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Parshas
Vayigash
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RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

PREPARING FOR CLOSENESS

This week's *parshah* begins with Yehudah's approach to Yosef as he pleads for his family. Before beginning his plea, Yehudah introduces his words by saying, "*Bi adoni yedaber-na avdchah davar be'aznei adoni*—Please, my lord, let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears..."

In his *sefer Be'eros Hamayim*, Rebbe Hirsh'l Riminover *zy"a* cites the Medrash that states, "*Ain hagashah ela l'tefillah,*" and explains that before we begin to daven, we should ask Hashem to give us the ability to pray to Him. This idea is also reflected in the words we say before beginning Shemoneh Esrei: "*Hashem sefasai tiftach,*" as we prepare ourselves to speak to Hashem and ask permission to approach Him.

The need for preparation is technically all ours, as Hashem is always ready to hear our prayers, and the timing is never the issue. And yet we preface our words with this request.

When it comes to approaching other people with requests, however, it's important to bear in mind that even if we have the right words and the right tone of voice, sometimes the other person needs us to first invest in the right preparation to enable them to listen to us and hear our words the way they were intended to be heard. If the preparation stage is left out, the person on the receiving end might be too tired to listen, too distracted, or become defensive if he feels under attack. It's good to recall Yehudah's words to Yosef and ask first for permission to address whoever it is, whether a spouse, a child, or a co-worker, and only start to say what we want after the scene has been properly set.

Although making an "appointment" and scheduling for a meeting can be appropriate in a work setting, I don't generally advise making appointments in family relationships, where things shouldn't need to be so formal. That said, there are times when it's best to at least be so considerate as to ask, "Is now a good time? I wanted to clarify something..." before going on to express yourself. And even when the timing is fine, a brief and nicely-phrased introduction, using words such as, "If you wouldn't mind then it would be meaningful to me if..." or "You don't have to, although I would really appreciate if..." or "Please understand that I don't mean to offend you, I just want to explain myself..." can make all the difference to the outcome of a conversation and often also to its effect on the relationship itself. Even without altering the content of the message, a short introduction can pave the path for your words to be accepted better.



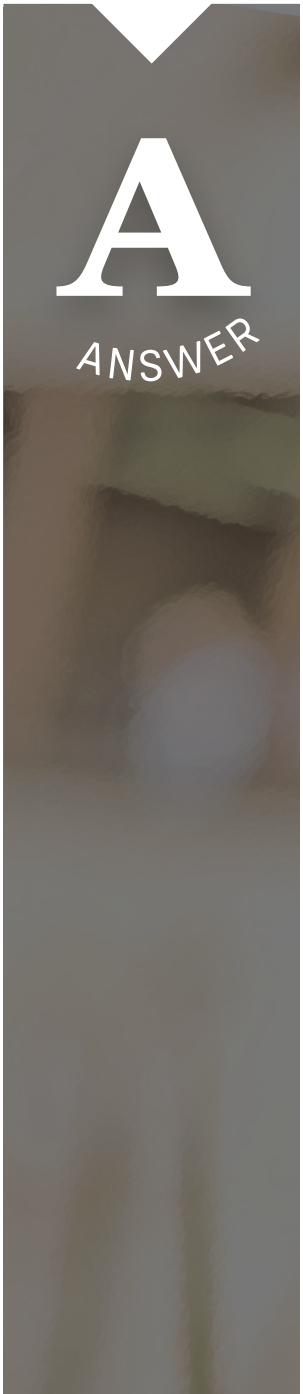
Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much! I have enjoyed so many of your classes which have been really helpful for me. May Hashem repay you, or better still, Hashem will repay you *iy"H*.

My question is about how women enjoy making fancy food for Yom Tov etc. and like to make nice meals that look great and taste delicious. But sometimes, I ask for more simple food that I prefer, but I don't get the simple salad (for example) that I would like. I wish my wife could just make plain food without going to such trouble.

Also, sometimes I tell her that on Shabbos she could use plastic dishes (and there are nice plastic dishes that she could use) because she's often exhausted — but she just refuses and insists on using real dishes.

I would appreciate your advice. Thank you again and *hatzlachah rabbah*!



Before I address the questioner, let me use the opportunity to generally discuss the topic as this is a situation that I think a lot of husbands can relate to. It's very common for women to enjoy taking the trouble to cook fancy dishes that look as well as taste good, because it makes *them* feel good about themselves. There are also more than a few women who tend to over-exert themselves and won't feel happy until they have pushed themselves to their limit, or as we sometimes say, make themselves into martyrs for the sake of their families.

