RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS MISHPATIM

FEEDBACK AND CLARIFICATION

The Ohr Pnei Moshe teaches an important lesson from the juxtaposition of two *pesukim* in this week's *parshah*. The first *passuk* states, *"Lo sateh mishpat evyoncha berivo* — you shall not pervert the judgment of a poor man." The next *passuk* begins: *"Midvar sheker tirchak* — distance yourself from falsehood." How are the two related?

The Ohr Pnei Moshe explains that "*evyon*" can refer to the *yetzer tov*, as we find in Koheles (4:13), where the *yetzer tov* is called a "*yeled misken*." Every day, we *daven*: "*Veha'er eineinu beSorasecha* — Open our eyes to Your Torah." We ask Hashem to help us learn and do what's right. However, all too often, as soon as *davening* is over, we go right back to our old and faulty ways. Behaving in this manner can be considered perverting the judgment of the *evyon*, the *yetzer tov*. Asking for one thing and then acting as if we didn't really mean it is a form of *sheker;* by doing our best to fulfill what we *daven* for, we distance ourselves from *sheker*. Being careful to act in accordance with our speech is a good way to be *misgaber* over the *yetzer hara*.

This would seem to apply even if our *tefillos* for success in learning were completely sincere and we truly intended to improve and begin learning properly. On the other hand, it's clear that Hashem knows that, and if something comes up and prevents us from fulfilling our sincere wishes, Hashem will still reward us for wanting. When it comes to our interpersonal relationships, however, we can't expect people to know we were sincere if we don't follow through with the promised behavior. If you promise to make a sincere effort to start being on time or to be more attentive, or anything else, if you don't follow through, the other person may assume you weren't sincere.

Of course, spouses should be understanding and realize that even with good intentions, people are people and can slip up or find it harder to keep the promise than they imagined it would be, even though they are really trying. We should all try to notice even just a little progress and show appreciation for whatever changes the other person succeeded in making. But if *you* promise something, make sure you do your best to fulfill it and don't expect the other person to judge you favorably, pick up on your well-meaning attempts, or appreciate the little you have to show for your mediocre efforts.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS SPONSORED IN HONOR OF
RABBI & MRS. AHRON PERL
ON THE OCCASION OF THE BIRTH OF A BABY BOY!
MAY THEY BE ZOCHE TO ENDLESS NACHAS FROM ALL THEIR CHILDREN!

The following is a collection of feedback I received in response to previous lectures and essays. I'll address them more briefly than usual in order to cover more topics.

QUESTION:

Hi,

I listened to your lecture on spouse alienation from parents, and I'd love some *chizuk*/explanation. I have a (crazy) sibling who's nice to 96% of the world as they aren't her immediate relatives. She officially cut her parents out, supposedly until they get help, and she doesn't allow a third party to get involved. I wonder what that shows about her. Supposedly there's a rav involved or endorsing this.

She is very "frum"' and has a bunch of kids and looks like a regular person to those who don't know her. Her kids are emotionally abused and her husband is a victim too, a *shmatta* of a guy, although he's not a bad person.

I wonder, what happens to these families, their kids etc.?

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

It's very sad to see people throw away their own lives without realizing what they're doing and worse still, blaming others. It's always someone else's fault for abusing them or not understanding them, and they are convinced that they're the victim.

It's hard for such people to see the truth, but if they would only consider this: If *everyone* is wrong or *everyone* is crazy, is it at all possible that there is *something* — nothing major, but something — wrong with… you? If there are only 15 people you're mad at, chances are that you may still be a large part of the problem, but the more people you have problems with, the more likely it is that there's something you might be doing wrong.

The problem is that this is not something you can tell a person to their face because they won't be able to absorb it. Sometimes, however, reading it in an article or hearing it in a class when the message isn't directed specifically at them can make it easier for a person to begin to consider whether a certain issue may apply to them, as long as they don't feel personally attacked. I have *baruch Hashem* heard from many people who heard a certain message in a class of mine and took it to heart, but don't feel bad if you can't find a way to get through to someone you care for.

