Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Ki Sisa |

When We Care, We Seek to Justify

Because I care about them, how can I justify their wrong?

When Moshe Rabeinu ascended Har Sinai to return to *klal Yisrael* with the *luchos*, Hashem told him that klal Yisrael had committed the *cheit ha'eigel*. In response, the first thing Moshe did when he came down was to ask Aharon, "What did this nation do to you that you brought them to such a grave sin?"

From this question, it appears that Moshe was seeking an excuse to absolve *klal Yisrael* from their grave wrongdoing even at the expense of blaming Aharon. For the most part, Aharon was the innocent party who was merely dragged into the rut by a disenchanted, confused nation.

Cheit ha'eigel is a very sensitive topic that is hard for our minds to grasp. We're talking of an exalted generation, *dor de'ah*, and their pious leader Aharon Hakohein, and we can't possibly imagine the *nisayon* they faced during that trying period of Moshe's absence. Still, we learn important lessons from this saga, including from Moshe's reaction.

Through his perplexing response to the crisis, perhaps Moshe was trying to convey the essence of true leadership to Aharon. During the time that Moshe was in *Shamayim*, Aharon was meant to serve as the interim leader for *klal Yisrael*, a role that Moshe played with utmost sincerity, humility, and a profound understanding of his brethren. The job of the *manhig Yisrael*, his response conveys, is to see them always in a most positive light, to do whatever he could to judge them favorably. Let us see, he said to Aharon, how we could justify even a sin as grave as the *cheit ha'eigel*. Perhaps the *Yidden* miscalculated my absence, perhaps they erroneously thought that this is what Hashem wants of them. Let's see if we could come up with a reason that will justify their wrong because I care about them.

Indeed, Moshe didn't break the *luchos* immediately after Hashem told him the tragic news. Only after he witnessed the *Yidden* dancing around the *eigel* did he shatter the symbol of convenance between Hashem and the *Yidden*. In explaining a reason for this delay, one of the commentators note that when Moshe heard the news, he hoped in his heart that the *Yidden* were sad about what they did, that they did it out of reluctant desperation. Later, when he saw them rejoicing around their *avodah zarah*, he was left with no choice but to accept the terrible reality.

When we care about someone, we find justification for their deeds, no matter how terrible they are. Moshe Rabeinu, in his greatness, sought every possible avenue in order to defend *klal Yisrael*. That was part of his loyalty toward them, as is evident in his announcement of "*Mi La'Hashem eilai!*" All he wanted was to prove that yes, in essence the *Yidden* were being dedicated to Hashem. In this case, Moshe Rabeinu was unsuccessful in

justifying the nation's wrong, and he had no choice but to follow through with Hashem's plan of retribution, but there's something that we can learn about giving the other party a chance to save face.

Your Reaction to your Spouse's Offense

It often happens that an individual feels that their spouse committed a wrong, toward them or someone else. The wrong could range from spending too much on a pair of shoes to a serious offense that seems unforgivable. There are two ways to deal with any such occurrence. The first is to say, "I caught you. Now I see your true colors," and to turn this into a serious conflict, bringing the relationship into crisis mode. Alternatively, you could try to let the other person save face. This is not only to avoid confrontation but about dealing with the relationship. Often, much of a couple's relationship can depend on that one bump in the road. They could emerge feeling much more connected or in an acrimonious state.

If someone does something wrong to you and your reaction is that this is what you expect of them, and that their wrong is a reflection of their negative essence, you may inadvertently strengthening this self-impression for that person. On the other hand, when you try to justify what they've done, you may be giving the other person a chance to rethink their offense, to express remorse and regret, and to ask for forgiveness.

Often, we're tempted to put the other person in their place. We subconsciously embrace the opportunity to tell them, "You see? I always knew you don't care about me. Here's my proof." What does such a response do to your relationship, though? So much of it is in our hands. Unfortunately, by the time most people get into such a rut it's hard to climb out of it. When a person is emotionally challenged it's hard to overcome those negative emotions and do what's simply logical. But, when we care about someone, that's what we do. It probably wasn't simple for Moshe Rabeinu to do what he did, but it was his sincere love for the nation that compelled him to look for answers to absolve them of their guilt. He knew the Yidden were the *am hanivchar*, he saw what they were meant to be, and he wanted with all his might to maintain their exalted standing despite the sin they committed. In *shalom bayis*, this is your spouse. This is the person you want to live with and enjoy a good relationship with.

