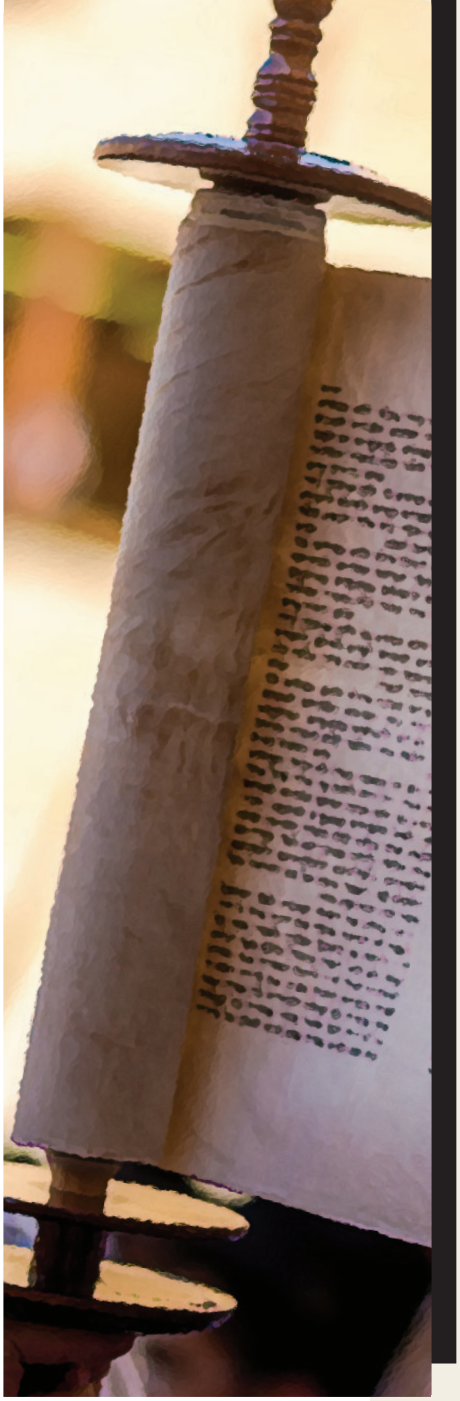


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

THE WISDOM OF REMAINING SILENT

In this week's *parshah*, Bnei Yisrael are presented with the Torah and declare, "*Na'aseh venishma*—We will do and we will listen!" The Chiddushei Harim *ztz"l* asks why the Torah uses the plural "we" will do and listen, when each person responded individually. He explains that the Torah appeared to Bnei Yisrael as so wonderful and sweet that those who were being offered it wanted to take it not only for themselves but also for everyone else — no one should be deprived of such an amazing gift.

Wanting to share something good is natural and it's certainly a *mitzvah* to give others the gifts of wisdom, understanding, the secrets of how to build good relationships... as long as one knows when to give and when to refrain from giving. Even if — and sometimes especially if — our intentions are positive, we have to take into account not only the giving but also the receiving. If the person we want to benefit is simply not ready or willing to accept what we are offering, the gift will not only not help them but can even harm them — and us.

This consideration is particularly applicable when it comes to close relationships, when the emotional involvement is so intense that sometimes the best way to demonstrate love is by holding back. Of course we should always do whatever we can to help our loved ones, but it's important to remember that sometimes "doing" is best expressed by "doing nothing." It takes good judgment to know when to refrain from saying or doing something, and it's often preferable to err on the side of caution. At the very least, take the time to ensure that your saying or doing something will help before jumping into action, because very often, there's no way to retract if the something goes horribly wrong.

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Parshas **Mishpatim**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First of all, thank you for the wisdom and advice you share on Torah Anytime. I always look forward to your new *shiurim*.

I have a question on *shalom bayis* between parents, which I believe is a very sensitive topic. My parents *baruch Hashem* have a stable marriage and love each other deeply but they are always bickering. As a child, I was constantly nervous about their marriage because they seemed to always be arguing about the same kinds of things. My father is quite critical and my mother has a more stubborn nature.