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That said, there's an interesting and often overlooked rule that might be relevant here. Just because one party is wrong, doesn't mean the other party is right. Just because your sister is "wrong" about the way she's reacting doesn't mean that your parents or the other people she's upset at were "right" in the way they treated her. She may be the largest part of the problem, but there are often other sides of the story that contribute to the situation. This is not to imply anything specific or to encourage joining the blame game of finding the culprit, but it's food for thought if you want to understand things better and more objectively.

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If you're asking how to deal with such a person, I would answer that you can always be nice to your sister with the understanding that she's dealing with a great many challenges. Don't feel intimidated by her attitude and don't feel the need to accept her way of seeing things or encourage her in her beliefs. Make sure your relationship has safe boundaries (time, topics, etc.). But remember that you're dealing with a very broken person. Be kind, and don't get sucked in.

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As to what happens to such families, it's all in Hashem's hands; that's not a question. In general, more resilient children have a greater chance of growing up to use their free will to understand what went on and surprisingly they often turn out just fine. More sensitive and impressionable children are usually more affected. Often, however, a thoughtful and caring family member can do a lot by reaching out to the children and developing a relationship, while being careful not to overstep bounds, play therapist, or upset the parents.

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QUESTION

I just listened to your Q&A by Keiravtuni about relationships. You said that when somebody is not asking a question, there's no need to answer, and you could just say, "Okay, I hear."

I found that to be very disturbing advice. From what I understand, when a woman complains, she probably needs a lot of empathy, and not just an "okay." In general, women have an interesting way of asking for things. They will often say something like, "The neighbor said that my dress doesn't look good," and that's really her way of saying, "Can I please have a new dress?" If that's the case then when she asks for something in her own way, doesn't she deserve a proper answer? Do you really think she should be happy when she gets an "okay"? Thank you again.

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Okay, I hear. Just kidding…

I'm happy to clarify what "okay" means and how to use it in such a case. It definitely shouldn't convey a lack of empathy or be used to shut down a conversation. A lot of that has to do with the tone of voice in which it's said. Sometimes, however, there truly *is* nothing to say. There's no answer that will be satisfactory, and you were told a trick statement that wasn't even a question to begin with. If someone says something starting off with, "It's not fair that I always have to…" or "everyone keeps telling me that…" then responding, "I hear" is often the only sensible way of acknowledging that you're listening.

This may not be the typical advice you'll hear, but it's an important idea. People often fall into a codependency trap where if their spouse is unhappy, they feel obligated to find a solution and make them happy again. You don't have to. It is not your responsibility to make sure anyone else is happy. Instead of getting pulled into a situation you don't want to be in, you can simply say, "Okay. I hear you." The fact that many women won't ask for things directly and will only hint doesn't mean that this is a proper method of communication, nor that the husband is obligated to provide her with what she's hinting at, or even excuse himself if he isn't able to do so for whatever reason.

Regarding a request that is not presented properly: you don't have to ignore the comment. You can acknowledge it and you can even go so far as to rephrase the request properly. "Do you mean you'd like a new dress?" It's okay for a woman to learn that when she wants something from her husband, she can and should ask directly as long as she goes about it the right way. And if a lot of women have this problem, then a lot of women should learn what to do about it.

Going a step further, people who talk like this, phrasing their complaints in ambiguous statements (especially after you have already tried pleasing them), are often not very easy to please. Even if they aren't happy with a simple "okay" as a response, there isn't always something you can say that *will* satisfy them. Trying to "answer" their complaint may only get you into more hot water. When someone isn't asking a question, there's no reason to give an answer. Being empathetic and acknowledging that you heard the statement is often enough.

QUESTION:

I read an essay you wrote on gift buying and it was amazing!

I'm married for around 25 years. I've told my husband many times how much it would mean to me if he bought me a gift. I also told him how stupid I feel telling this to him. I've given him so many gifts in the past. But he still doesn't get it.

I went for help and he also went a few times. But he has no patience. After the first session, he bought me an ice cream and told me, "I got you an ice cream, it's in the freezer." After the next session, he bought me another ice cream. This time I was really turned off, although I thanked him for it. As soon as he stopped going to the therapist, everything else stopped too.

