

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

FIRST SMALL STEPS ON A LONG JOURNEY

In this week's parshah, Hashem tells Avraham Avinu to leave his father's house and go "to the land that I will show you." At first, Avraham had no idea where his journey would end, and as Rashi explains, Hashem deliberately withheld this information from Avraham. Part of the test was to see whether he would head out without even knowing where he was being asked to go.

The Rebbe R' Yerachmiel of Parshischa explains this based on what Chazal teach us, that "all beginnings are difficult." This was certainly true for Avraham; it's also true for each of us, in our individual pathways of avodas Hashem. At first, when a person resolves to serve Hashem, the task seems so monumental, as far away as Shamayim. However, when he overcomes his hesitation, his fears, and his natural laziness, and starts out on this path, Hashem shows him that really, what he thought was Shamayim is Eretz, and totally attainable. Later, when it's time for a new challenge, a new Shamayim opens up before him, presenting new opportunities for growth.

Whenever we feel challenged in life, it's important to remember that we don't need to know exactly where we're going. The only thing we need to know is the direction, and then we simply take one step after another. Often, the path seems to lead us through harsh terrain, taking us to places where we're certain we'll flounder. We feel tempted to give up and excuse ourselves from the task ahead — "I'm not the kind of person who can do that," or, "That's for people greater than me; I can't reach such a level." Sometimes, we opt out and prefer that someone else does the hard work of plodding forward, and never realize that we could have reached the goal ourselves if only we had persevered.

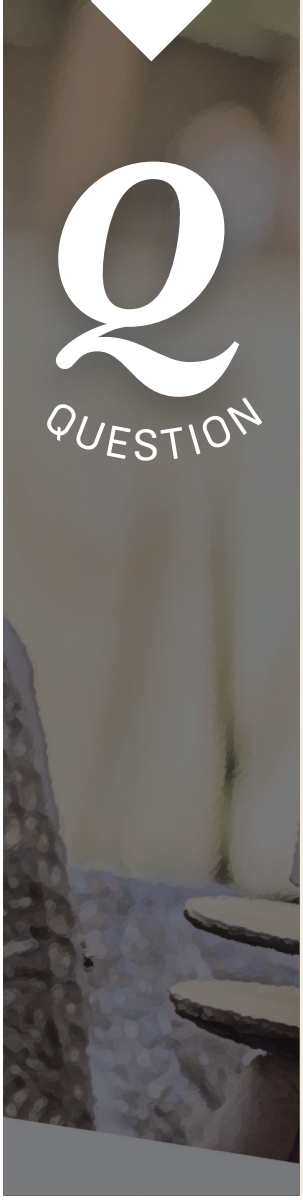
Our relationships — primarily with a spouse, but also with children, parents, and colleagues — frequently challenge us to overcome the perceived limitations of our "father's house," all the behavior patterns we're accustomed to and comfortable with. For example, a person who consoles himself with the thought that, "I just have a short fuse," may find after getting married that he needs to choose between overcoming his anger and ruining his marriage. It's then that "I can't" has to become, "I'll do my best" — and it's also then that, "I'll do my best" becomes, "I never imagined I could do that," with Hashem's help, and with constant tefillos.

Special thanks to

Yosef Shlomo Frankel

for sponsoring this week's essay and for being a great support!

Parshas
Lech Lecha
VOL. 8 | ISSUE 3



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your amazing shiurim. Your classes are so insightful and I appreciate listening to them on a weekly basis.

Recently, my wife and I have been dealing with a very difficult family issue, one more related to my wife than to me. Things have been very stressful and my wife is eaten up with anxiety.

Recently, she complained to me that I'm not being sympathetic enough, that I only deal with the practical side of things and don't give her enough support. She also said that since I'm not giving her the support she needs, she'll have to look for it from her friends — and she's not happy with that.

I acknowledge this issue and agree that I got caught up in the details and lost sight of the emotional well-being of my wife. But although I am committed to supporting her emotionally and being more sympathetic, I feel that as a husband and a man in general, there's a limit to how much emotional support I can give her, and I think that there are things that a good friend can provide better than a spouse.

