RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS EMOR

A TUMULTUOUS HOME

In Parshas Emor, we learn about all the Yamim Tovim. Once at a *tisch* Erev Yom Kippur, the Kneses Mordechai of Sadigur (a grandson of the Heilige Ruzhiner *zy"a*) said the following in the name of the Rebbe Reb Baruch'l of Mezhibuzh: "When I'll come up to Shamayim I'll be asked if I accomplished what was expected of me. I will answer that with the *nefesh* I was given, I did the most I was capable of. If more was expected of me, you could have given me a bigger *neshamah* and then I could have done more." Of course, this is an incredible *madreigah* and something only a tzaddik can say about himself.

The Kneses Mordechai used the words in our parsha to expound on this idea, "*Ve'inisem es nafshoseichem* – and you shall afflict your soul". "Ve'inisem" also contains the root word for 'answering.' The Rebbe taught that we should be able to 'answer' to our *nefesh*. When Hashem asks us if we accomplished what we were supposed to, each according to our *nefesh*, we should be able to answer, "Yes, I did."

We may be very far from being able to say *this* about ourselves in general, but the concept of remembering the day when we will need to give Din Vacheshbon, is certainly something we should remember. And interestingly, this is something that can be a help in our relationships too.

Someone asked Rav Avigdor Miller how he could focus only on his wife's good qualities and not on the negative parts of her personality. Rav Miller told the man to think about this. "Every day when you come home and call your wife's name and she answers you, 'Hello, how are you? How was your day?' But thee day will come when you'll call her name and no one will answer..."

It's a scary thought, but the truth is, our relationships are all only temporary. Think *now* what you'll think when that day comes and there's no one to answer. How much will you miss her? What will you wish you could have done better when you still had that relationship? Sometimes, when a person is in a more difficult relationship – whether with a spouse or a child – they can only think of the day they'll get rid of their challenge. But when the moment of truth actually comes, people think differently. When you miss them, you see things differently.

Chazal teach us that there are three things a person should think about if his *yetzer*

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hora is being *misgaber* on him. He should think about *limud haTorah*, *Krias Shema*, or about the day of death, the day of judgment. Thinking about death may not be the best line of defense, because it can make a person depressed, but when you know you'll have to answer for your actions, you definitely do things differently.

This thought can sometimes be helpful to our relationships also. There will come a day when the challenging person is not here anymore. How does that thought make you think about that person today? It's not the most pleasant thought and not the thought that should drive our relationships on a daily basis, but it's good to think about it every once in a while.

Question:

First of all, thank you so much for your work giving encouragement to people working on *sholom bayis.* One idea you mention often is that even when one party is not in such a good situation, the other one can transform it into a good *sholom bayis.* Can you elaborate on this?

My question is like this: When I come home, the atmosphere in my house is tense. Instead of getting upset at my wife for this, how can I take the first step to change the atmosphere in the house and have a better relationship with my wife? I don't want to be stuck in the middle, between my wife and the kids. What can I do to change a stressful atmosphere to a happy one?

Sometimes, if you just do what you need to do, it hurts you. The fact that the other party does not work along can sometimes be destructive. And if you ignore the other party and just try to do the right thing, you don't really connect with your spouse.

Thank you.

Answer:

There's an interesting paradox that is important to clarify. On the one hand, you shouldn't take responsibility for making sure your wife is calm. It is never one person's responsibility to control how another person will feel, react or respond. That's the mistake of codependency, "If she feels like this, *I* must be doing something wrong. I have to find a way to make her be calm, it's my responsibility..." It's important to understand the difference between the obligation to do what's right and the feeling that someone else's feelings or actions are your responsibility.

At the same time, though, not being codependent doesn't absolve you of doing

what *you are* supposed to just because someone else is misbehaving.

Rav Avrohom Genechovsky says that when the Rambam discusses marriage, he put the husband's responsibilities in one chapter and the wife's responsibilities in another chapter. Because one is independent of the other. The husband and wife are each required to fulfill their obligations regardless of what the other one is doing. You don't fulfill your responsibilities so that your spouse should fulfill theirs. She has to be a good wife; you have to be a good husband.

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If you want to know what you can do as a husband when you come home, you want to know what's in your hands, that's a healthy way of looking at things. It's not what you should do so that she should be happy. It's what you should do because someone is unhappy. Although it may seem like the same thing, there's a big difference .