At this point, I feel like I'm stuck with the *nisayon* of just accepting my husband's personality. Your messages hit almost every part of my marriage. Maybe if I get my husband to read your articles, it will work like going for help?

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

As discouraging as this may sound, I'm afraid that after 25 years of marriage, you can choose between stopping waiting for your husband to "get it" (read: accept the facts and him too), and continuing to build resentment and frustration for the rest of your life.

Every person on the planet has things they wish their spouse would "get." Not everyone "gets" everything. That's why hoping they'll read an essay and suddenly "get it" is unrealistic.

But if something specific is important enough for you, you can be very clear about what you want. "Thank you for buying the ice cream. I would love it if you could buy me a piece of jewelry." (Of course, you should be realistic about the timing of your request as well as the possibility of having it fulfilled.) I know that it doesn't feel the same to receive a gift you had to ask for, but if you want it enough and you'll be less resentful as a result, go ahead and ask for it. And as mentioned, your other options are to accept not getting a gift or becoming very angry at your husband.

It feels better when people do things of their own accord, and even more so when they *want* to do it and don't need prompting, but don't get stuck on that. A wife may feel that, "It's not enough he's taking me on vacation. I want him to *want* to take me," but what she forgets — what we all sometimes forget — is that *we* don't always want what our spouses want, so why should we expect *them* to want what we want? People are all different, and by default think differently and feel differently. If you can accept that, you'll be sparing yourself a lot of aggravation going forward.

You mentioned that this issue is affecting all parts of your relationship. That's all the more reason to deal with this quickly. It's sad when such feelings trickle in and make people doubt their entire relationship. Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that one should never doubt whether they married the right person, and once married they should be firmly convinced that a *bas-kol* called out that this is their *bashert*. It's quite common for people to get nervous (often a few months into marriage) due to various issues that come up,

and to resist accepting the fact that their spouse's personality might be quite different from their own — and is still totally fine. When you decide to accept that you married the right person, you accept the entire package. You can of course still try to help your spouse "get" something by saying it nicely and patiently, but at some point, you will want to accept the fact that he sees things differently from you.

When your husband bought you an ice cream, that was an opportunity to reinforce the behavior you'd like to see more of. Even though you felt turned off, you could have thanked him profusely and told him how much it meant to you (and tried to mean that sincerely). You could even have told him the next day how good you still felt about it. Such an approach might have gotten you more ice cream, and although I know you weren't looking for an abundance of ice cream, it might have led him to buy something more next time around. It might have made him feel so good about buying you something that the next time he knows you want something, he'll want to buy it for you and get the warm feedback again.

But it's okay if you missed that opportunity; just be on the look-out for other ones.

The fact that you read my essay and saw that "even Rabbi Gruen agrees" shouldn't be used to prove that you're right, or get you more frustrated than before. The essay should be used only for the points relevant to you: to help you understand how important it is for you to buy something for your husband, or to suggest to you a new way of communicating your needs. You can be assertive and communicate clearly, and also show genuine appreciation. Trying to find a way to prove how right you are, is wrong. Remember, it's all about what *you* can do.

QUESTION:

Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I hope it's not chutzpah for me to write this email. I wonder if there was a stronger point that was overlooked in the question of the mother who was upset that her husband was giving junk food to the kids, and not changing their diapers for a long while.

Firstly, I want to say that while it's true that no one died of an extra rugela here or there, it's important to teach kids healthy eating patterns at an early age. I'm a big fan of nosh, but if heart disease, obesity, or diabetes run in the family, it's vital to get the kids on the right track early on. If the father gives one rugela per day, fine. But in this particular question, it became two, and the kids weren't eating breakfast or putting nutrition into their bodies at the start of the day, and that's not good.

Which leads me to the next thing that I think the mother might be saying, something I find frustrating too. When the father takes an easy way out with the children, the mother often has to pay for it later. True, no one died from a diaper rash, but when the father doesn't change the diaper, the child often will get a rash. Then the child suffers and the mother has to deal with it for the next few days. Sometimes it even needs a trip to the doctor's office for a prescription cream. And all this time the baby is crying from discomfort.

