בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS VAYEILECH

SELF-AWARENESS IN MARRIAGE

As we near the end of the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu is preparing for his last moments in this world, and it is then that Hashem tells Moshe that after his death, Am Yisrael will forsake Hashem and serve idols, bringing upon themselves severe punishments and perhaps the worst of all: Hashem will hide His face from them.

The *Drashos Chasam Sofer* explains that the most important aspect of *teshuvah* — especially as we approach the final days of the year — is to abandon sin and cut it out of our hearts. Saying Tehillim, giving *tzedakah,* and doing good deeds, while all important, are not fundamental to *teshuvah*. Until we take that first step of stopping wrongdoing, *teshuvah* can't happen. Unfortunately, people often make the mistake of increasing their good deeds without stopping any bad ones.

The Chasam Sofer notes that it appears from these *pesukim* that Hashem will punish Am Yisrael even after they admit to their wrongdoing. Why would that be? Am Yisrael assumed that they weren't doing enough *mitzvos* and that they needed to prove their dedication to Hashem. However, they continued to worship idols. Hashem is telling us that we cannot avoid punishment by simply enhancing the good. We also have to stop doing evil.

This lesson applies to many areas of our lives, and certainly to our relationships. Sometimes, people do things that hurt their relationships and they don't even try to deny it. However, instead of fixing what they're doing wrong, they try to compensate by doing other things right. While their good deeds still improve the relationship, the underlying problem remains, as long as they refuse to address it.

Improving relationships takes a lot of dedication and motivation — real changes won't happen without hard work. If you're hurting someone and think you can patch things up by buying flowers, you're making a big mistake. It's still nice to buy flowers, do favors, and give compliments, and all such things can do a lot for a relationship, but they can't solve unrelated problems.

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QUESTION #1

DEAR RABBI GRUEN,

Thank you for your practical and meaningful classes on TorahAnytime. I greatly appreciate the time and effort you put into them.

My situation is somewhat unique:

I've been married for a few years despite the fact that my personality is not very conducive to marriage. I'm a very closed person and I'm very cautious in relationships. In addition, I easily get queasy and repulsed by little things (ex. eating with an open mouth, breathing loudly etc.) While I'm not sure if it's possible to address this issue, I'd appreciate it if you could advise me on how I can assure my husband that it's not his problem or fault. He blames himself for lack of conversation, my lack of interest in him, and the general lack of connection in our marriage. When I try telling him that it's my problem and my personality, he just brushes me off and tells me to stop blaming myself.

Your advice would be greatly appreciated.

QUESTION #2

HI RABBI GRUEN,

I am a big fan of your classes, and follow them avidly on TorahAnytime. I appreciate your insight tremendously, and have learned very much from your speeches.

***Baruch Hashem*, I am grateful that my wife and I are very happy. I respect her tremendously, and appreciate everything about her.**

By nature, I get stressed easily and have a hard time dealing with it. This ends up creating really unpleasant situations. Things are great the rest of the time, sometimes for days and sometimes for weeks. Inevitably, though, something ends up coming up, I get upset, she's upset that I got upset, I feel bad, etc.

I am aware that most of the issues that come up are really my fault, and I try to apologize as much as possible whenever I upset her. But now my wife says she wants us to go for help, because she doesn't know how to deal with it when I have outbursts.

I never intend to hurt her, and I understand why she can't put up with it. Still, I don't see how couples therapy would help the situation. It's probably just my issue. Also, I am really working very hard on myself and I am seeing and feeling improvement. I know my issue, it's just that it is a very hard thing for me. Is this something we should be addressing as a couple?

Thank you in advance.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

I'd like to begin by noting that I don't usually address "unique" questions in a public forum. Truly unique situations need one-on-one guidance and in my essays and *shiurim*, I generally address issues that many people share, so that many people can benefit. It's very common, however, for people who are struggling to assume that their situation is exceptional, and while it's not common for people to be so self-aware and self-critical, being "closed," having a low tolerance level, having frequent outbursts, or struggling in a marriage in general is (sadly) not so unique at all.

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Before addressing the more general points of the letters in a way that will be helpful to many readers, I would also like to point out that the issue the first questioner describes, being "repulsed by little things," could be something called *misophonia*, a condition in which certain sounds trigger apparently unwarranted emotional responses (such as anger, panic, or feeling like they're "being driven mad"). There's no conventional "cure" for this condition but there are emotion-based approaches that can offer at least some relief. Meanwhile, accepting your sensitivity in this area might make things easier for you and your husband.

Not everyone feels capable of admitting that they are contributing to a problem in a relationship. Awareness of one's sensitivity is a good thing, and self-criticism can be a good thing too, especially when the right people are self-aware.