So, the next day I told my wife that I think it's actually a great idea that she should open up to a friend, a friend who isn't involved in the details and technicalities and everything else we are busy with as a couple. I think a friend could provide that listening ear and sympathy that she needs and that someone as entrenched as I am just can't. But my wife wasn't happy with that, as she feels that in a good marriage spouses should be able to lean on each other and not have to seek support from other people.

My question is, should I demand of myself to be able to give my wife all the sympathy and emotional support she needs? Or, perhaps there's something a good friend can do that even a very good spouse in a very good relationship can't, and it's okay to open up to a friend and doesn't reflect badly on the spouse or marriage?

Thank you



Thank you for your kind words about my shiurim, and I'm glad that you listen every week, as consistency in any area of self-growth is a very good thing. Especially when you're trying to learn a particular approach to shalom bayis, consistent reinforcement is extremely helpful.

If you've been listening to my classes long enough, you've probably noticed that I almost always avoid the question of who is right or wrong. In most cases, there is no black-and-white interpretation, and even when it comes to the occasional exception, it's usually not helpful to blame one spouse and exonerate the other. I always attempt to guide the person looking for help to find things they can do to improve the situation, without waiting for the other person, or the circumstances, to first change. When this advice is followed, situations almost always improve.

• • •

Difficult situations, such as the one your wife is dealing with, offer an opportunity for great improvements to be made in relationships — or the opposite, if one is not careful. Often, when people go above and beyond to do the right thing in a time

of crisis, the effects prove long-lasting and the devotion, sympathy, and assistance offered by those close to us are remembered for years to come. It's a shame when people who are experiencing difficulty in knowing how to deal with challenges withdraw or argue, instead of doing what you're doing — reaching out for advice.

Your wife needs your support and it's normal for her to feel that need very acutely. And it's also normal for you to feel somewhat overwhelmed at being called upon to provide absolutely all the help she needs. Of course one's spouse should be more loyal, more devoted, and more loving and giving than anyone else. That doesn't, however, rule out a role for others such as friends and relatives.

In your situation, your concern for your wife's well-being can, ironically, make it harder for you to step back enough to offer the sympathy and reassurance she needs. This is a common dynamic between couples—often seen, for example, when they're dealing with an issue involving a child. One parent, feeling anxious and seeking comfort, may be met with irritation or impatience from the other. While that response can feel cold or unfeeling, it often stems from the fact that the other parent is equally worried and also yearning for support.

Aside from that, no matter how devoted a spouse is and wants to be, there are limits to their capabilities. Just as we sometimes call in outside help to solve practical problems, there are also times when it's normal and acceptable for one spouse to seek outside help for an emotional issue. This doesn't mean that the other spouse has failed in their role as "devoted husband/wife."

And so, it's reasonable of you to encourage your wife to confide in a friend, someone who isn't overburdened with anxiety or dealing with the practical details of your situation. The question is how to do that without giving your wife the impression that you're withdrawing or not fulfilling your obligations as a caring spouse.

• • •

It isn't easy to set aside your own concerns (to a degree) and support your wife. However, almost everyone is capable of far more than they believe. Sometimes, it's a crisis that reveals our hidden strengths; at other times it's just a matter of stepping up to the plate and putting in more effort. Yes, even as "just a man" you can offer your wife a great deal of support, possibly far more than you are currently giving.

Even if this issue is affecting you as well, it's important to remember that this is primarily her problem and that the focus should be on her rather than on your own difficulties. If you need support yourself, you should certainly seek it out, just as you have asked for my advice here.

In general, my advice in such a situation is twofold: Don't argue, and try to stay one step ahead. Not arguing means that you don't challenge your wife's feelings — don't try to "prove" that you're not capable of supporting her more, and don't protest that a friend would do a better job than you. It doesn't matter who's right; the main thing is not to turn the issue into a debate.

