RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Toldos

Dealing with Obsessive Behavior

A Free Gift

Some say that Yitzchok was punished with a son, a rasha, because he begged Hashem for sons. As the saying goes "Be careful what you wish for..." According to this *shittah* a person doesn't have the right to make personal requests of Hashem without the *zechus* of *tefillah b'tzibur.*

The Chida quotes this idea from Maharam Chagiz but strongly disagrees. He maintains that not only is a person allowed to specify his needs in private prayer, but he's also allowed to pray for it specifically as a "*matnas chinam*" – a free gift! "This itself is a *zechus*," says the Chida. When a person humbly admits to Hashem that he doesn't think he deserves what he's asking for, that alone awakens Hashem's mercy and He will acquiesce and accept the *tefillah*.

We can apply this idea to our personal relationships as well. When you ask your spouse to do something for you, you can either do so in a manner which implies that you deserve it and that it's coming to you, or you can ask for it humbly and admit that they will be doing you a favor.

When you *demand* something, *"Didn't I ask you to take out the trash?!",* even if it gets done, it will be with resentment and ill will. However, when you *ask* it of them, *"Shlomo, would you be so kind and grab the trash on your way out?"*, it will probably be done with so much more grace and positivity. The fact that you're asking for a *matnas chinam* gains you favor in your spouse's eyes and they will acquiesce.

Some people are afraid that if they don't *demand* what's coming to them and instead ask for it nicely, the other party won't feel obligated to help them. Actually, they might be *more* inclined to help, because they care and want to, not because they feel like it's their obligation. As an added perk, you get to tell them a big thank you afterwards because they saved the day and did you such a big favor, and then everyone will be happy! You'd be surprised but it can feel good expressing thanks.

In general, when you tone down a bit in conversations with your spouse, the atmosphere will be calmer, cooler, and more pleasant for everyone. Let's apply this lesson of how to ask a spouse for change, to an email I received this week.

Question:

Dear Rabbi,

My wife is 'allergic' to dirt and messes, to the point where it's causing the atmosphere in the house to be uptight and anxious - not to mention that it physically drains her so that she isn't left with much energy to deal with her other responsibilities.

She always had this problem, but it became more pronounced recently when we moved to a new house and she wants everything to stay shiny and fresh. This is not a passing phase, she was always like this; only now it took on a new urgency.

What bothers me most is:

The financial burden of all her organizing purchases, since everything must be placed into a separate container or holder which is periodically replaced.

Cleanliness and order stand above all else. Even if something is impractical or more difficult or downright nonsensical it is still done, in the name of keeping things clean and organized.

The atmosphere in the house is extremely tense, with the kids being yelled at most of the time for various infractions, such as having too many toys out or touching a mirror or window. Understandably, with so much yelling there is very little time or energy left to smile at the children from time to time, let alone afford a smile to me, the husband.

My question is whether this is normal, and are we all supposed to just sit there and take it? If not, is there anything I can do about it?

Answer:

As always, I will try to answer this questioner by addressing it in a way that the general public can gain some insight as well.

Based on your descri ption, there's a chance that there might be some form of OCD at play here, and that would require professional intervention. However, since that was not the question – the questioner only asked how *he* can deal with it – I will answer only that.

Firstly, you're not alone with this problem, many people feel just like you with some variation. For some,like you, it's cleanliness, and for others it's things like tardiness, or *frumkeit*, or even the exact opposite – an extreme lack of cleanliness and order. So do know that you are not alone in your struggle. And you shouldn't necessarily doubt yourself.

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It's important to keep in mind that men and women generally have a different way of looking at things, especially when it comes to cleanliness. This difference of mentality is completely normal. Most of

the time, women will care much more than their husbands about how their house looks. A woman can stay up half the night cleaning her kitchen, while her husband won't understand why she doesn't just go to sleep and tackle it tomorrow when she's more rested. To some degree it's so important for men and women to understand and accept the basic difference of style and preference, and not use it one against the other. It's when it becomes overdone that it's a problem.

Oddly enough, some women who are excessively clean think they are doing their husbands a favor. I recently had a client who was very bothered with the way his wife was dealing with him for various reasons. When we asked his wife for her take, she could not understand why her husband had to be such an ingrate! She claimed that she was an exemplary wife that many, many husbands weren't so lucky to have. To illustrate her point, she proudly told us that in her house nothing stays in the laundry hamper for longer than a couple of hours. She does laundry three times every day! And yes, this woman actually thought that she was doing her husband a favor by being this way. So, understanding the difference of perspective can often help you both accommodate each other more accurately, and be more accepting of each other as well.

