. Suppose it was your spouse who sent me this question, what would you respond, without getting defensive? Do you have an explanation for your excessive dependence on your phone?

If the scenarios described above sound familiar to you, it's time to make a personal reckoning. What if your wife/husband is right? I hope I don't come across as critical, but what if there is nothing I can answer to make their life easier, and the only solution is for you to change your ways? For the sake of your family, take this seriously and do what you can for the sake of your home and relationships.

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Having said that, I will now try to address the questioner.

You don't mention whether you have tried to broach this topic with your husband himself. That should probably be your first course of action. Many people balk at this indignantly. "What do you mean, I have to tell him?! Doesn't he see for himself?! Is he blind?" Well, unfortunately, most people do not marry a mind-reader, and no, a person can often not see himself objectively, and/or how his behavior appears to others or affects them. Without communicating your needs and concerns, there might not be a way for your husband to know how you're feeling. I can't tell you if your husband can keep his phone out of your home, or how much he can or cannot do things differently than he does now, but he can!

Don't be afraid to articulate your thoughts on the matter. A good relationship relies heavily on healthy communication. It is crucial to learn how to express thoughts and feelings in a way that your spouse understands and can accept.

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Perhaps you *did* talk to him. Maybe you even spoke to him multiple times. In that case, the question would be, why is it still a problem? Perhaps the message was conveyed, But was it *properly* conveyed?

Maybe when you were talking to your husband you came across as very critical and he became defensive? Maybe the timing wasn't right? You need to find a quiet, calm moment to address it – not while the situation is in the middle of "happening" or you're emotionally tense. Maybe your complaint was stated disrespectfully? You don't want to put him down or preach. Maybe you weren't clear? Beating around the bush isn't very effective, either. There might have been something that was preventing your message from getting across.

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When communicating with your spouse – or anyone, for that matter – be mindful of the following:

- Don't expect them to pick up the clues and hints or read your mind.
- Be clear and consistent.
- Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements, explaining to them how much it bothers you when they behave this way, or better,

how much you'd appreciate if it were to be done differently.

- Cushion such discussions with praise and empathy. Tell them how appreciative you are of all they already do for you and the family. And furthermore, that you realize how hard it must be for them and that you're sure they didn't realize how destructive it has been.
- You can repeat yourself as often as necessary, as long as you remain respectful and calm, and as long as the timing is right.

When proposing possible solutions to your husband, try not to be rigid or to come across controlling. Try to come up with a viable plan. Maybe your husband can leave the phone outside during suppertime?

For some people, being on the phone while doing something helps them focus. Maybe your spouse needs to talk on the phone while washing dishes, or listen to a shiur while rocking the baby to sleep. Be mindful of that too.

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Obviously, you need to be careful not to contradict yourself. Even if you don't have a smartphone yourself, if you're constantly on the phone while you should really be paying attention to the kids or your husband, you aren't making a very strong argument. The exact example of what he's doing right isn't as relevant as you think. Show your husband that focusing on the family is a priority to you as well.

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Another thing to be mindful of is not to get stuck on this one detail. Sometimes a marriage is in shambles, the relationship is unstable, and one spouse will point at a smartphone and say, "See? That is why we have all our problems!" However, even when the smartphone is eliminated, the problems remain.

While smartphones have indeed wrecked relationships and homes, they are sometimes only a part of the problem, or only a single symptom of a problem, rather than the entire problem. Keep the big picture in mind, and do your part to ensure a healthy marriage and home, with or without the phone.

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One last thing to consider is whether there might be a reason your husband is looking to distract himself. Some husbands tell me that they are greeted each day by a royal grouch who pours a whole litany of complaints and criticism over their heads as soon as they walk through the door. Some people feel so attacked or judged by their spouses, that they *intentionally* distract themselves from their misery by losing themselves on their phones!

While it still doesn't justify their behavior, make sure that you are pleasant to be around and you are not the reason someone would want to distract themselves in your presence.

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To sum it up: if you think that you might be the one who is unfocused or attached to your phone when you're around your family, realize that this may be a hindrance to your marriage and hurtful to your family. If you have a problem with your spouse, communicate respectfully and consistently, while making sure your relationship is otherwise healthy and offering practical and realistic solutions.

And most importantly, whatever you say, make sure it comes from the heart and so it will b'ezras Hashem enter their heart.

All the best,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYECHI 5781

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