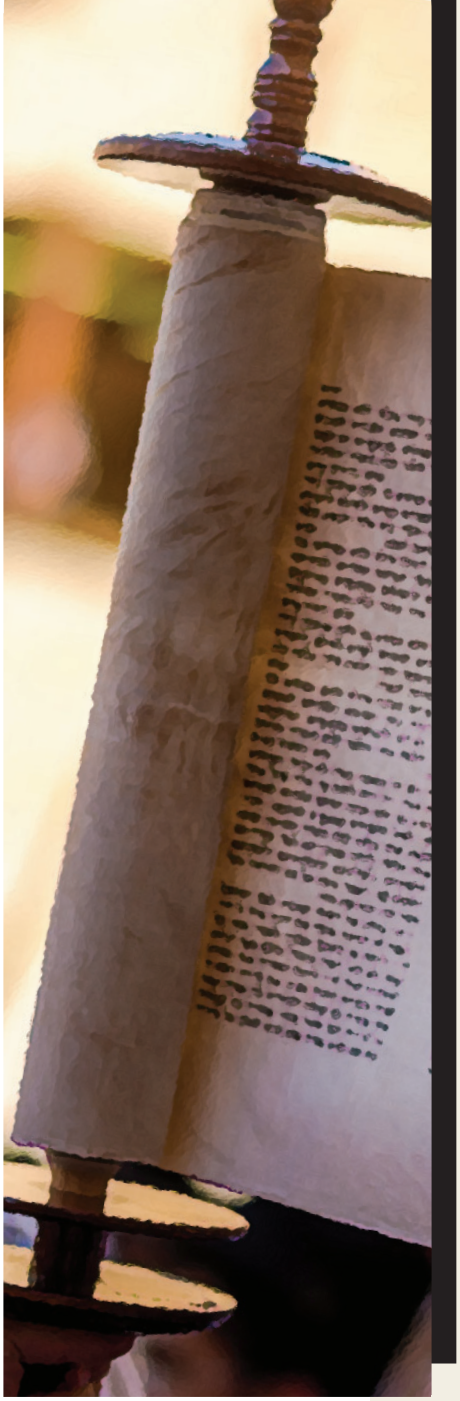


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHERE - AND HOW - TO DRAW THE LINE

At the end of this week's *parshah*, we are told of the *shidduch* between Avraham Avinu and Sara Imeinu. The *pesukim* refer to Sara as "Yiscah" and only in Rashi's commentary do we learn that Yiscah is another name for Sara. Rashi provides two explanations for Sara's other name. One is that *ruach hakodesh* rested (*sachah*) upon her; the other is that due to her beauty, people would gaze (*sochin*) at her.

Why did Rashi, usually so sparing with words, find it necessary to provide two explanations for Sara's alternate name — would not one explanation suffice? The Kishutei Kallah answers that the two explanations are interlinked. Sara was the younger daughter of Haran; Milka was the older sister. Terach, Haran's brother, had two sons — Avraham and Nachor. Sara might have assumed, as did Leah Imeinu years later, that the older sister, Milka, would marry the older brother, Avraham, leaving her with Nachor, and that she needed to daven and cry to Hashem to be saved from such a fate. However, since she had *ruach hakodesh*, she knew that she was destined to marry Avraham and hence did not need to cry and lose her beauty, as Leah did.

Both Leah Imeinu and her daughter Dinah are portrayed as extremely reluctant to marry someone not of their caliber and this is not seen as a problem — quite the opposite. We learn from this that it is normal and in fact praiseworthy to want to marry someone with *yiras Shamayim*, and it's also reasonable to conclude that if someone does marry a spouse who is lacking in this area, it's normal and understandable to be bothered by it, and at the very least to daven that the person improves.

There are those who claim that caring about others should be confined to their *gashmiyus*, as their *ruchniyus* is their own business. This does not seem to be the Torah way. Of course, rebuking another person has to be done correctly; otherwise, it can be not only wrong but counterproductive. However, caring about any Jew's spiritual state, especially that of one's spouse, is the way things should be.