I have been married for a few years now and have a beautiful marriage and am often hurt on my mother's behalf by the things my father says, although he does not generally mean to be hurtful. My parents and I are very open, and I once spoke (very respectfully) with my father about his being critical of my mother. My father was very open with me and I believe he appreciated what I had to say but I was concerned I was doing something improper because I am his daughter.

I found out from the conversation that my father feels my mother does not spend enough time with him. To sum it up, it seems some basic needs in their marriage are not being met; my father needs more time with my mother and my mother needs more compliments from my father. I believe there is much potential for them to still work on their relationship and enjoy a more peaceful and loving marriage like the one I am *baruch Hashem zocheh* to have.

Can you give me any advice on how to proceed with helping them being that I am their child and I am afraid of overstepping boundaries?

Thank you.



I'd like to start by highlighting what you describe as your loving marriage and wonderful *shalom bayis*. It's so important to recognize the gifts we have been given, and be thankful for them. Too often, we only see what we have in contrast to what we don't, such as the wonderful children we only notice when one of them becomes a cause for concern. Having good *shalom bay*is is a tremendous *brachah* in itself and also brings in its wake many other *brachos*, because a stable and loving home is the foundation for generations.

Always remember to appreciate for these gifts, and make make every effort to maintain the special marriage that you *baruch Hashem* have.

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Your question about a child intervening in the *shalom bayis* of his or her parents is an interesting one, and while it's more common to encounter the question in reverse (parents intervening in the *shalom bayis* of their married children), it's not unheard of for grown children (married or not) to try to help their parents solve their problems, usually with the very best of intentions.

While some people may consider it completely inappropriate, we see in the Torah that such things can happen. In Parshas Shemos, Amram separated from his wife Yocheved as a result of Pharaoh's decree and it was their daughter Miriam who persuaded her father to return to his wife —which resulted in Moshe Rabbeinu's birth.

However, I certainly would not advise anyone today to proceed without caution and try to emulate Miriam Haneviah, for the very reasons you mention. The danger of overstepping boundaries is very real, as you recognize.

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In the first place, one has to consider the *halachos* of *kibbud av va'eim*. Even if a child sees his parent actually transgressing a *mitzvah de'Oraysa*, he has to know how he may phrase his very gentle and cautious chastisement. Here, you're not talking about anything that is blatantly forbidden. Bickering and even criticism is not at all the same as deliberately causing another person anguish, and you are probably not obligated to intervene in any way.

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Secondly, a child is far too emotionally involved with his or her parents to be able to see the situation objectively enough to truly help. This applies between siblings as well. I am sure you genuinely want to see your parents' *shalom bayis* improve but this wish is not enough to ensure that any intervention on your part would be productive rather than destructive.

Intervention could in fact harm not only your parents' marriage but also your own relationship with them, and that would be a tremendous shame given that you only want the best for all of you.

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You write that, "My parents *baruch Hashem* have a stable marriage and love each other deeply but..." The bickering and criticism that you describe clearly does not (even to your eyes) detract from your parents' loving and stable marriage, and that actually says a lot, perhaps more than you realize.

Sometimes, what can look so very problematic and upsetting from the outside can actually feel very differently to those involved. I'm not in any way advocating for couples to bicker and criticize one another — however, it seems to me that it's quite possible that your parents don't see the actions that bother you as nearly as problematic as you do.

There are all kinds of successful marriages in the world, and among them are relationships in which the wife asks the husband before making even the smallest purchase; or the wife is always late getting ready to leave for *simchos*; or the husband often laughs at a certain habit his wife has. While these examples can be a source of major aggravation for some couples, believe it or not, for others it's all fine... and neither of them seeks to change these aspects of their marriage, nor do they feel victimized in any way.

Even when it seems that one spouse is being controlled by the other, things may not be nearly as simple as the casual onlooker or even the couple's own children think. One also has to take into account the generation gap and remember that what seems so upsetting to younger people might not be at all upsetting to the older generation.

This reminds me of a story of two people who would meet after Shacharis every day in shul and argue vociferously about anything and everything. It was enough for one of them to express an opinion on something and the other would immediately jump to take the opposite position and no matter how long and ferociously they argued, they never came to any kind of resolution.