The Benefit of Understanding your Spouse

When you justify the other person, you take away so much of the potential negativity the occurrence could arouse. "Oh, you forgot to buy that. You were probably running late." Often, that person is waiting to see how you'll interpret what just happened. Will you see me as a bad person because of what I did? In our own life, when we commit a wrong, we're naturally wired to justify it immediately. When we put that very mechanism into action when our loved ones fail we're the winner. If you're afraid that by justifying it'll happen again, know that the opposite will occur. Precisely when we use the other person's wrong to show them our derogatory view of them the person will lose interest in proving us wrong. But, when we convey our desire to see the good in the other person, to absolve them of their mistakes, they will be motivated to prove us right.

Don't Negate Your Pain

This is not to say that you shouldn't communicate your disappointment to your spouse. Yes, you could be clear with him that you wanted that to happen and that it was important to you, but at the same time you could shift the conversation from blame and anger to understanding and acceptance.

When it's hard for you to justify a wrong, and you can't come up with a good reason to defend them, you could simply say, "I'm sure you didn't mean it." This doesn't mean that it doesn't bother me, but it means that I'm not using this incident as a proof of your bad intentions. When you say something like "Oh! It must have been the bad weather," even if that may not have been the reason, you're giving them a way out. The next day, when the weather is better, they will probably make an effort to prove your comment right.

If you could tell your spouse, "I'm sure you didn't mean to neglect my needs," even if you were hurt, you're expressing your pain but you're also letting the other person save face and do it differently next time. When your spouse knows that you're not judging them for what they did wrong and that you acknowledge their good intentions, they're propelled to connect more. They see in you a heart that is open to a relationship.

When your spouse does something that is objectively wrong, not necessarily against you, your responsibility is to not to absolve them from their *aveirah*. However, you could simply acknowledge their humanness. Without justifying the act, you could still say something like, "I could understand your temptation to do this. I could relate to what pulled you to do this." This is a big step in making the other person feel at ease. Without condoning the behavior in any way, Moshe Rabeinu, who had just spent 40 days in *Shamayim*, was ready to put himself in the same boat as *klal Yisrael* when he told Hashem that if He obliterates the nation he wants his name erased from the Torah, simply to save face for them. This is the result of love and concern.

Letting Your Child Save Face

When a child commits a wrong, no matter how old he is, a loving parent will let the child save face. This does not convey approval. A parent should clarify that the deed in itself is wrong, but adding "I'm sure you did it because…" makes all the difference in fostering the relationship.

Suppose your child consistently wakes up late in the morning and thus arrives late to school. Instead of berating him for his laziness, justify the behavior. "I understand you for waking up late. It's probably because you need more sleep." When you make such a statement, the child absorbs your understanding, your perception of him as a person who wants to do right. As such, he'll relate to the excuse you've giving for him, perhaps undertaking to go to bed earlier in order to get his eight hours at a better time. When the child gives his own excuses, instead of rejecting them and saying, "No, it's because you're not trying hard enough," the parent could say, "You're right. You need more reminders to go to sleep on time. I'll help you with that. I knew you want to wake up earlier. I know how much you want to do the right thing." In general, child who gets such a response wants to prove his parents right.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: My son has kept asking me to skip school and I let him stay home every so often. He says the *melamed* doesn't treat him well and that he's probably happy when he isn't there. Lately, the situation has escalated and he hasn't been in *cheder* for two weeks. When we spoke to the *melamed* about this, he said it's the parent's responsibility to push their kid to go to *cheder*. Is this true?

Answer: It saddened me to hear this question. A *melamed* should do everything in his power to make a kid want to come to *cheder*. How can a parent facilitate the *melamed's* goodwill in doing so?

While a parent shouldn't make a child too comfortable about staying home, they should also not use force to get the child to go. Instead of pushing the child to go, he should be attracted to want it. For this, cooperation from the *melamed* or *menahel* is crucial. What is *cheder* offering the child to make him want to be there? Thus, the parent should reach out to the *hanhala* and say, "I'm sure you're doing your best. What can we do so my child will be enthusiastic about spending the day in *cheder* every day? Could you please explain to him how much you want him to come? Is there a small job you could give him to make him feel needed in your classroom?"

If the *melamed* still insists that this is not his responsibility, don't back off. "I know it's not your job, but I would really appreciate if you do this for my child. I could push the kid to go but I'd really prefer that he want to go. I'm okay with encouraging him and helping him, but I believe that if he'll feel better about going it'll be much easier and healthier for him. Could you please help me out?"

A child should never be pushed to go to a place where they don't feel safe or comfortable. When there's a good relationship between parents and educators, they can usually ensure that the school environment is attractive to the child.

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