RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYIKRA

CHANGE AND ACCEPTANCE

The Midrash at the beginning of Parshas Vayikra brings the *passuk* in Tehillim, "*Barchu Hashem malachav giborei koach osei devaro* — His *malachim* bless Hashem, those mighty in strength who fulfill His word." The Midrash explains that the *giborei koach* are the *shomrei shevi'is*, those who keep the *halachos* of *shemittah*. Why? Many of the *mitzvos* we do only take a few minutes, or anywhere between a few hours or sometimes a full day (such as Shabbos), or possibly a week. But there are a few *mitzvos* which are fulfilled for an entire year, most notably *shemittah*. When a person keeps the *halachos* of *shemittah*, he has to let his fields lie fallow for an entire year, forgoing any potential income and possibly still incurring expenses. That's considered real *gevurah,* true strength.

It's not so hard to power through something that doesn't take long. But when a difficulty lasts for a long period of time, it demands a lot more strength. People often talk about *shalom bayis* and how hard it can be to achieve it. For some people, this comes as a surprise, especially if they don't usually have a problem getting along with others. What they don't realize is that with most people in their life, they can choose when to spend time with them. Most of our relationships are on our own terms. When it comes to marriage, however, you can't just turn away whenever you feel like it. A long-term, all-encompassing relationship is incredibly challenging, and it can take talent, strength, and a lot of *siyatta diShmaya* to get along with one's spouse.

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you for your insightful *shiurim* and emails. I have the following question:

My wife seems to have a rather low tolerance level and often gets very agitated by seemingly trivial things, whenever there's a hiccup or challenge. For example, if the baby is not following a sleep schedule and is up at night, she will get very tense and angry. Also, whenever there is something she doesn't like, she will become agitated with me and will cause friction between us.

When I share my feelings with her and tell her how hard it is for me to live like this, her response is: "Do you expect me to be a *malach*?" or, "Can't I vent and express my feelings?" and so on.

Is this her personality which I just have to accept because "you cannot change anyone," and I should rather focus on her many other qualities and good times that we do have together? On the other hand, maybe I'm tolerating something harmful to me and the home? Would it be more correct to be assertive and form a positive atmosphere at home?

Thank you!

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

You're presenting the question as a choice between accepting your wife the way she is and focusing on her good points, and trying to change things. It doesn't have to be a choice. You can, and should, do all these things — the question is the right way to go about it.

The first thing to do is accept that basic personalities don't change. This includes things like levels of tolerance and ability to understand certain things. It's totally normal for there to be sizable differences of personality between spouses, and while this is a challenge, it's not a problem. This is something I discuss in a class called *The Ten Biggest Mistakes People Make in Marriage* (available upon request).

Also in that class, however, I note that another mistake people make is thinking that you *can't* change things. In difficult or harmful situations, there's often a lot we can do to improve things, including accepting the other person as they are. However, accepting people isn't just a means to an end. We should always work on accepting others and seeing the good in them, regardless of what we hope to gain from doing so.

There is a *maamar Chazal* that when person is in pain, Hashem says, "*Kilani meiroshi, kilani mizro'i* — My head is heavy, My hand is heavy." The word "*kilani*" is not an oft-used term, and it can also be read as *"kal eini* — it is not light," implying that in general, things are relatively easy, though presently they aren't. When your head is heavy, that's the time to recall all the times when it's light.

This also applies in relationships, because people have a natural tendency to focus on the negative; we often don't notice things unless they seem "amiss." Yes, everyone should treat their spouses wonderfully, but that doesn't mean we should take it for granted when this actually happens. If we focus only on the negative and need prompting to notice the positive, that's not a good recipe for *shalom bayis*.

For most of us, it doesn't come naturally to express appreciation for the good things. Becoming more aware of this gets easier over time, and it can vastly improve relationships when the other person knows and feels that you see the good in them — they'll often want to build on that good and improve things even more.