Then, one of the two was hospitalized for a long period and the people in shul noticed that the other one seemed to be getting more and more melancholy as the days passed... until he took the long trip to the hospital to pay his sparring partner a visit. He had barely entered the room before the two of them were at it again, arguing, shouting, gesturing... and when the visit was over, both of them were beaming.

Sometimes, what looks like a passionate argument is simply two people being passionate about a subject that they care deeply about, and isn't at all a sign that they care less about each other. We're used to the idea of *chavrusos* sparring in learning, and it could be that your parents actually enjoy their bickering exchanges, or at least don't find them nearly as upsetting as you do to witness.

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It is of course also possible that they, or either your mother or your father, do find the arguments upsetting. It's not uncommon for one spouse to enjoy a "good argument" while the other would prefer a calmer sort of existence, or for one to see the fighting as a very worrying sign while the other just assumes that it will soon blow over.

Even if that is the case, however, that doesn't mean that there's a potential role for their child to step in as a therapist. In fact, your drawing extra attention to this problematic aspect of their relationship could even make things worse, when in fact, it is a small matter in comparison to the many ways in which your parents get on well and respect one another.

If you really do feel, however, that it would benefit the situation to say something, the very most you could do (preferably after consulting with an objective observer) is to gently suggest that they might want to consult someone about it — and then step back and never revisit the issue.

That means that you don't follow up in any way, such as, asking if they took your advice and consulted someone, or whether things have improved (or worsened). You simply pretend that the conversation never happened and make no reference to it ever again.

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In your letter you describe how you have already taken a very limited action, so what I would suggest in your case is that you now drop the subject entirely. The response of your father actually illustrates one of the pitfalls of intervening — namely, that it can draw one or both parents into defending themselves to you, which puts you in an entirely inappropriate relationship with that parent.

As you can see, broaching what you obviously feel is your father's excessive criticism of your mother has achieved nothing other than to cause your father to justify (whether truthfully or not) his behavior by "explaining" that your mother doesn't spend enough time with him. It should go without saying that if you were then to go to your mother and report back, things could quickly spiral out of control and end up very far from your dream of improving your parents' *shalom bayis*.

There's no need for you to assess whether your father's defense is justified. The best thing for you to do at this point is to very respectfully and gently say something noncommittal ("I hear you") and withdraw.

Let's consider, however, a different scenario in which your father, not you, introduces the subject and tries to persuade you that your mother is the one in the wrong. Such cases do unfortunately occur and for a child to allow him or herself to be dragged into the *shalom bayis* struggles of his parents can be catastrophic. Again, the only good option is to stay noncommittal and refuse to be drawn in. It may then be helpful to suggest someone that the parent could speak with.

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I want to stress that the more usual scenario is for parents to be tempted to intervene in their married children's lives, not the other way around. There too I would give the same advice — to stay out as much as possible, and if a comment simply *must* be made, to make it gentle, brief, and one-time-only.

While a married child shouldn't be offended by a well-meaning parent, anyone on the receiving end of such a comment should be comfortable with simply responding very gently that, "I am dealing with it already, and thank you for your concern," or something to that effect.

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Very often, people assume that problems are intergenerational — that what a child sees in his parents' home is what he ends up doing in his own home. Personally I think that's a very simplistic way of viewing things. People act in problematic ways because they have problems that they need to address, and if those problems happen to be the same ones their parents have, then they may justify their inaction by saying, "Well, what can you expect? My father always yelled at his kids..." or, "What's the big deal about always being late? My mother was always late and my father never had a problem with it."

In your case I'm glad this isn't something to worry about, but in general I would caution people not to learn from their parents' mistakes, even if they don't seem to have had terrible repercussions. Your spouse is not your parent and it's your spouse's reaction you have to be concerned about, not your parents'.

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Not always can you share the gifts of happiness with all those you love and care about, but by following the Torah's wisdom we can increase blessing in the world and bring *nachas* to our parents and to Hashem.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: MISHPATIM 5785

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