Staying a step ahead will also calm things down as your wife sees that you're doing your best even without her prompting (i.e., complaints). If you know there's something particular she wants you to take care of, do it before she reminds you. If there's something specific that she complained about yesterday, do it the right way today before she gets frustrated again.

And if you don't know what to do, ask. Tell her how much you want to support her in a way that she'll appreciate, and how hard you're already trying. Then ask her what she wants from you. If she doesn't have a clear answer, or claims that "you should know already," don't give up, and don't take the bait and argue. Make suggestions and be patient, while continuing to do what you can.

• • •

You're right that being male does predispose you (to a degree) to focusing on practicalities rather than emotional support. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't try hard to stretch beyond your comfort zone and find ways to offer the emotional support your wife wants.

That said, you do have to maintain your own emotional equilibrium. If you're doing your best to provide what your wife needs, and she is still complaining, you shouldn't feel depressed or guilty or ashamed that "now she'll have to turn to a friend and that means I failed." While our human capabilities are far in excess of what we use, we're still not superhuman and we — and our spouses — may need to recognize that.

• • •

You're the one turning to me for advice, and it's to you and not to your wife that my advice is directed. Nonetheless, I would like to address "the other spouse" in general as there are a few important points for anyone in a similar situation to your wife to bear in mind.

When faced with challenges, we often cling to others for support and that's only natural and how things should be. It's also natural, when we're suffering, to hope and

even expect that those closest to us should relieve our pain and help us solve things. Not always is that possible.

Even the most loving and devoted spouse can only do so much. If it's "not enough," then that fact shouldn't blind us to everything they are still doing. Unfortunately, it's common for a husband or wife to take for granted everything they receive from their spouse and then, when an outsider steps in to fill the breach, shower that person with praise as if they had saved the day.

Needless to say, this is unfair and can lead to a great deal of resentment, especially in situations where the other spouse is actually suffering from the same issue and is supposed to deal with their own feelings and someone else's too. If anyone finds themselves in such a situation, they do have to remember and keep reminding themselves that what may seem like a lack of patience or understanding may derive from the person being under so much pressure themselves that they don't have much energy left for others.

• • •

Another point I would like to stress is that very often, we turn to others to "rely on" without even knowing what that would look like in practice. If you ask someone for support, try to be specific about what you would like them to do. It may feel odd at first, but it's undoubtedly the most effective way of getting your needs met. In most cases, your spouse is longing to know what they can do to make a real difference and meanwhile, they're stumbling around in the dark trying to get it right without knowing what "it" is.



And — if you don't know what "it" is, how do you expect your spouse to know?

Furthermore, don't have unrealistic expectations. Relying on one's spouse shouldn't mean that you are no longer putting in effort and would utterly collapse without them. That applies not only in practical terms but also emotionally — in fact, even more so, because no person can "make" another person happy or remove their anxiety. They can only help to ease the surrounding circumstances and offer chizuk.

• • •

There's nothing wrong with asking people for chizuk; in fact, we should do precisely that when we need encouragement. Problems only arise when we expect more than what we get and interpret that as the other person not caring, or not caring enough. There could be all kinds of reasons why that person appears to fall short, and it's unfair and unjust to judge them unfavorably.

If your spouse speaks a different emotional language to you (an almost universal problem), then learning to translate their words into terms that you understand is an essential "shalom bayis project." This works both ways, of course — you should also do your best to communicate in words that your spouse can understand. This will likely involve each of you asking the other to translate, frequently, and being this open and vulnerable will usually bring you closer.

Learning a new language isn't easy, but similar to our forefather Avraham, that's what we often need to do when we pick ourselves up and move out of our father's house. When entering into a new land, we have to accustom ourselves to new ways of doing things. It can seem like an almost impossible task when we set out on this journey, but with Hashem's help, we can turn what looks like Shamayim into Aretz, and slowly, one day at a time, the impossible becomes second nature.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: LECH LECHA 5785

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

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