Comments such as, "Do you know how many hours I stood on my feet to cook this...?" or "If you only knew how hard I worked..." clue us into the fact that it's not necessarily all about making the recipient happy, however. Women who insist on making themselves into martyrs are often in desperate need for attention and appreciation. The truth is that people should be able to feel happy about themselves without demanding compliments from others or constantly "proving" themselves. The regular things we do for others should be enough to make us feel okay, and this is something many people, both men and women, need to work on.

Whenever a person gets caught up in needing to feel exceptional, it causes problems. Sometimes, people aren't willing to exert themselves for something that won't be noticed or appreciated and instead choose to do nothing at all. For instance, someone who is asked to give a speech at a *sheva brachos* and doesn't have enough time to prepare something that will impress everyone, might turn down the offer entirely.

Alternatively, the person does invest the extra effort, but then they're so exhausted that they can't even give a smile to their children when they come home from school, or they may even get annoyed and angry at every little thing. I remember hearing a *mashgiach* in *yeshivah* being asked by a *bachur* about taking on a certain *chumra,* and the *mashgiach* pointed out that if it was going to end up being at the expense of others, it would not only not be worth it, but would actually be worse than not taking on the *chumra* at all. In many areas of life, one of the main things to consider before deciding how to go about something is the impact it will likely have on others. This may not necessarily be the only factor to consider, but it should certainly not be overlooked or disregarded. The answer to this question can often help you determine how important or correct something is.

Whether it's the exhausted wife that the family has to contend with after the extensive cooking, or even the underappreciated mommy, it's a shame that such dedication should lead to resentment and hurt feelings on both ends.

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Very often, people who become accustomed to over-exerting themselves don't even realize that they're not even doing it for others; they're doing it for themselves. In

the question here, the wife may think that she is going the extra mile for her husband and family, and that blinds her to the fact that her husband would actually prefer simpler food. Other husbands in similar situations might add that they don't need fancy meals — what they want most is a wife who's relaxed and smiling when they come home, and a comfortable atmosphere for everyone.

The well-known children's story of the king who came to visit a certain town illustrates this well. The elaborate carriage draws up in the town square where everyone is waiting to greet him, the servant opens the door, and the king steps out — and falls into the mud.

Everyone is stunned, but then the baker rushes up to the king, his tray of fancy pastries in his hands, and cries, "Your majesty, here are the pastries I baked for you!"

Following his example, the town's tailor approaches with a fine cloak of velvet to present to the king. "Your majesty, I spent months sewing this elegant cloak for you to wear!"

Meanwhile, the king is still lying on the ground, in the mud, and the baker and tailor stand to one side, confused. Then, two young boys come forward. "Your majesty, can we help you to your feet?" They support him from either side and the king gets up and brushes the dirt from his clothing. Here it was two young boys who taught the town's people a lesson in caring for others by understanding their needs.

When a husband comes home after a long day of work, what he most needs is a smile and a warm greeting, and probably also a hot meal on the table. If his wife is grumpy and exhausted from hours of slaving in the kitchen (and especially if the meal is late because she spent so long on getting it "perfect") then the fanciest dishes in the world won't compensate. There are also husbands for whom a regular schedule is very important and waiting around for supper to be ready makes them nervous.

Whenever a wife finds herself about to do something for her husband, the first thing she should do is ask herself: "What does my husband really want?" Being able to set aside her own need for praise for her cooking is something she should work on.

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With all that said, let's now turn to the husband in this situation. As much as his wife should be asking herself what her husband wants, he should be asking himself, "What does my wife really want?"

If she seems to need compliments on her cooking so much that she always goes the extra ten miles, even when she's exhausted, he should be wondering why. I have no way of knowing the details of your situation, but I'll ask some questions that can be helpful for many readers to think about. Could it be that if she doesn't go the extra mile, she won't get a compliment at all? Does she feel appreciated for the regular things she does? Appreciating one's spouse for the day-to-day things they do for us is fundamental to *shalom bayis*. No one should have to work extra-hard to feel appreciated.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are husbands who belittle all the chores their wives spend so much time on and try to "educate" them to be more idealistic and not to "invest in *shtusim*." This is a big mistake. Women spend much of their time involved in very basic, physical tasks for their families, and men who don't appreciate how much their wives contribute to the family with all these "mundane" things have a lot to learn.

