RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Netzavim

The Blessings of Peace

The Chiddushei Harim says that the most amazing thing about our nation is depicted in the very first *passuk* of this week's Parsha. *"Atem netzavim hayom kulchem* – Everyone, from the simplest of Yidden to the most exalted, stood before Hashem". How was that possible, he asks? It takes a certain amount of *kedusha* to merit "standing before Hashem" and yet *everyone* merited it! The Chiddushei Harim explains that because they were all standing together, they were united as one, that is how they merited this great experience.

In marriages, too, we are told that a man and woman merit that the Shechina rests between them. When does that occur? When there is unity and peace in their relationship. Even if the husband is not the biggest *tzaddik* and the wife is not the biggest *tzaddeikes*; as long as they live together harmoniously, this tremendous source of *bracha* enters their home.

Often it pays to forgo our preferences, to compromise and give in, in order to maintain the peace in our homes. That is certainly true when it comes to *gashmiyus* matters, but is even sometimes the case when it pertains to one's *ruchniyus*! The *halacha* teaches that one is permitted to state a mistruth for the sake of peace, even though lying is a rather serious transgression that would not be allowed under any other circumstances *"midvar sheker tirchak!"*. A man is responsible to make his wife aware of any *halachos* she needs to keep, but in certain cases he is advised not to mix in and to let her continue doing something wrong. These cases demonstrate the great lengths Chazal have gone to teach us the importance of avoiding conflict and confrontation.

Obviously, one is not to jump to conclusions on his own, and before he determines that keeping the peace supersedes a halachic matter, he needs to discuss it with a reliable Halachic authority. This is not something that one can *pasken* for himself.

The main takeaway is that when a man and a woman come together, put aside their differences, and work on creating a peaceful home, the Shechina rejoices and joins their union.

Question:

L'kavod Rabbi Gruen,

I'm very confused, and I hope I can be as clear as possible and you can give me some insight. We recently joined a *kehilla* that is way below my standards, but my husband claims it *is* his standard. I would like to believe that it isn't.

We are being exposed to many things that we didn't do previously. My question is, where do I draw that line, and do I draw the line at all?

I'll give some examples: recently, a group of couples got together for a supper together. While the men and women sat on separate tables, there was quite a bit of mingling going on. I refused to join, but it bothered my husband so much that he *mamesh* became depressed. In light of this, I relented and joined.

My husband participates in various recreational activities and outings, which bother me a lot. This is not something I saw my father or his father do. He even wants me to join him on some of them, and gets very upset when I don't.

We joined this *kehilla* because my husband wanted to be in a place where he can "chill", but I think that this is overdoing it a bit.

What is really confusing to me, though, is that since we joined, he is learning a lot more and our relationship is overall a lot better. This shows me that the "chilling" might be good for him. My question is, what is the limit?

Thank you, and looking forward to your response.

Answer:

Before I address this question, I want to reiterate that every question that touches upon Halacha needs to be asked from a qualified Rav or Rabbinic authority, something that I do not claim to be. I can only advise on the relationship aspect of the query.

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Prior to addressing the woman in question, I would like to write a couple of words to the husband (or, in contrasting situations, the wife – as the case may be). While it is possible that this particular husband will not even be reading this, it is intended for any person who finds themselves described in the letter above. As always, the purpose of my essays is for you to take away a lesson for yourself – not busy yourself with thinking how others will benefit from the information.

Every person is given free choice. He can decide how he wants to behave and what his standards of living should be. At the same time, when one grows up within a certain framework – whether it means dressing a certain way, behaving a certain way, keeping certain *minhagim* – your marriage partner might rightfully expect you to stay within that framework. That does not necessarily mean that you are bound to one narrow lane forever, as much as your spouse has every right to be surprised, shocked, and disappointed if you start making changes later in life – especially if those changes are drastic or sudden. It also doesn't matter whether these changes are for better or for worse; the fact that you are shifting off the beaten path gives your spouse every right to be unsettled and even upset.

This does not in any way indicate that you must remain stagnant forever and ever and can never change in any way. It does mean that if you feel the desire to do things differently, you should definitely first discuss it with your spouse. Tell them what is compelling you to want to do this and hear what they have to say about it. Make sure they're on board, or find a way to make it work for both of you. Most importantly, introduce any changes gradually, and only once there is a mutual agreement between the two of you.

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Ironically, I will say the exact opposite to the wife who is asking the question. People change. It is not very realistic to expect your spouse to remain precisely the same as when he or she married you. That does not say that you need to be complicit with drastic changes, but smaller shifts are to be expected. I once heard an explanation that a *kallah* is covered when going to her *chuppah* to signify that what the groom heard up until then doesn't matter. He might very well be unpleasantly surprised by the reality of his bride. And yet, he is marrying her anyway.

