RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

ORGANIZATION AND GROWTH

Rav Yehuda Assad teaches a very relevant lesson in his Divrei Maharya on this week's *sedra*. He explains *"Achor vakedem tzartani"* - mankind must always look forward and backward. In *ruchnius* we must always look forward and strive for more and more, while in *gashmiyus* we should look backward and see how we can limit ourselves.

The *gemara* says that when the *malachim* asked Lot's wife for some salt to go with their bread, she rebuffed them saying "Be happy with what you have, my husband is a tzaddik for giving you bread, none of my neighbors would have given you a thing!"

Here was a case where she looked backward in *ruchnius*; instead of looking forward at Avrohom's *chesed* and attempting to emulate it, she looked backward at the nonexistent *chesed* of her neighbors. This is why she was punished when she "looked back" and she was "turned into salt".

This lesson can be applied to Shalom Bayis as well. When it comes to improving yourself within a relationship, you should always look "forward" at those who have done or achieved more. Maybe you're a great guy, but perhaps there are those who are even more attuned to the needs of their spouse, and a little more helpful. Learn from them and become even better.

When it comes to the other person in the relationship, though, it's imperative to look "backward". Instead of saying "Why can't you do as much as so-and-so?" It would be beneficial to see how many people may be doing even less, and realizing all that you really should be very grateful for. As much as you would want your spouse (or child) to be the best, and you can easily pinpoint what change they can make to get there, it's good to understand that there are many others who would be quite grateful for that which you were blessed with, and you can actually appreciate more that which you have.

That doesn't mean giving up on improving your spouse and your relationship. But remember that seeing the good and focusing on that will get you a lot further than any plans for improvement you want from someone else. Perhaps this idea can help us answer the question for this week.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

First, I'd like to thank you for your amazing weekly shiurim. I've only begun listening recently and already I have gained so much. I especially appreciate the conciseness of your talks and how you cut straight to the heart of the matter in such a practical and clearcut way.

Like so many couples, my husband and I have opposite personalities in many ways. However, there's one particular difference that causes friction between us. I like to keep my home neat and tidy, even if not perfect, but my husband has trouble keeping things in place. Some examples: leaving a plate or finished bag after eating, dirty laundry on the floor, Shabbos clothes laying around, etc. He also isn't very organized with bills, taking care of things around the house, or getting what we need for yom tov. Unless I take charge, things don't get done before the last minute. I know that this is how he grew up, but I don't think I can bear to live in a messy home.

My question is twofold. Firstly, how can I get him to put his things away or to get things done without being critical, condescending or acting like a nagging mother to a child? I've tried telling him in a nice, non threatening way but that only helps so much. Criticism never worked. Yet, if I ignore the issue, I end up being resentful as I silently pick up his socks from the floor every morning.

Secondly, how can I make this better for the long term? I try to praise him often when I see that he does put his things away, and maybe it helps, but not nearly enough. It doesn't usually last for more than a few days. Above all, I don't want this to turn into a parent-child dynamic.

Answer:

In last week's essay, we discussed the situation of a woman whose husband smokes. We elaborated on how much one spouse can control the other and when just accepting your spouse as they are is called for. Often, smoking is a conscious disagreement. Perhaps because it's an addiction, a smoker may make the conscious choice to smoke even if he knows his wife is against it.

In the case of a husband who is sloppy though, he may not even know he's being sloppy! In his mind he always puts things away, it just happens sometimes that he leaves his things laying around. You point out that your husband understands that it bothers you and would change if he could. It's important to focus on that. It is not a disagreement over whether having a neat

home is a good thing, it is simply a tendency that he has a hard time overcoming.

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Now how to address the problem and attempt to improve the situation: You've already tried criticism, talking nicely, and even compliments and yet you didn't get the results you wanted. I will add that your spouse may have a different take on what you tried. What to one can look like asking nicely can seem to another like frustrated nagging; just something to remember and be mindful of.

So often the tone, the timing, the attitude, and the introduction and ending to such messages, makes all the difference in how it's taken. But I'll assume that you'll both agree that you did it the best possible way, and yet it still didn't do the job. It's unlikely I can come up with a magic option that no one thought of yet, but maybe we can discuss the situation you're in and gain some clarity as to what you're dealing with, perhaps this will benefit you and others.