The Baba Sali once heard that Rav Ezriel Tauber *ztz"l* was very involved in helping couples with their *shalom bayis*, and he invited him to his home. Rav Tauber accepted the invitation, wondering what he had done to merit it.

The two of them sat down for a meal, and the rebbetzin brought in the dishes. After tasting each dish, the Baba Sali called his wife and complimented her on her cooking and even asked her how she had prepared the food and what ingredients she had used.

After the meal, as Rav Tauber got up to leave, he turned to the Babi Sali and thanked him, adding, "I understand now."

A similar story is told of Rav Chaim Shmulevitz *ztz"l*, the Mirrer *rosh yeshivah*. A childhood friend of his was once a guest in his home, and during the meal, he expressed his surprise at how R' Chaim kept asking his wife to bring in more food.

"Chaim, what happened to you?" he asked. "Since when did you care so much about what you eat?"

R' Chaim smiled. "You have to understand that my wife's cooking is like my preparation for a *shiur*," he said. "I invest a lot of time preparing the *shiur*, and afterward, it's the greatest pleasure when people ask questions, ask me to repeat certain things, and so forth. The same applies to my wife — it's such a pleasure for her to see that her efforts were appreciated and enjoyed."

Even if you genuinely prefer simpler food, if your wife has invested thought, time, and effort in preparing a meal, it's terrible to belittle that effort. You should overcome your own feelings and for her sake, make a big deal out of all the trouble she has gone to — for you. While it's her job to assess whether her motives are one-hundred-percent pure, it's your job to judge her favorably and assume that she went to all that trouble to please you — and then to show appreciation.

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What if, however, the supper is always late (because the wife spent hours on fancy dishes) or the husband is on a diet and doesn't want to be challenged with (relatively) unhealthy food? The husband can certainly speak up, but he should be careful to avoid two very common mistakes. (I've seen these situations many times so here are some ideas I share with those who've been there.)

The first mistake people make is telling someone, "I don't appreciate the effort you made, because it's not what I wanted." This is extremely hurtful. In addition, when a person hears something like that, it becomes even less likely that they'll adapt for you.

The second mistake people make is not being clear enough about what the problem is and what you would like to change. Sometimes, husbands hint at the problem: "Your mother's salad last Shabbos was amazing..." or "How about making a nice vegetable soup?" and they expect their wives to figure out all the missing details. Then, when their wives (understandably) don't figure it out, they get resentful, expecting them to have read their minds and made the changes they thought they asked for.

As in so many areas, the middle way is the right way to go. Husbands should always notice, appreciate, and compliment, before anything else. "Thank you so much — I know how much effort went into that, and it tastes amazing!" Then, and only then, can you add, a few hours later, or the next day, "I love a simple salad, too." (Avoid the word "but" as much as possible, because adding "but" will detract from the sincere impression your kind words should create. It could even make the compliment seem like just a manipulation to get your salad.)

This approach will often be successful and leave everyone with good feelings.

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That said, there are times when a husband, or wife, has to pick their battles and recognize when it's simply not worth trying to get a certain need met. If you know your wife has a tremendous amount of *sipuk* from creating beautiful meals, and it's a healthy *sipuk* for the family (meaning that she isn't exhausted and still has energy and patience and smiles for everyone, often *because* she feels good about herself), but you don't personally appreciate the fancy food, it might just be worth it for you to swallow your feelings and leave things as they are.

When weighing your wife's *sipuk* and pleasure at your compliments against your preference for a different style of cooking, you have to be really honest about what's the best approach to choose. Certainly if your concern is that your wife is investing "too much" in what you consider to be less-than-idealistic things such as food, you need to reassess your approach. It's not your job to work on your wife's *middos*. It is your job to make her happy.



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To summarize: In order to build a strong *shalom bayis*, each spouse needs to consider the other's genuine needs and do their best to fill them. Everyone needs appreciation, and no one should feel that they have to over-exert themselves to get it.

It's also important to remember that making another person happy usually doesn't involve anything super-special. A smile and a warm welcome for a spouse, and for children, is usually (and should be) appreciated a lot more than a three-course meal. But if your wife truly loves cooking gourmet-style meals for you, and no one is suffering as a result, appreciate it as much as you would appreciate a Torah *shiur*, and thank her and make her feel good.

May Hashem help us all to know what's truly important, how to understand others and make them feel good about themselves, and how to build close and loving relationships.



Please come join in our Simcha, IY"H by you oif Simchos

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