A certain husband once approached me with a question about his wife, who had the habit of telling him about all the things she did, and using that as an excuse not to do other things. I advised him that the best thing to do in such a case was to work along with her. Whenever she started recounting all the things she had done, he should compliment her. The natural reaction in such a situation might be to say, "What's the big deal? These are things she's supposed to be doing in any case!" Try to stop thinking that way!! Working with someone rather than against them will benefit everyone. Aside from it being only right to show appreciation, making another person feel good is likely to motivate them to want to please you even more. So focus on the good, and show your appreciation.

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You describe "seemingly trivial things" that your wife gets upset about. Given that you acknowledge that your wife has a low tolerance level, you can understand that what seems trivial to you doesn't seem trivial to her, and this may be something you have to accept. Who's right? You are both right, and that's why giving your wife the feeling that you think she's over-exaggerating or hysterical is not going to be helpful. Looking at the situation from the other direction, she may see you as insensitive and uncaring.

It's important to understand just what "acceptance" really means. Sometimes, a person continues to see something that bothers his spouse as trivial, but "accepts" it just as one would accept childish behavior from a child — only in this case, *nebach*, they're not going to grow out of it. Needless to say this can come across as condescending and even belittling, even if that isn't consciously the intention. Comments such as, "I know, I know. To *you*, this is important," or, "Yes, you've been telling me for years that you can't deal with this," may make the other person feel bad, stupid, or inferior, which is unlikely to have good results.

Accepting someone has a lot to do with actually making them *feel* accepted. Don't trivialize what's important to someone you care about. Once you recognize that the way they see things is just as valid as the way you do, you'll be able to convey genuine understanding.

This is not to suggest that you are responsible for *making* them feel accepted, and if someone tells you that they won't truly feel understood unless you do XYZ, you aren't necessarily obligated to obey them. However, you can and should still do your best to *be* accepting and to convey a genuine acceptance. The rest is up to them.

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Now let's turn to you. You've noticed your wife's low level of tolerance, but you must also acknowledge your own limits — as you write: "how hard it is for me to live like this…" Allowing your wife to push you beyond your limits isn't good for either of you.

Where should you draw the line? When it affects you *directly*. If someone's nervousness and agitation only *bothers* you, you can focus on the good and accept the situation. But when it *affects* you (for instance, if someone is making excessive demands of you, trying to control you, or being abusive in any way), you should address things.

When you do so, you should take care to only address the issue — not the person. First validate, then talk about how it affects you: "I understand

this really bothers you. For me, it's difficult to do XYZ," or, "It would mean so much to me if you could ask me rather than tell me." Focusing on a single detail makes your message much clearer and increases the chances of your being heard. When you focus on your own feelings, it's less likely that the other person will feel put down or controlled, and the situation won't turn into a power struggle. You're validating your wife's feelings as well as your own — and this can help her to see your point of view and will often prompt her to try to moderate her outbursts once she understands the impact they're having.

Remember to communicate gently without being afraid. As long as you're confident that you're saying the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, it's okay if the other person doesn't like it. "She'll fly off the handle and start screaming. What should I do?" You should listen calmly. You can show that you understand. Repeat your message one more time. Or maybe you can walk away. Maybe next time, it will be taken better. You will have given the message that "flying off the handle" won't intimidate you into backing down and tolerating something that you feel you can't. You'll be doing yourself, and the other person, a very big favor.

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To sum it up: We can't change other people, but we can help them to change, by focusing on the good, showing appreciation, and making sure they know you value them. At the same time, you must let others know there are certain things you won't accept.

A certain man was struggling a great deal, to the extent that he was *mechallel Shabbos* and about to marry a non-Jewish girl. The Satmar Rav spoke nicely to him and asked him to come *daven* in his shul. He made sure the people there treated him nicely and he gently drew him closer. With time, the man was back on track and the Rebbe had saved his life. It wasn't that he chose to "correct" him in a nice way versus a demeaning way. He didn't attempt to change him at all — rather, he helped him change *himself*. If only we would all focus on respecting others so that they eventually want to change and are capable of doing so. Giving up on people isn't right, and neither is pushing yourself beyond your limits in an effort to accommodate them. Neither approach will lead to positive change.

The only thing that is likely to be effective is changing your own attitude, seeing the good, and becoming more appreciative. In this way, you can both learn to bring out the best in each other.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557**
or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!