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Parshas **Noach**

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QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I listened to your talk on technology which gave so much clarity in this area. I really appreciate the fact that you discuss topics so openly so that those in the dark don't feel so alone.

In your talk, you mentioned the idea of "things that can't be tolerated." I recently discovered that my husband signed up on various extremely inappropriate internet sites. Should I confront him about it, or should I wait and see what happens?

Thank you

A

ANSWER

Before I answer your question, I'll preface with two general points.

Firstly, "people in the dark" should not feel alone. They are not alone, unfortunately. The reason I speak about such topics in a public forum is because they affect so many people.

Secondly, I cannot accurately specify which "things can't be tolerated" without knowing much more about a given situation, and when I receive letters that don't provide any background, there's only so much detail that I'm privy to. All such cases should be dealt with one-on-one, with a qualified mentor because it's vital to get precise and clear advice on an individual basis.

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When discussing what should or can't be tolerated, it's important to understand what not tolerating means. People generally assume it has to do with ultimatums and threats.

Giving an ultimatum can feel reassuring to some people, like a "quick fix" to solve a difficult problem. "Once he stops doing that, everything will be fine." "Once I know not to put up with that, I'll be able to deal with things." However, most relationship problems are far more complex than fixing a single issue which may be a symptom rather than a cause. Even when the "intolerable" behavior is serious, there can be options other than giving an ultimatum, which can truly help to turn things around.

Furthermore, too often, people view the "unacceptable" behavior or situation as if it appeared out of nowhere. They fail to see all the things that led up to it that may need to be addressed first (or simultaneously).

Aside from what needs to be specifically addressed, there are many things couples can do to repair relationships aside from telling one another, "You need to change." Investing time and energy in relationship-building areas such as giving respect, showing appreciation and gratitude, and spending more time together (just for example) can often go a long way to improving things. After all, the aim should be to make things better, not just to suffer less.

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Another point, before we begin discussing what can't be tolerated, is the need to clarify what it even means to "tolerate" another person.

In all relationships, there are areas that affect one or of the parties, or both of them. There will inevitably be issues that arise when one spouse makes decisions in "his" area that don't directly affect "hers," and vice versa. As much as one may not approve of another's decision, those areas may not pertain to both of them. Sometimes, one spouse finds choices made by the other "intolerable" and attempts to change them, without realizing that this borders on controlling behavior.

That said, being bothered by something that your spouse does *is* normal, regardless of whether it directly affects you or not. Although you may not be entitled to control their behavior, that doesn't necessarily mean that you must "grin and bear it" either. If a husband is constantly nagging his wife to wear only what he prefers, it's usually a sign of a problem, but he can, for example, ask his wife nicely to put on a different dress for a *chasunah* if he likes the other one better. "Asking" and doing so "nicely" is generally fine, whereas "demanding," especially if "not done in a nice manner, isn't. A smart person will know where, when, and how to make requests and where to allow his or her spouse to be an individual and do as he or she prefers.

Allowing someone else "to be" is not called "tolerance" — it's simply respecting the fact that the other person is a unique individual, expressing their uniqueness in an area that doesn't harm anyone.

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Refusing to allow another person "to be" is what can be defined as abuse and this is where the question of tolerance becomes relevant. Behavior that is overly controlling, damaging, or clearly dysfunctional, should not be tolerated. Tolerating such behavior is wrong and often makes things worse. Unfortunately, there are people who do so and see themselves as martyrs, believing their approach to be commendable. As in most relationship issues, gauging the fine line between upsetting and abusive behavior is something that is extremely difficult to do when enmeshed in the relationship. Therefore, an objective and competent outsider who provides Torah-based guidance should always be consulted before one decides on how to address these challenging situations.

Part of knowing how to address things is seeing the entire picture and how both spouses are actively participating in the situation. It's vital to ensure that the suffering spouse is not in any way enabling the intolerable behavior. Enabling another person to hurt them is absolutely NOT the same as being to blame for the situation. However, there are situations where problems can be solved much more simply when the enabling behavior stops. So much direct confrontation can be avoided when issues are dealt with properly in advance.