In my book, Get Along with Everyone, I discuss the fact that people are programmed to act and react in certain ways based on their personalities. People can always change, but everyone has things that are naturally difficult for them. Your description of your husband makes it sound like neatness is naturally difficult for him. Being resentful and harping on it doesn't seem to be beneficial to anyone. At some point, you may have to accept that as difficult as it is for you and as much as it makes you nervous, this is not easy for him. Being resentful is damaging your relationship. By process of elimination after everything you've tried, it seems your best option now might just be... acceptance!

It's important to clarify what that means though. Acceptance doesn't mean you're okay with sloppiness. It doesn't mean you hope the socks stay on the floor forever. It doesn't either mean you're giving up and don't expect your husband to change ever. It means understanding that as hard as it is for you to accept this, that's how hard it is – or maybe harder – for your husband to change.

Acceptance is not assuming a person *can't* change. Every person can grow and change. Acceptance means understanding that *you* may not be the one that can get your husband to change in the near future. He might be able to change but it may take a long time. Don't think you married a loser. Realize you married a winner, a very nice person, who has a difficulty that he may overcome, but one that *you* may not be able to change.

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Another thing: Don't take this personally. Your husband's disorganization is not about you. He's not trying to make you nervous and it's not that he doesn't care. It's not about your marriage either. In fact, he's probably disorganized at work and in other areas too. This is his natural tendency and he may not even be upset when you remind him about it. He tries to be better, but this is simply who he is.

Does this mean that you have to bend down to pick up his socks? Maybe. Maybe not. You can leave it there until he realizes he doesn't have socks anymore and he'll pick them up himself. But if you do that in "fight mode" or because you're trying to teach him something, chances are you'll both come out upset.

Since your husband is a nice person, you can choose to keep asking nicely and reminding him to take care of things. You can also choose to take charge. Does that mean you have to start paying the bills? You don't have to. Maybe you can sit down with a coffee and schmooze with him while he does the bills. Whatever you do choose to do, remember that acceptance means trying to find what will work in the best and healthiest way.

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There's another important point I want to clarify. People often talk about The Five Love Languages. "This is my 'love-language', and I'm not getting it from my spouse." Often, though, people don't realize that it's not that they aren't getting the one love language that they need. It's often just that because they're not getting *this* one that they think that it must be what they're

missing, and the one that would've made them happy.

Perhaps it will. Often, though, a person may be enjoying four of the five love languages, but the one they're missing makes them feel unloved. If you weren't getting one of the other love languages, you'd possibly be pining for those and not the one you feel you're missing now. A person naturally focuses on what they're missing.

My understanding from your letter is that you married a very nice person. It seems that even when you nag him about this one issue, he doesn't fight you or become defensive. Realize all the pleasant things he brings to the table. Imagine if you would have married someone more nasty or less pleasant to be around. Someone who gets upset when criticized in any way. We don't always realize how grateful we should be for the problems we don't have. Appreciating the good qualities in your husband will help your resentment shift.

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Interestingly, as I was thinking about this question, I met a person who mentioned in conversation, "I have no patience for bills. I know it's a man's job, but why can't my wife just do it? Doesn't she see that I can't handle it?" He wanted her to see it from his perspective. And maybe his natural strengths make him better at something else and his wife *would* be better with the bills.

Another person just told me, "My wife walks into a room and the one thing that's out of place is the only thing she sees. I don't even see that. When I look at my child, I see him smile. I see him playing. She sees the stain on his shirt".

You can't expect someone else to see what you're seeing. That's acceptance. Understand the other person. See what's difficult for them and work with that. And appreciate everything they do have to offer. Getting angry, criticizing, and hoping that a person will suddenly change, usually doesn't work.

The message here isn't to allow your spouse to be sloppy. Rather, understand who you married. It's inevitable that the person you married won't be exactly like you. It's inevitable that your spouse will have natural difficulties with things that are important to you. And it's inevitable that there are many things you can appreciate in any person with whom you're in a relationship. And although it's normal to focus on what's missing, it's better to focus on how lucky you are to have married someone with so many good qualities. When you reach this level of acceptance, things become easier and simpler. When a person feels loved and accepted like this, it may even bring about change. And it may not. But that's what acceptance is all about.

Wishing you much hatzlacha,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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