Rugelach for breakfast can slowly become a way of life. Breakfast is such an important meal, filling the person with *koach* for the day ahead. But if a child fills up on fluff, he's not hungry for nutritious food. Then I have to deal with the kid being cranky when he comes home from school because he didn't eat properly in the morning. If I need to give a snack, it can delay the whole supper and bedtime routine. It might sound extreme, but nobody is an island, and everything affects everyone in a home.

Sometimes my husband tells me to sleep an extra 20 minutes in the morning while he starts off with the children. Trust me, those 20 minutes are huge and I tell him so. But instead of making sure they eat a healthy breakfast, he makes grilled cheese and then rests on the couch while they eat. We have two toddlers, so they need to be fed or reminded to take a bite. But he takes the easy way out for himself while making things harder for me. When I wake up, there is grilled cheese on the living room floor. That means they didn't eat, which means now I'm 20 minutes behind on my morning schedule and I still have to feed the kids breakfast. It's not so much the nutrition as the feeling that he's not respecting my efforts.

Another example: I asked my husband to use parchment paper in the sandwich maker. I even have pre-cut parchment paper for it. But it's more cumbersome to use the paper, so he doesn't bother. It's less of a hassle for him, but a much bigger hassle for me because I have to clean up afterward. My *shalom bayis* is worth more than that, so I don't mention it. (I'm a huge fan of The Surrendered Wife *mehalech* which encourages surrendering rather than complaining, and I follow it very deliberately.) But it is frustrating because it makes my work harder.

I don't think men understand how much *koach* and patience mothers expend on our children, aside from keeping the house running, and how utterly exhausted we can be. I got married at a later age and consider myself the luckiest person in the world to be married to a prince and to have two children. But the fact is that I'm chasing and organizing and cleaning up after two toddlers at my age, which is more difficult than for most young mothers. I feel slighted when my husband gives the kids nosh because he doesn't want to deal with their yelling, or takes the easy way out for things that will really make it more difficult for

me. I feel like I'm putting so much effort into this, why doesn't he?

Thank you.

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I think you did a great job clarifying the issues in the previous letter and I agree with your points. It may be important for men to read what you're describing, as a woman's perspective is different. I hope I didn't come across as negating the difficulties or the need to take a mother more seriously.

Clearly, neglecting children's needs, even ones that aren't the most important, isn't good. If a woman can communicate this to her husband nicely, without being resentful, and tell him how hard he's making things for her, while understanding that it may be hard for him to do more, she may be able to get him onto her page.

If explaining this to your husband doesn't work, whether because he can't fulfill your request or you can't communicate it clearly and nicely, try not to allow it to affect your relationship. (And if you think about it, chances are that there really is no third possibility for why your spouse isn't complying.) Accepting that this difference in perspectives will continue to exist is better than becoming upset or imagining worst-case scenarios of diabetes, diaper rashes and more. Your relationship is worth more than that.

A certain story about a *yungerman* illustrates this point. The husband in question decided not to put on a *shtreimel* when he got married, although most of his family did wear one. His wife didn't want the *shtreimel* either. After a few years, he changed his mind and went out and bought himself a beauty for $2,000. His wife was furious. The yungerman didn't know what to do so he went to Harav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *ztz"l* for advice.

Rav Auerbach advised the man not to wear the *shtreimel*. "But I paid $2,000 for it!" he replied. The Rav explained that his marriage was worth more than that, but the man couldn't swallow the huge loss — so Rav Shlomo Zalman bought the *shtreimel* from him.

For Rav Shlomo Zalman, another man's marriage was worth that much money. But his advice to the young man is more valuable than the *shtreimel*. And if that young man couldn't accept it, at least we can. Even when something costs a lot of money, your relationship and your marriage are worth more.

Your frustration and negative feelings toward your husband are probably more damaging to your children than sugar and diaper rashes. It's important to understand that men and women are not made the same way. As hard as we try to understand each other's needs, men and women are still fundamentally different and may never "get it" on the level we want them to. When your husband takes care of the children, it will not be the same as when you take care of them. Neither will it be the same if you try to learn *Mishnayos* with your sons. There are some things women do better and some things that men do better. It's a choice you have to make. Ask Hashem to help you choose wisely. Your choices have an effect on you and your family.

