

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

UNDERSTANDING OTHERS — AND YOURSELF

Sefer Bamidbar opens with Bnei Yisrael traveling through the desert, each man under his *shevet's* flag. The Chiddushei Harim notes that the flags enabled each man to know his own place, and stresses the parallel between this idea and that of each Jew being a separate letter in the Torah. Every person has his own place and purpose.

The idea of having one's own place is only possible when we have clear boundaries between one person and the next. This applies equally to all our interpersonal relationships, even and perhaps especially between husband and wife. In a Yiddishe home, each person needs to know the difference between "mine, yours, and ours." Virtually all problems in the area of *shalom bayis* revolve around a lack of understanding or agreement on boundaries, with one or more people crossing boundaries and trying to control or impose on others.

Problems are common in this area, because the boundaries aren't always clear, and often each family needs specific guidance from their rav. Many boundary questions concern very sensitive issues, which makes it that much more important to get the right guidance and ensure that each person knows where their duties and responsibilities lie.

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לעילוי נשמת
ר' **נפתלי צבי** ב"ר
משה שמואל ע"ה

לרגל היאה"צ
ביום כ"ו אייר

תנצב"ה

Parshas
Bamidbar
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Q QUESTION

Lechavod Harav Gruen,

Thank you for your *shiurim* which are so full of important content and wisdom.

Baruch Hashem my wife and I understand each other really well and we have an amazing relationship. We've been married a few years already. There's just one point that troubles me... It's about the length of my wife's sheitel.

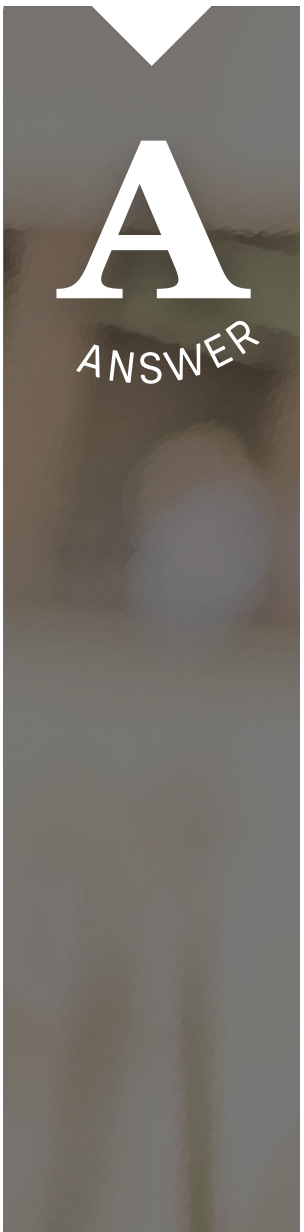
I'd like her sheitel to be shorter, not to be more frum, but because of what the *rabbanim* say, that it shouldn't be longer than shoulder-length. I told her once, and she cut her sheitel a bit, and I told her how much I appreciated it and even bought her a gift, and said I knew how hard it was for her and how grateful I was.

I thought she'd realized that she did have to cut it some more, but two years have passed since then, and though I've reminded her lots of times, she hasn't done anything about it. In fact, she really doesn't like hearing me talk about it, and even says that her sheitel isn't too long and that no matter what she does, I won't be happy.

I won't say anything more if she keeps on like this, but it's going to be an ongoing struggle, and every time she buys a new sheitel it's going to cause problems. In fact, she recently bought a new sheitel and hasn't cut it shorter.

Is there anything I can do? What should I do?

Thank you



A ANSWER

I would like to start with an important disclaimer: I don't know the person who wrote this letter, the details of this family, who their rav is, or the entire background to this issue. I certainly don't have any idea how long the sheitel being discussed actually is! I hope it's obvious that anything I'll suggest has nothing to do with any specific details of this situation at all.

In a Yiddishe home, the husband is primarily responsible for many aspects of the Yiddishkeit of the home. In general, the *tznius* of the wife is her personal area of responsibility. However, that doesn't mean that neither of them have a say in an area that falls mainly in the other's domain. What it does mean is that just as parents have a general obligation to be *mechanech* their children, but aren't necessarily obligated to police their children's behavior at each and every moment, so too each spouse may and should be aware in a general sense of what the other is doing without being controlling in any way. Certainly when dealing with an adult wife, a husband is not required to "make" his wife behave in a certain way. She has her own *bechirah*.

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That said, without being obligated to control his wife, a husband may certainly discuss *tznius* and anything else for that matter, with her, even if the issue pertains primarily to her. However, especially in this area, it would be wise for him to remember how sensitive this particular issue is, and to be extra-careful in choosing his words. Even when he is focused solely on her benefit, he must still tread very carefully. It's common for wives to feel that husbands just don't understand matters of dress and so forth, and that they therefore shouldn't interfere at all. Even if and when they're wrong a husband should be aware of all the pitfalls before saying anything.