I would assume it can be a help for women readers to consider this: Your husband doesn't mind an organized home, of course, but when it comes at the expense of your peace of mind and happiness, he'd rather do without. He'd much rather have a relaxed wife than a perfectly symmetrical toy closet.

Of course, this does not justify people on the other extreme - and I've seen those situations too, unfortunately - who couldn't be bothered to ever clean up or organize their house. Therefore, it is vital to look for and implement the happy medium.

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While I'm not blaming anyone, it may be that things have gotten to this level because you tolerated it until now. The easiest way to check if this is the case is to find out how your wife is in other environments. Is this how she is at work? Is she as critical or controling? Is this how she acts at her mother's house? Does she yell at her sister-in-law if something is sticking out of the trashcan? Of course the simple explanation of why she might behave differently in other environments can be that in the comfort of her own zone she tends to control more, and care more too, but often the difference of behaviour is also in part due to the fact that elsewhere it'll be (or is) less tolerated to begin with.

Obviously, I'm not trying to fault you. I am just bringing to your attention that there are many things you *can* put a stop to simply by not tolerating the behavior, just like others wouldn't, especially in the areas that affect you directly.

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That needs to be done with a lot of forethought and sensitivity, though. It's not about putting up a fight, or dismissing what's important to her. Quite the opposite. You need to start the conversation by telling her how much you appreciate all of her efforts to keep a clean home, and acknowledge how much organization means to her.

Your message to her needs to be supportive. Don't knock her accomplishments or tell her that she's wrong in her approach. Nobody wants to hear that, especially not when they are very emotional or sensitive about it, (or sensitive in general). It also might put her on the defensive, and cause her to attack your (or your mother's) lack of cleanliness.

Instead, use lots of "I" statements. You can say things like, *"I'm sure you don't mean any harm, and I can see the merit in how you chose to do things. Of course, I appreciate all of your hard work! [Leave out the word BUT, and continue on!] It's still really hard for me to watch the kids being yelled at so often because of cleanliness.*

Maybe we can come up with some idea or plan that can work for all of us"

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You want to be careful not to completely do away with her approach. Because this might be who she is at her essence, it will hurt her and she will feel completely disregarded. Instead, choose the one or two things that bother you the most that cause the whole family to suffer. Hearing just one or two things might be easier for her to digest. Be careful that your message doesn't come across as judgmental or like you're trying to control her, just genuine concern for the wellbeing of the children and the household.

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Refrain from broaching the topic while she is in the heat of the moment, and worked up about some perceived mishap. That is guaranteed to backfire, not because she disagrees with you, as much as she is too emotionally charged to even process what you're telling her.

Find a calm moment when you can bring it up. Some people are hesitant to do this, because they feel like they're going to rock the boat. It's finally quiet, we're having such a nice dinner, let me not ruin it by addressing problems. But actually, that is the only time you can hope to get through to her.

Additionally, when you start the conversation in a calm moment, it will be easier to stick to your message even if the conversation does end up becoming challenging to navigate. Remember to wrap your message in many layers of compliments, but keep it firm and consistent.

If done the right way - with the right choice of words and tome, chances are it will accomplish what you want. Maybe not on the spot, but your message can penetrate.

Perhaps you can try to come up with a solution to the problem together. You might also consider offering to help her out. Even though she will likely refuse your offer, you will prove to her that you're not just saying things - you're ready to "get your hands dirty". That will make your words carry more weight and might also preclude the common retort, "How can you talk when you've never even tried to help me?"

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If your wife tells you that she knows that what you're saying is true, but she feels like she's powerless to do things differently, you might want to gently broach the topic of seeking professional help.

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Lastly, you must remember that no matter how stressful or unbearable the situation might be, the children cannot be privy to your feelings about their mother's behavior. Never turn them against her or let them see you snickering or disproving of her obsession (or flouting Mommy's rules when she isn't home).

You must never allow *Shalom Bayis* issues to become a *Chinuch* problem, nor should you turn *Chinuch* problems into a *Shalom Bayis* issue.

Hatzlacha!
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TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: TOLDOS 5781

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