

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the Home

## ALL IN THE RIGHT TIME

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem gives us the *mitzvah* of donating to the Mishkan: "*Viyikchu Li terumah*—And they shall take for Me an offering..." What is this "offering"? A *terumah* is something that has already been set aside for the recipient, but why would it have been set aside before it was needed?

The Chida explains the concept of *terumah* using the example of a rich man who keeps a store of coins already set aside for the poor in his pocket so that whenever someone approaches him for a donation, it's easy for him to give because in his mind, the money has already been donated. The Torah is thus hinting to us that one way of overcoming our reluctance to give generously is to set aside money for donations at a calm, unpressured moment when no one is asking for anything and there is no emotional contest going on. Then, when the *tzedakah* collector appears, it's easier to go to that drawer or pocket and take out money which you are already emotionally disconnected from as "yours" and hand it over.

There are many things that are easier to accomplish when they are done in advance, or at least not in the heat of the moment. Knowing how to communicate effectively with others is more than just the words we use and the tone in which they're spoken — it's also about the timing.

Trying to get another person to see our point of view in the midst of an argument is very hard to achieve. If, instead, we anticipate the problem and talk about the issue calmly in advance, or, alternatively, we wait for the next calm moment, it's much easier for that person to take the message well.

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Parshas **Terumah**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I gained a lot from a *shiur* of yours on the topic of a husband who comes home very late from work each evening, and my question is along the same lines.

I'm in the first months of pregnancy and not feeling myself. I'm often moody, cranky, and tired. When I get home from work I have to make supper and take care of my toddler. By six in the evening I'm exhausted and usually snuggled up on the couch, with the house a mess and the baby in need of someone to take some notice of her.

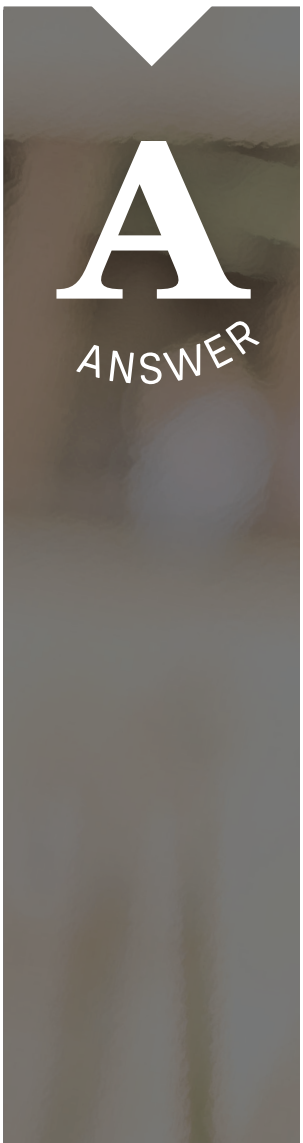
But my husband doesn't usually get home before seven, even though *kollel* finishes at half-past-six. He usually stays for a while to schmooze while I'm literally counting the minutes as I wait for him, and he finds it really annoying to get text messages from me asking where he is or pointing out that it's already past seven and he's not home yet. He responds that he needs some time of his own and that all he wants to do is finish off whatever it is in *kollel* or run to the grocery or some other thing. I understand that he feels stifled, but meanwhile, I'm at home and not managing.

Anyway, even after he gets home he's only around for an hour and a half during which time he eats supper and helps out a little. Then he goes out to learn and daven and again, I urge him to get home as soon as possible.

I do understand that he's behaving in a very normal way and that he needs to daven and learn and even hang out with friends sometimes, but right now, it's so hard for me to be home without him there.

I'm not looking to blame him or put him down. I just would like to know how I can get the help I need without him feeling that he doesn't have any time for himself. I'd be grateful for your suggestions.

Thank you




I appreciate your question, not just because of the issues it raises (which are common ones) but also because of the balanced way in which the issues are presented. It's commendable that you recognize not only your needs but also those of your husband. Often, people in similar situations are tempted to present the issue in very stark black-and-white terms: "How can he not understand that..." "She has to realize that..." as if the problem is entirely one of the other person's bad *middos* and the only solution is for the other person to "improve." They really believe that once the other person fixes themselves, everything will be fine. It sounds so simple, but isn't at all, and taking such an approach usually doesn't help resolve anything.

Although it can seem that acknowledging conflicting interests complicates things, the truth is that being able to see things from the other person's point of view as well, makes it easier to find solutions.

I would like to begin by suggesting a few things you can do for yourself, which don't require your husband's cooperation and which could make a big difference for both of you.