With all the "right" a husband has, Chazal tell us, "Just as it is a *mitzvah* to say something that a person will listen to, it is a *mitzvah* to refrain from saying something that a person won't listen to." If a husband sees that pointing something out isn't helping (or is making things worse), then it is clearly better to remain silent. Even if he believes that it's his responsibility to "do something about the situation," he should understand that if he can't actually achieve his goal, being that registering his protest at regular intervals is likely to be counter-productive, it's best to refrain.

Sometimes, saying something once isn't problematic; it's when you repeat it so often that the words become a "*davar shelo nishma*" and the other person stops being receptive to what you're saying. It's a mistake to think that if you stop repeating yourself or obsessing, the other person assumes it doesn't bother you anymore. They know what you think, even if you don't remind them all the time. Saying something once is like planting a seed. When

the right moment comes along, they'll remember your words and find it easier to take action. Sometimes it takes the right moment of introspection, or a search for a *zechus,* to arouse someone to internalize or implement something you mentioned, or to use that opportunity to grow in another area. Constantly nagging, however, is likely to keep the person on the defensive.

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One of my rules in communication is that a person can say virtually anything, as long as he knows how, and when. Knowing "how" depends largely on how you see the issue. Most issues aren't black-and-white, but problems start when each person insists on seeing it that way, and just can't understand why the other person doesn't agree. Stating your position in categorical terms is much more likely to arouse resistance. Even if you're actually right, no one likes to hear how wrong they are — and there's no need to tell them.

Telling someone that they're wrong and "must" change also belittles the struggle they're having in that area, and makes them feel that you look down on them for not doing the "right" thing. Even if you claim to understand how hard it is for them, you won't sound genuine if at the same time, you're telling them that they are so wrong that they should have figured it out for themselves already and fixed whatever it is.

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Instead, focus on the fact that the issue isn't completely clear, and that there are various opinions, which makes it that much more of a challenge. Sometimes, people are reluctant to give the other person validation for struggling with something, because they assume that the other person will use it as a justification for continuing to do the wrong thing. The opposite is usually true, however. Giving a person recognition is far more likely to have good results. Furthermore, offering them the space to make changes at the pace they can manage, such as by clearly saying, "You don't have to," or "It's your choice," can make it easier for the other person to start moving in the right direction.

The other benefit to recognizing the other person's challenges is that you can show much more genuine appreciation when they do make the changes you'd like them to. Appreciation and gratitude give tremendous *chizuk* and help people to continue doing the right thing. That also means that appreciation and gratitude should be expressed regularly. Even if a person only did something once, that doesn't mean that you're restricted to mentioning it just once. Appreciation can become stale over time. If your wife is still wearing that sheitel that she cut shorter, you can bring it up from time to time (without getting on her nerves), not just the first time after cutting it.

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Several years ago, someone showed me a letter he was thinking of sending to his wife, about wearing a human-hair sheitel made using hair from India. This was right after people became aware that there could be issues of benefiting from *avodah zarah*. He wrote a very eloquent letter and with excellent intentions. I knew enough about his marriage to understand why he felt the need to write a letter and was afraid of a conversation. Many conversations, even about simpler topics, didn't go over all that well. Fortunately, he showed me the letter first and I was able to point out some issues with what he wrote before he sent it.

I'm reproducing it here to illustrate some of the points I've made above, with my comments inserted:

To my dear wife,

I wanted to send you this letter due to what we were discussing about the sheitel. It's like this: I decided to write to you because when I try to discuss something with you, something that makes you feel uncomfortable, you get all worked up about it, and you tell me that you don't want to talk about it, and that makes me feel very bad.

[Telling someone that they get "all worked up" is likely to make them feel quite bad too.]

On the other hand, when it comes to something that I'd like to ask of you, I have the right to tell my beloved wife about it, so I thought I'd write you a letter and lay everything out so that you'll understand things better and realize what I'd like.

[He does have the right to say this to his wife, but if he wants his words to have the desired effect, sounding entitled might not be the best way to go about it.

Telling his wife that she'll "understand better" also implies that right now, she doesn't understand, and can sound quite condescending.]

What I'd like to ask about the sheitel — you have to realize that it's not a chumra. It's a very big she'ilah and all the rabbanim say that there's no way around this issue.