If a person wants to change something – let's say he wants to upgrade his standards and become more stringent in certain regards – and it will affect his wife or family, it is *halachically* questionable. He will need to consult with his Rav before he does that. If, however, it is just about him, then it is generally not of her concern.

The word "standards" would be defined as the quality and level by which one chooses to conduct himself and/or live his life. This is something that a person can decide for himself, but other people cannot dictate what someone else's standards should be. This is where boundaries in a relationship come in.

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In the letter above, I see a mistake on both counts. The husband is lowering his own standards, which might not be so much of an issue, but why is insisting that she come along with him, especially since it is clearly making her uncomfortable? And why is she feeling the need to go along with it against her will? While there are times when it is okay to go along with something for the sake of marital peace, [as mentioned in the introduction to this essay], the very fact that he is going so far as to become "depressed" at her reluctance is often indicative of a clear breach of boundaries!

There are certain topics that are better off not being discussed, and because standards can be quite relative, going into a discussion will often just frustrate everyone. Many things don't have a right or wrong answer. Yiddishkeit concerns should always be discussed with Daas Torah. But even in a case where the disagreement is just a matter of preference, one spouse cannot impose his will on the other – and throwing a hissy fit or forcing their will upon them is a serious red flag.

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When your spouse asks you to join them in an activity that makes you feel uncomfortable, for whatever reason, the response should not be "refusing to join" or throwing the proverbial tantrum. You need to calmly state your position and express to them that this is not something that you are agreeable to, and you would really appreciate for them to understand this. You certainly have a right to do that.

Don't argue why you think you're right or why you think he's wrong. It doesn't even matter. Just talk about yourself. You can even tell him that you understand why he would want to do it, and explain to him that you don't judge him for wanting to go.

When you backtrack because you are afraid to offend him, you are showing him that if he throws a big enough fit you will relent. It is very important to be able to tell your spouse what you feel, without fear of repercussions.

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When your spouse does something that does not affect you directly, you don't have to necessarily pretend to like it, but you should understand that it is his choice. As long as you don't come across as aggressive or offensive, you can gently voice your

dissatisfaction. You don't have to hide your opinion from him.

Sometimes, with the right choice of words, you can convince him to refrain from engaging in questionable activities. A boy once told me that he can't bring himself to do certain things because his mother so eloquently explained to him why it isn't something he should be doing. "Why does she have to say it like that?! When she says it so nicely, I feel bad letting her down.", he told me. That says something about how something worded softly can accomplish.

You might also want to try replacing his need for questionable recreational activities with something better. Maybe you can offer to go with him to a place that is more in line with your standards, or try to give him other ways to enjoy himself, he might not want to look elsewhere for fun.

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Another very important thing to keep in mind is that when someone lowers their standards, they are lowering THEIR standards, not yours. Don't take it personally. When you realize that it is not about you, you will be less defensive and it will be less of a struggle. Also remember that even if he is lowering his standards, he is still the same person, and don't disrespect him or look down at him because of it.

A set of parents once came to me and said that their son repeatedly spoke in an offensive manner, provoking the family members. They kept telling him off, because they felt like he was lowering the standards in their home. The situation had spiraled out of control and they came to me for advice. I told them that they should just let him talk. Of course, it wasn't pleasant to hear him speaking that way, but it was *him* doing the talking. It was not about them. Within a week of their ignoring him, their son stopped talking like that. As long as there was the power struggle going on, he couldn't bring himself to stop.

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In your letter, you mention that there are certain areas in which you see improvement. That is wonderful! Pick up on those and encourage them. There are many people who will either not notice or intentionally refuse to acknowledge positive change because they don't approve of the other changes that are taking place. Keep your focus on the positive, acknowledge, show appreciation for it, and very gently encourage more without being controlling or overbearing.

This can also be a good point to consider when raising children. Sometimes, when high standards are imposed upon a person – either on his own or by his family or community – it can stifle him. Often, when you do away with the social pressure (obviously this is not about *halacha*), it can really help him thrive in areas that really matter.

Because this often runs the risk of crossing lines or going into grey areas, it always needs to be discussed with a responsible third party or Rav, but it is worthwhile to consider that the notion of people doing better under less pressure exists.

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One final thought that I can't stress enough is the need for every couple to have Daas Torah to guide them at all times. Don't wait for when you have a big question to go and search for someone, because then it will just be adding stress to the situation. When things are calm and tranquil, each couple should decide upon a person they both agree upon, who will be their source of guidance in the event any big dilemmas come up.

Wishing you all the best and a wonderful life filled with spiritual growth,

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