QUESTION:

Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I wanted to ask you a question about something you spoke about. You mentioned that keeping secrets from one's spouse in the right context is not only okay, but preferred. You added, though, that hiding something that shouldn't be hidden creates a distance between a couple. Just the fact that something is hidden creates an impasse.

Can you elaborate on this? Is it a matter of the subconscious or something decreed by Hashem? Or is it more a matter of the mind that even if one can hide something well and not worry about being "caught" by his spouse, perhaps he thinks about it a lot and it creates a disconnect?

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

It's always interesting to me how some people who demand complete openness from a spouse aren't ready to provide that same level of transparency. As a matter of fact, would *anyone* really be okay with having their daily calls recorded and their spouse then listening to all the recorded conversations, day after day? Would any promoter of "total transparency" encourage, or even suggest anything that ridiculous?

But regardless, just like with any other topic, it's good to avoid seeing things in black-and-white, and it's all about proper application. Some people think there can be nothing hidden from a spouse. It's simply not practical. The marriage relationship *is* all encompassing, and yet it is still a relationship of two separate individuals. In fact, Chazal teach us to knock on the door before entering our own home.

On the other hand, it isn't healthy to hide things from your spouse. When people lead a double life or do things they don't want their spouse to know about, it causes many problems. Aside from the very fact that hiding things should make them question themselves and their motives, often they have to continually make up excuses about where they're going or who they're talking to. They end up living without honesty and with a fear of being found out. That definitely does cause distancing. Both too much secrecy and too much transparency can hurt a relationship.

Judging each topic on its own merits and sharing all you can, alongside reserving the right to keep certain things private if that's important to you or it could be harmful to share, is a healthy balance. I often quote the *mishnah "Al*

tarbeh sichah im ha'ishah," which the Bartenura explains as knowing when not to share something that could destroy your marriage. I know too many stories of people who shared sensitive information in the name of "building their marriage with total transparency" and ended up dealing with the damage for many years thereafter.

QUESTION:

Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I heard your amazing talk at Keiravtuni on the topic of relationships.

You mentioned something interesting, suggesting that a parent attending the Shabbaton could make a child at home feel good by asking him over the phone which lecture to attend. I think that's a bit overdone. What message does it give a child if parents have to follow his opinion when it comes to their own progress and personal choices? Are we trying to teach our children that they're on our level and can become our advisors?

ANSWER RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

Before talking about this in general, I want to clarify that this advice was mentioned in the context of a story about parents whose child was struggling. There was very little communication and respect. Instead of getting stuck on the principle of lowering oneself to the child's level, I advised the father to deal with what was happening. This was a tense relationship that was causing the child to get into a lot of trouble. One of the ways to change such a situation is by showing the child that you take him seriously and respect him and his opinion.

Even then, I did not intend to imply that the child now gets to decide which *shiur* the parent should go to, or in general, what ideas they need to learn and master. It was a casual way of showing that a parent respects his child's opinions. One of the best ways to show someone respect, whether a spouse or a child, is to ask for their opinion.

With little children, you can ask them which flavor of ice cream to buy, without committing to always taking their advice. But as children grow up, you may want to show them more respect by asking for their opinion on something they're surprised you would want their input on. Without drawing the conclusion that they just became your "advisor," they can still feel good knowing that you care about how they feel about certain things.

I recently dealt with a family whose son was out of *yeshivah* for a few months. Suffice it to say, it was difficult for everyone involved. The boy wanted to go to a *yeshivah* that was different from the family's standards, but definitely better than staying home. On principle, the parents refused. And everyone continued to suffer. Were they "wrong"? Did the child have better principles than them? Not at all, but sometimes, with the proper guidance, you may want to violate your own principles if the situation calls for it. Being too careful about not letting your child think he's your advisor, if he's being advised wrongly by others as a result, may be a mistaken judgment.

So, while in typical situations you may not want to request your child's advice on certain topics, out of fear of giving the wrong message, in general the idea of showing a child that you respect his opinion is helpful and can be applied appropriately. By the way, sometimes you'll be surprised how much your children and teenagers know about certain topics. Letting them feel good about knowing so much is only going to bring out the best in them.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

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