[Telling his wife that she "has to realize" is likely to provoke a defensive reaction of "No, I *don't* have to." Presenting the issue as black-and-white ("all the *rabbanim*") is also likely to make the wife defensive and feel that he thinks she isn't *ehrlich* in this area — or at all, especially if she *knows* that it isn't actually *all* the *rabbanim*, even if it is very many.]

I realize that it's a really hard thing for you and something new that's come up, and it's hard for me to ask this of you, but sometimes, you've just got to do what you've got to do, and you surely want to have a pure and holy home, especially when you're lighting candles and davening for good children — at such a time, you don't chas ve'shalom want to have something with a question of avodah zarah on your head.

[Again, he is telling her what she has "got to do," and implying that she doesn't care about the *aveirah* of *avodah zarah*.]

I don't mean to say that I don't love you as you are, and please don't take this personally — you shouldn't think for a moment that I love you any less because of this. You have to understand that I don't look down on you — I treasure you so much and respect you so much. It's not about me wanting people to think that I'm so frum. It's just that we have just one tafkid in the world — to become close to Hashem by doing His ratzon and not going against it, and so I really want you to take my words seriously and so when you buy another sheitel, please remember what I've written here, and our home will have such a great merit.

[Telling his wife that she should realize what her *tafkid* is in the world is also unlikely to make her feel understood.]

Please also believe that I understand how hard this is for you. If this was just a matter of a bit more frumkeit, I wouldn't be asking this of you, but this is something that involves our home, so I'm asking you from the bottom of my heart...

[After the long introduction, it's unlikely that the wife will really believe that her husband understands her. It would have been much better for him to stress that he really *can't* understand how hard it is for her, but is trying to.]

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After discussing the above-mentioned points, we came up with a better version. True, he was perfectly entitled to write everything he did in the original version, but he was much more likely to achieve positive results with a letter like this one:

To my dear wife,

I wanted to write to you about what we were discussing, about the sheitel. I thought it would be easier for both of us if we wrote down our feelings instead. I hope you don't mind that I'm writing to you instead of talking to you, and it's fine with me if you either write back or if you prefer to discuss it with me. Either way, thank you for reading.

It's a really hard thing to do, to start wearing a different sheitel, especially when one type is so much prettier than another, and I want you to look beautiful and feel good about yourself. Since I really don't feel comfortable about the fact that it seems like a big question in halachah on these types of sheitels, I'm really worried about this and I really hope that you can understand me here.

It's really impossible for me to appreciate the level of mesirus nefesh in doing such a thing, as well as the discomfort in it. But I'm writing to you because of my concerns in this area, along with my love for you.

If there's anything I can do to make it easier for you to have such mesirus nefesh, for example buying something different such as a beautiful piece of jewelry, please tell me because I really want to make you feel good about yourself, and you certainly deserve it for such a mesirus nefesh that you're not obligated to do.

We both want to do the right thing and build a Yiddishe home with real Yiddishe nachas from our sweet children, and be'ezras Hashem we will both always have the strength to do what's right...

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The husband in this particular case was not happy about the changes I suggested. He felt that he wasn't obligated to write such a letter or to be so forgiving. Perhaps he wasn't, but he was much more likely to help his wife make the changes that were so important to him, by writing in such a way.

I don't mean to imply that we should be figuring out ways to manipulate other people into doing what we want. However, some issues definitely need to be resolved, and learning how to express ourselves more effectively will go a long way toward achieving that.

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The Rebbe R' Bunim of Pershischa once asked: "Why do the rich man and the pauper hate each other so much? After all, the only difference between them is a few rubles. Each has two arms, two legs, a home, families... Why the hatred?"

R' Bunim then explained: People always tend to look at others to see what they're doing wrong. So the rich man looks at the poor man and thinks: The *mishnah* tells us to be happy with plain bread and water. Why is he pestering me to give him money? Why can't he be *same'ach be'chelko*—content with his lot?

And the pauper looks at the rich man and thinks of all the *mitzvos* a person can do with his money—*tzedakah*, and *hachnassas orchim,* and so forth... so why won't he just do them?

The same applies to us in our relationships. It's tempting to look at others and focus on all the things they should be doing and aren't. We might even be right — after all, everyone makes mistakes. But that's not how harmonious relationships are built.

Especially in the gray areas, we need to step back and remember that two different people have two different perspectives. The person writing the letter looks at his wife and sees a sheitel that's "too long." She looks at the sheitel and remembers how she cut it, and how hard it was for her, and how her sister's sheitel is so much longer...

They're both right, and both wrong. It's important for them to try to understand each other, not just themselves.

When we try to put ourselves in the other person's shoes and admit that there are other ways of seeing things from the way we see them, *be'ezras Hashem* all will become easier and we can all be happier together.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BAMIDBAR 5784

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