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Due to your specific circumstances, as you note, you have justified reasons to be exhausted, occasionally moody, and so forth. You describe getting home late in the afternoon after a long day of work and then having to take care of a toddler while you get supper ready. It might be currently unrealistic for you, but I would suggest that anyone feeling overwhelmed should first reassess their obligations and try to find areas where they can take it a bit easier in order not to reach that point of exhaustion, especially so early in the evening.

The same is true for a mother who doesn't go out to work but over-exerts herself to produce fancy meals that her husband doesn't require or even necessarily appreciate, or to keep the house spotlessly clean when she really doesn't have the time or energy to do so. I have often heard from husbands frustrated at their wives' exhaustion after going to lengths in housekeeping that they think are unnecessary. What happens then is that everyone suffers.

The husband would prefer a happy, relaxed wife with time to chat and a smile on her face; instead he gets a four-course meal. The wife would prefer a husband who appreciates all that she does for him; instead she gets a husband who is annoyed at her exhaustion and thinks she is silly for having over-extended herself. The children, of course, would gain far more from having relaxed and happy parents who care more about them, and less about clean floors and gourmet cooking.

In your case, I have no idea whether you could (temporarily or permanently) cut back your hours at work, hire a cleaner to take some of the pressure off you, or cook simpler suppers mid-week. If those options are available, they are worth pursuing for everyone's benefit.

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Even if there are no practical steps you can take to lessen your exhaustion at the end of the day, you can still improve things (even before you say anything to your husband) by simply smiling and relaxing a little just for those important first five minutes after he gets home.

I realize that it's easier said than done after you've been waiting and watching the clock for half an hour or more. But, instead of watching the clock, you could mentally readjust to the idea that he isn't getting home until ten past seven and find yourself a nice book to read in the meantime. Then, when he gets home, you simply welcome him with a smile and not a word of complaint. Anything you want to discuss should be postponed beyond those initial few minutes of quiet.

This isn't a question of whether he "deserves" to have a smiling wife greeting him when he gets home at the end of a long day. You're doing this for everyone's benefit. After all, if your husband is like most husbands, just knowing he's coming home to a happy, relaxed wife will make him more willing to get home early than one who is dreading coming home to a grouchy wife who is full of complaints. Of course,

he should take your needs and wishes into consideration regardless of the type of welcome-home he gets each evening, but this way, it's just so much easier and more pleasant all around. And yes, it really is easier and more pleasant for you, too, because when you smile and welcome your husband home, you will automatically be reminded of all the good reasons why you enjoy your husband's company — you don't want him home solely to help you with chores. He's much more than that in your life.

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Welcoming your husband home with a smile might also remind you that he, like you, is coming home after a long and exhausting day. Maybe he really does need half an hour or a little more to wind down after *kollel*, especially as he has another learning session later in the evening. If you can show him that you understand his need to have a few minutes to himself at the end of the day before coming home, you may find that he becomes more willing and able to understand your own needs and put his aside.

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You write that your husband isn't really doing anything that isn't normal or out of the ordinary. What happens, however, when a husband is going beyond that magic "normal"?

I'm reminded of another letter I received from a wife whose husband chronically came home late. In their case, it wasn't due to any need for "winding-down" time but simply kept happening because the husband had no concept of time-keeping. Although he meant well, neither nagging nor pleasant reminders worked. The truth is that in many marriages one finds a personality trait in one spouse that makes a certain issue keep recurring, and when that is the case, it's often best to accept it as one of that marriage's "facts of life" which can't be changed, and to focus on other areas where the relationship is mutual and strong. As much as people don't like giving up, holding on to unrealistic expectations is often a huge source of aggravation that grows over time. A better alternative is to reach a level of acceptance and make the best of a situation.

In your case, I don't think there's any reason at all to give up hope of change in the issue that's troubling you. So, what I would suggest in practical terms is that you start from your smile and build up from there. Be nice in your entire approach; don't give your husband any reason to be reminded of how cranky you can (justifiably) become when you're over-tired and upset.

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I believe you can and should find a calm time to simply ask him if he can commit to being home by seven every evening. This isn't the same as tacitly admitting that he doesn't have to be home by then, that if you didn't ask he could come home whenever he wants. It's simply a wise and respectful way of solving this issue that is coming between you.

Then, tell him how much you'll appreciate it when he does start coming home predictably by that time. Thank him in advance for making the effort and tell him that you realize it will put some pressure on him and that you really admire him for putting aside his own feelings and investing in your *shalom bayis*.

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The next stage is to wait a few days to see what happens. If a few days pass and there's no change, you should gently remind your husband of what you requested and repeat how much it means to you. Alternatively, if things get better for a few days and then your husband relapses, you should also gently and nicely remind him. It's normal for people to need a while to get used to a new way of doing things.