This is true when it comes to raising children as well. We have to think about what we need to do as parents to bring out the best in them and teach them what's right. But at the same time, we have to realize that they are their own people and as the years go on, they'll be making more and more of their own choices. As a husband/wife/parent, there is a right thing to do, but that doesn't control the result.

Hopefully, when we do what's right, it *will* bring about the result, but that's not the point. It's hard for people not to ignore the goal and still stay motivated because usually, the goal is what motivates us.

This is a broad idea that can be confusing in relationships, so let me clarify: In most cases, when someone does the right thing, the intended results will follow. If a husband will do the right thing when he comes home to a nervous wife – acting in a patient, sensitive and helpful way, (which is not easy), very often that will be enough to calm things down. Usually, when you're *mechanech* the right way, it has a certain result. But fulfilling your obligation to do what you're supposed to doesn't depend on achieving those results.

Part of your responsibility is to treat your wife the right way, while being assertive about your needs and expressing what's bothering you. That's not part of your wife's obligation, but hopefully will bring about the right response from her.

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So you know that you have your responsibilities and she has hers. It's always easier to see when someone else isn't doing their part than when we don't fulfill our responsibilities. Noticing when someone else is doing something wrong isn't proof that you're doing everything right. You don't feel when you're doing something wrong to others, but you do feel someone else's wrongdoing towards you. That's why it's harder to focus on what *you* can do to make things better. If you're coming home to a house of people, kids, tension, what can *you* do?

The first thing to think about is how are *you* coming home? A man once walked into his house and said, "What's going on, why's everyone so nervous?" and his wife answered, "We're nervous because *you* came home!" This may not be true, and it probably wasn't the nicest thing to say to a husband who just walked in after a day's work either, but there can be truth in it. Is your wife intimidated when you come home? Does she think you're upset because supper's not ready or that she's not coping because there are things all over the place? Are you coming home from work stressed out and adding to the tension?

There's a well known idea from the Rebbe Reb Mendele of Riminov on the words *"Al tirgezu badarech,"* don't come home edgy – make sure you're well-fed and rested before coming home. That's not always practical, but maybe you can take a short nap in the car before you walk in. Maybe you can buy a little snack in the grocery so you don't come home starved. Maybe you just have to brace yourself before entering the house, "*the house may be tense so I'll put on a smile now right before I walk in...*'.

There's the famous story of Rav Shlomo Zalmen Auerbach zt"l who straightened his hat and jacket before walking into the house. "*Shechina sheruya bainaihem*. I'm going into a place where the *Shechina* rests, I have to look good." He prepared

himself before going into the house. Maybe prepping yourself a little bit before walking into the house will be enough to calm the atmosphere with your serene presence and smile.

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There are some other ideas. You can notice something good your wife did that day and comment on it as soon as you walk in. You can offer a little help or ask if she wants to take a nap while you take over for a few minutes. You can call home a few minutes before you arrive to let her know you're coming and find out if she needs anything. It may be a good idea to have a discussion with your wife about the tense atmosphere. Ask her if there's something you can do about it. But have such a conversation when things are calmer, not during moments of tension. It may give you more clarity about the situation.

You shouldn't do these things out of a feeling of responsibility to make other people calm or control their moods. You can do this because it's the right thing for you to do. It might end up helping the situation because when a husband walks in with a smile and offers help, it will often make a wife calmer. But the end result is not your responsibility.

As an aside, there are times when a person will use such tension as a tool to manipulate others into doing what they want. They'll project a certain tension so that you feel compelled to comply with a demand, in order that they calm down. Sometimes it's a shpiel that's not worth playing into. In such cases, you may need to stand your ground and not give in because of their nervousness. "I understand this makes you nervous and tense, I still don't feel comfortable doing such and such. Thank you for understanding".

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Let's summarize. Firstly, think if there's anything you're doing that's adding to the nervousness. If yes, is there anything you can do about it? If not, don't get stuck in codependency and feel guilty that people around you are nervous.

But even when it's not your fault, you can still care about making the situation better by doing what you can do with a smile, a compliment and thoughtfulness. And doing the right thing will often bring about the results you're looking for.

Wishing you much Hatzlacha,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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