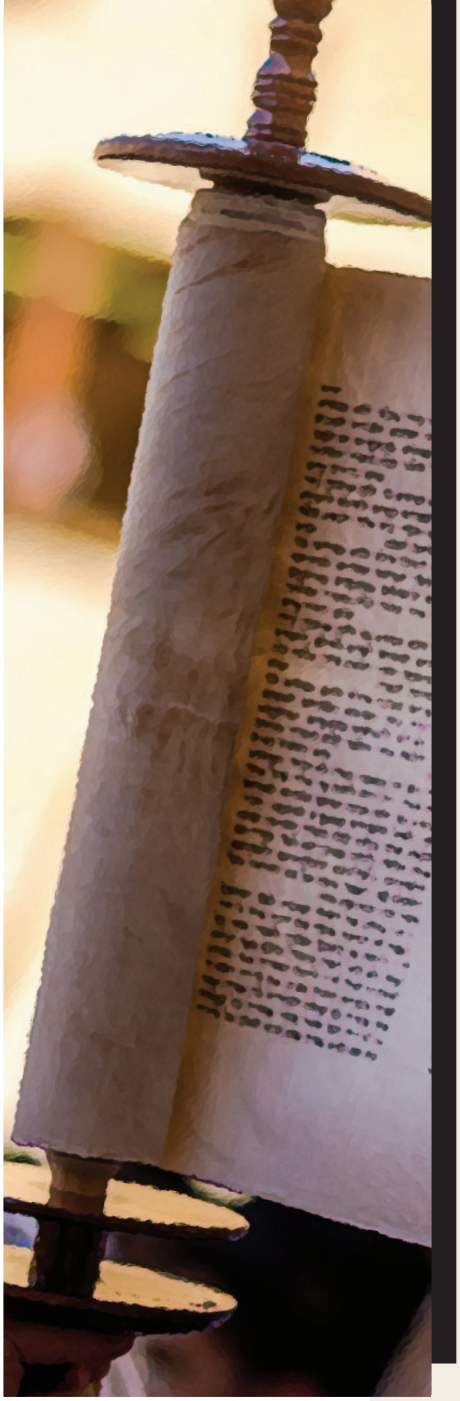


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

FROM COMPLAINTS TO COMPASSION

In this week's *parshah*, Klal Yisrael are described as "complainers" and their complaints aroused Hashem's anger. The Chasam Sofer teaches that it was not so much the nature of their complaints that brought this about, as the fact that they were complaining about their own personal suffering and spared little thought for other people's welfare.

He goes on to explain that when someone is going through difficult times, he should not complain. Rather, he should accept any suffering that Hashem sends with love and trust, recognizing that everything Hashem does is ultimately for his benefit.

When someone else is suffering, however, our focus should be on supporting them and showing them empathy and caring, and on *davening* for them.

Interestingly, this applies even if we are facing exactly the same challenge as the other person. We should still thank Hashem for sending us a challenge designed to build us, at the same time as we *daven* and ask Hashem to spare the other person the suffering inherent in that challenge.

It's not easy to maintain such a double standard, but in relationships this is often what's needed. It's important to understand others and feel for them, even when we understand that justifying ourselves in a similar situation isn't correct.

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Parshas
Beha'aloschah
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My father recommended that I read your book, *Get Along With Everyone*, after 18 years of my VERY difficult marriage. The book was a real game changer and shed so much clarity on the difficult inborn personality of the highly sensitive person. It has helped me and my father to crack the difficult nut of trying to figure out what makes my husband tick, which is the first step; now there's a lifetime ahead of putting it into practice *b'ezras Hashem*, which is of course not easy, but at least we have a handbook now.

I have two questions:

1. Some of my children are very sensitive. One is a struggling teen which isn't surprising given that he grew up with a sensitive father and a kind-hearted, gentle mother who was giving to him all the years from a place of feeling so exhausted and depressed. My younger sensitive child is never happy and seems to think everyone is out to get him. I so badly would like to give him the tools to live life happily, and eventually also be a productive, fulfilled successful adult and husband. Would therapy help with that, and if yes, what should I stress to the therapist? And if therapy won't help, what will? It's way too hard to just watch him kvetch through life, especially as I can see how that can end up. Your book is great for helping others to get along with sensitive people, but how can I help him get along with himself?