It's also normal for people to get frustrated and assume that, "If, after all I said, and all the arguments we've had, and all the times I've asked him nicely, he still forgets, it must mean he doesn't care about me." It doesn't usually mean that at all. It just means that your husband made a mistake for whatever reason and that you should give him a chance to fix it.

Therefore, if he does keep forgetting, or gets better and then slips back, stay calm and ask him again, nicely. Don't sulk and expect him to figure out why. Don't pretend not to care and then get even more upset.

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There is another scenario that you have to be prepared for, though it's an unlikely one. This is the scenario where your husband's response to your nicely worded and timed request is: "I'm sorry. I'd really like to do this for you, but I can't stand feeling so constrained by having to be home at a certain time. I'll try to always be home before half-past-seven but I can't commit to anything beyond that."

To clarify: we're not talking about an abusively neglectful husband who simply doesn't care about your needs or desires. Dealing with that situation is beyond the scope of this essay. I'm referring to the kind of husband who genuinely wants to make his wife happy, but feels that accommodating her in this area will put too much of a strain on his nerves and will leave both of them ultimately less happy.

In such a case, your best approach may be to accept that this is your husband, and that he has many good qualities, and you'll have to find another way to work around this issue. It's not the

end of the discussion — it's actually the beginning, because you should then ask him: Okay, if that's the situation, then can we brainstorm some ways to make it easier for me? Your husband is still involved in the issue even if he can't solve it the way you would prefer.

And, while you move forward on finding different, creative ways of figuring out what to do, you should both remember that this is only one aspect of your relationship, a relationship that is strong in other areas. There's no justification or sense in letting it overshadow all the positive and loving parts of your *shalom bayis*.

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Being creative in such a situation may involve some of the suggestions I made earlier, such as working fewer hours or cooking simpler meals. Implementing these ideas will generally require your husband's input and agreement in any case. If he tells you, "Certainly, cut down the number of hours you work if that helps," then you should see that as his contribution to solving the problem (as would also be the case if he agrees to pay for a cleaning lady, or to having much simpler suppers).

If he just tells you, "Sorry, I can't help you — think of a way to solve this yourself," then you still have a choice in how you'd like to deal with the situation. You can continue working long hours, coming home tired, cooking supper, and then collapsing in exhaustion, and getting angry and frustrated. You could do all of that and resign yourself to having a "husband who doesn't care." Far better, would be to say to your husband: "I see. I'd love to get it all done and serve you properly, but I don't think I can, so I may have to do my best for me and the baby, and when you get home, you can warm up something from the freezer for supper, because by half-past-seven I'm just too tired to move."

It's very common for people not to realize they have options in the way they deal with frustrating issues. To give a different example: The husband of a wife who is always ready late when they need to leave for a *simchah* simply sits in the car and stews in frustration while he waits. The better response (after trying all the methods outlined above) is for him to tell her: "I see that you're not managing to address your lateness, so let's think of something else we can do. Next time, I'll leave on time and if you're not ready, I'll give you money to take a cab."

This method shouldn't be used in anger or frustration. It can simply be the wisest way to deal with a clash of personalities in one specific area where other solutions haven't worked. What helps is to remember that just as your husband upsets you by coming home late every evening, you do things that annoy your husband on a regular basis, too. It's the very rare marriage where both spouses don't have to come to terms with things that they would rather not have to.

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One important point to remember, however, which distinguishes your situation from many others, is that it is temporary. You won't always be feeling as exhausted and grouchy as you are now, and when you ask your husband to come home earlier, you should certainly point this out and remind him that what you're asking for will only apply for a few months. That should make it much easier for him to commit to what you're asking.

Often, spouses are reluctant to do something out of the ordinary for each other if they worry that what is a special favor today will become expected behavior tomorrow. Making it clear that you're asking for something temporary, and stressing how much you appreciate his flexibility, will make it more likely that he'll happily agree.

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Now, with all that said, a quick word to any husband reading this: Go home!

Home isn't the place you retreat to when there's nowhere better or more interesting to be. It's the place where you belong, now that you're married and committed to a wife and family. Of course you need some time to yourself as well, but taking that time is something you arrange together with your wife, not something you have an inalienable right to.

Even if your wife isn't asking you to come home, that's still where you should be. And even if she doesn't need your help, you should offer it; and even if she says "No thank you", that doesn't mean you don't need to be there. And, even if you come home and she is grouchy and isn't smiling and is upset that you're late (again), you can still smile at her and apologize and tell her that you'll try to do better in future.

When both spouses are genuinely committed to each other, and to getting their communication right — the right words, the right tone, at the right time — they'll find a path toward a solution to every problem, *be'ezras Hashem*.



## **TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME**: TERUMAH 5785

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