Consider, for example, a situation where someone tells a spouse, "I want you to do XYZ every afternoon," and the spouse complies even though it is exhausting, painful, or simply too difficult. Although the demanding and controlling attitude can be considered annoying and inconsiderate and reflects a problem in the relationship that should be addressed, it's actually the compliance with something wrong and unreasonable that is creating a large part of the problem. The same is true with passively accepting verbal abuse which may only be happening because you remain there to listen. If the suffering spouse adopts a more active role and refuses to comply with unreasonable demands, this may result in the other spouse changing their behavior without them ever having to become confrontational.

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Another option to be considered before learning how to "not tolerate" a husband or wife dealing with a problematic behavior in their spouse is simply to ask them to stop. This may seem obvious, but for various reasons not everyone considers or tries this option.

Asking someone to stop, naturally, must be done the right way if there is to be any chance of success. It's vital to avoid any wording or tone of voice that is likely to stir up defensiveness. It's equally important to avoid being judgmental, telling the other person that "You're acting just like your father," or generalizing ("you always...") and so forth.

What you can say is something along the lines of, "I know you don't intend to hurt me. I may have done something wrong. I would appreciate it if you could please stop xyz."

Where this doesn't bring immediate results, it's important to be patient and give the person time to think things over and make the change at some later point (not too far in the future) when they don't feel directly pressured by you to comply. Adults aren't all that different from children in this respect: they too

can be resistant to being "controlled" and just want to feel that they are doing things of their own volition.

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Before moving to the final step of when confrontation is necessary, I would like to summarize the preconditions discussed above: making sure that the issue pertains to you; clarifying with an outside source of advice that the behavior is truly intolerable; addressing any enabling behavior; and asking nicely for the other person to change.

If all these steps have been taken and yet have accomplished nothing or not enough, that's when you probably need to be firm and assertive, and make it clear that you aren't okay with what's happening and can't adapt to the behavior or decision concerned. There are situations in which one needs to say something such as, "I love you very much and I want our marriage to work, but if you continue to stay out all night, then I don't think there's a way for me to continue in this relationship."

Giving such an ultimatum can feel very daunting and shouldn't be done without proper consideration. However, it's important to know that while one must be absolutely serious about following through if necessary, in very many cases it won't be necessary as the shock is enough to create change — and I have seen this happen even in relationships that involved very serious abuse.

The ultimatum should be given firmly yet calmly, without a threatening tone, and of course only when all other realistic options have been exhausted.

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No one should ever give ultimatums without first discussing the situation with someone who provides Torah-based guidance. As I noted above, giving a list of situations which are intolerable is something I'm not about to do because each case must be assessed individually. Some relationships clearly involve behaviors which are totally out-of-bounds but need to be addressed with a broad view of the dynamics. Other relationships involve people with a low tolerance level in general, and while their distress is genuine and they may truly feel that their spouse's behavior is intolerable, they need outside help to restore a sense of proportion.

A competent, Torah-based counselor will not tell such a person, "You're being too thin-skinned," as this will not help. Telling the other spouse, "Adapt to your spouse's low level of tolerance," is also not necessarily the entire answer. However, accepting at face-value a person's account of "intolerable" behavior is irresponsible and could have tragic consequences if the adviser encourages them to break up the relationship. Such an approach fails to address the root cause of the problem, the low level of tolerance — which will in any case be transplanted to any new relationship...

Similarly, people who find it too hard to admit that a relationship involves intolerable behavior may need outside help in order to see things as they are. Very often, one spouse may be willing to overlook even terrible things "for the sake of the children" or to avoid the stigma and consequences of divorce.

There are, unfortunately, situations that are truly and objectively intolerable and must be dealt with or simply terminated. With the right guidance and *siyatta diShmaya*, people in such situations will be able not only to emerge from the darkness but also build beautiful relationships of light and happiness.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: NOACH 5785

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