2. I recently found out from my brother, who is an exceptionally kind and generous person, that his "super-successful" wife is also one of these sensitive types, despite her great image. I used to have a good relationship with her but now I'm just so mad at her for making my brother's life miserable. Your book paints sensitive types with a very rosy tint but personally, I don't see much to like about them, to put it mildly. They go through life causing pain and trauma and just don't see anyone except themselves. I feel like I don't have any more energy to deal with these types, let alone continue to treat my husband with silk gloves while I feel no emotional connection to him.

Is there any advice you could give me?

Thank you so much



It takes a great deal of strength to keep trying to work on a marriage after years of struggling to the point that you feel exhausted. Even after all this time, you are still trying to find a better way of doing things, and I admire you greatly for that.

Since I know nothing about you beyond what you write, it could be that a lot of what I'll reply will be irrelevant to your particular circumstances. I hope you won't feel judged or criticized, and it certainly isn't my intention to make you feel that way. And, while there may be things that your husband can do to improve your relationship, since you're the one reaching out for advice, it's to you that my advice will be addressed.

Additionally, without hearing from him directly, I have no way of knowing whether your husband has a different perspective on what has gone wrong and why. While I don't question your narrative, please bear in mind that everyone sees things through their own eyes only and therefore, there could be a big part of the picture missing from what you write. This is not because you're lying or hiding anything — it's simply because from your vantage point, you can't see it.

It's extremely common for people to identify their spouse or child in a book describing problematic personalities and disorders. It's far rarer for a person to

identify himself. And it's certainly also possible that one's spouse (or child) is "the problem." But that shouldn't stop one from considering whether they might be just a small part of the problem themselves. No, I'm not suggesting that every situation is fifty-fifty, with each spouse being equally responsible for a painful situation. But there is virtually no marriage in which one spouse is utterly innocent of all wrongdoing and absolutely could not be doing anything better. There's always something we can do to improve things, and that should give us hope that better times can come.

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Dealing with a highly-sensitive spouse is hard — I don't deny that. It can be exhausting, and at times, one just wishes they didn't have to be so careful with their words and actions all the time, or suffer the consequences when they don't. It's easy to become resentful, but there are ways of looking at the situation that make it a little easier to deal with, in a more productive and efficient manner.

While you write of your relief that you finally understand your husband, it's clear that you hold within you a great deal of anger at the situation. Given how you describe your anger at your sister-in-law, it's not hard to deduce that you feel similarly toward your husband. In a way, feeling angry at someone for being sensitive is similar to being angry at a child for being a child. Why do children make a lot of noise and mess and break things? Because they're children. Why do sensitive adults react to things in what can seem an extreme way and cause so much heartache? Because they're sensitive. They don't choose to be sensitive and very often, they'd rather not be, but it's just a fact of life. It's no one's fault.

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You write that I portray sensitive types with a rosy tint in my book. I believe that no type of personality is better or worse than another. Sensitive people have certain inborn talents as well as challenges, and the same applies to the other types of personality that I describe. Although some people believe that a sensitive person is more spiritual or closer to the truth, the very traits that can make this possible also create barriers that make this harder to achieve. Like with everything, it's part of a package, with pros and cons.

Essentially, being highly sensitive means that a person has a harder time dealing with his or her emotions, as they are felt with an intensity others have a hard time fathoming. This is why a sensitive person in a stressful environment can come across completely differently from the same person in a calm and predictable environment. As a mother of sensitive children, you've surely seen this play out, probably on a daily basis. A patient and understanding teacher, for instance, can work wonders with a sensitive child. And the same child, with a strict and narrow-minded teacher who refuses to make allowances for personality differences, can become a very problematic child indeed.

Very often, parents of such children ask me not only for advice, but whether the advice will help in the "real world." "After all," they say, "I can provide my child with a calm and predictable environment, and I can even talk to his teacher and help him to understand him better. But what will happen when he grows up and enters the adult world where no one makes allowances for him? What then?"

You can probably answer that question yourself — you see the answer in your husband. He is likely the living embodiment of someone whose sensitivity wasn't respected as he was growing up, and he entered the adult world without anyone to stretch out a supportive hand to help him adjust. That's why it's wonderful that you're asking how to avoid having this happen to your children.

And there is a lot you can do, primarily by helping your sensitive children to accept that their personalities are innate and that while it can be more complicated and even more painful to be sensitive, there are great gifts in their personalities too. No child should ever view himself as flawed. And it begins with yourself—by viewing your children as individuals full of strengths and positive qualities.

Once you understand your children's personality, I believe there'll be no need to seek out any kind of therapy. If you feel you would like that support, that's fine, but only look for the kind of therapist who will believe in them and work with their personality to help them thrive, not one who will try to "fix" them.

Don't let anyone tell you or your child that there is something wrong with being sensitive. Like any other personality trait, it's given to people to use for the good, not to suppress or be ashamed of.

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If Hashem gave you the insight into the challenge, that's a gift you can gratefully accept. It's possible that your husband, from the place where he is right now, just isn't capable of looking at the situation clearly and seeing what needs to be done for his children. Instead of being resentful, be thankful that you are capable of doing that. Feeling empowered to reach out for advice and implement it with determination will help you to feel so much better about yourself and the situation in which you find yourself.

It might appear to you that your husband is disconnected from the situation and doesn't even realize that his children's sensitivity could be a problem if not dealt with wisely. But it could equally be that he has no idea what to do and just worries and feels terrible about it. Sometimes, not being highly sensitive makes it easier for people to just do what

needs to be done without worrying about all the things that might go wrong, or whether they're really up to it, or whether it will work out at all. Dealing with a problem effectively is actually much easier than feeling helpless to change anything.

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But what about your husband — is it too late for him? The answer is no. It's never too late. But it is hard, as you've already seen.

Here too, you can give yourself strength by learning to feel empowered to deal with the situation. Hashem has given you the wisdom to understand the challenge, the humility to seek advice, and the sense of justice to find the determination to do the right thing. These are tremendous gifts and you should feel privileged to have been granted them.

Perhaps you can help and encourage your brother too. It might feel good in the moment to simply commiserate with him, but this achieves nothing (beyond increasing resentment) in the long term. Help him to understand that even though his wife has created a successful image for the outside world, inside, she is struggling far more than he realizes, and she certainly never chose to be born with the personality Hashem gave her.

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Understanding a sensitive person's struggle isn't enough, however. You have to find the positive aspects of your husband's nature, not just sympathize with what he goes through. Just as with sensitive children, you're most likely to find those positive aspects when things are calm and predictable. It could be that such moments are rare, and you might want to actively create them. Try to rediscover your husband at moments of low stress, pretending at such times that you've forgotten what he looks like when he's feeling exhausted or overwhelmed. You might just get a glimpse of someone you always suspected was hiding away somewhere and never dared to come out.



Try to hold an image of your husband at such times in the forefront of your mind, reminding yourself that this is the "real him," and that the highly sensitive, emotional, perhaps angry person you see much of the time is just his defensive shell reacting to what can feel like a war on his senses. As your perception of him changes, you might even find him changing in response. It's not magic, but it can work wonders.

And even before that, although you've been through a lot over the years, I'm sure you can identify at least a few areas in which your husband excels. Focus on these areas and create opportunities for him to shine where he feels able. As he starts to relax, his confidence in himself as a person who can cope will increase and gradually you may find that the low-stress version of your husband emerges from his shell more and more often. Try to find at least one thing, every day, that you can admire in your husband, and focus on that.

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This isn't going to happen overnight. And it demands so much patience and understanding from you, which is why it can be so tempting to vent and look for sympathy from others. Venting is okay from time to time, but done too often, it will only encourage you to wallow in self-pity, which helps no one. Instead, look for support from those who want to help you see not only your strengths but also your husband's.

You will still be carrying an immense burden but remember that you were given immense capabilities to be able to do so, and to help your husband carry his burdens too. *B'ezras Hashem*, over time, your husband will gain tremendous appreciation for all that you have done for him, and you in turn will gain appreciation for all that he is, despite and because of his sensitivity.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BEHA'ALOSCHAH 5786

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