That said, it can still be helpful to seek out an objective opinion, because it's impossible to assess something accurately when you're inside it. Furthermore, it's often those people who are quicker to accept blame who tend to be overly self-critical. I often speak to men about *shalom bayis* issues and very often, their accounts begin with: "Let me tell you how my wife sees it, because I think she may be right." It's always good to try to see things from the other person's perspective, but it's not good to take that to an extreme. In fact, it's often those people who are ready to take the other person's version of events as a given who are being sold a skewed story. (My class on TorahAnytime, "The Victim and the Perpetrator," addresses this in more detail.)

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Working on yourself and investing genuine effort in a marriage isn't easy. I won't pretend to have a concise answer for those setting out on this path. But I would like to address this issue from a slightly different angle.

Both questions concern spouses who admit to issues that are disturbing their *shalom bayis*, and it does seem that their impressions are accurate, and that they are dealing with genuine issues. Both accept the blame for the problem and are willing to apologize, even on a regular basis, which is certainly praiseworthy. Apologizing for doing something wrong isn't optional. But then what? Is that all? Is that enough? Apologizing and admitting are a great first step. Not everyone takes that first step. But it's still only the *first* step. There may need to be steps after that.

As an aside, I would advise anyone receiving an apology in such circumstances to accept it, *even* when an apology is not sufficient, and even if you don't want or feel like what you need is an apology. What's more, accepting an apology doesn't mean that you lose the right to clarify what it is that you would appreciate done better, as long as you know how, when, and what to say.

However, if you're the person apologizing and you can see that the other person isn't satisfied, you have to face up to the fact that an apology isn't the answer to this particular problem. In fact, it could be *part* of the problem. If you're constantly apologizing without doing anything to fix things, the other person may justifiably stop taking your remorse seriously.

It can be hard to fix the situation. Many people are by nature quite inflexible, have a low threshold of tolerance, or any number of other problems. You may be genuinely working on your issues (and Hashem will certainly reward you for your efforts), but if the other person isn't seeing results, they may doubt that you really care.

When you're single, personality flaws don't have the same impact as they do in marriage. While we are still obligated to work on our *middos*, if they're not actually harming others, then it's your decision whether you want to work on your shortcomings or not. It's between you and Hashem.

Once you get married, however, your character flaws are not just your problem anymore. They'll end up working against you and hurting your relationship. You can't bring your problems into a relationship and expect them to be tolerated. At some point, if you want to be happily married and build a healthy home, you'll have to work harder on yourself. No one can demand that of you, but you should demand it of yourself. It's not easy, and it won't happen overnight, but it's a necessary component of a healthy relationship.

One of the first things I teach in my training courses is that trying to help the person causing the problem is generally less effective than trying to help the person who's living with them. It's much easier to teach a person how to understand, accept, and work around someone else's problems, than it is to enable a person to perceive, understand, and overcome their own issues. People are far more open to hearing that others have issues than they are to admitting to their own. Both approaches demand working on oneself, but focusing on someone else's difficulty when you're not dealing with the underlying emotions causing the problems is a far simpler prospect.

So I do realize that the advice I'm giving here, addressing those who are feeling challenged and

perhaps causing the difficulty in the relationships, is advice that is hard to implement — and it's admirable that the questioners are open to receiving advice on the situation. It also sounds like it's going to be very necessary for both questioners to accept the difficult feelings of their spouses, despite the fact that they are apologizing and trying to improve matters. If they want to seek out professional help, understand that this is probably because they feel you don't understand them. They've tried to make you realize how important it is for them to see that you're making changes, and they feel that they've failed in that attempt. Now they want someone else to explain it to you, more effectively. If you can reassure them that you do understand how they feel, and also (this is the important part) outline how you're going to work on the issues, they may change their minds about the need for therapy — as long as they see things start changing.

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The issues described here are actually a very common dynamic in all kinds of relationships. When people talk about a personal issue, they often preface it with, "I know this is my problem," or "I know how I contribute to the problem." As an example, a father may say, "My son isn't interested in learning. I know I should learn more with him but I don't have the time or patience. What can I do to get him to learn more?" Sometimes, men complain that the house is "flying," before adding that, "I know I don't help all that much... but how can I get my wife to run the house better?"

Both are admitting to their share of the problem and even criticizing themselves for not doing more — but it stops there. One might be forgiven for wondering if that's the point: to *make* it stop there. After all, if they simply stated the problem and left out the admission, the natural response of anyone listening would be, "Can you learn with him?" or "Do you help enough?" Although the person might not be aware that being self-critical is actually a tactic he uses to stop *others* from criticizing *him*, that is certainly what happens.

Saying things like, "My personality is not conducive to marriage," or, "I have a hard time dealing with stress," doesn't give you a free pass to hurt your spouse. Even if you choose to identify with your problem (which isn't a good idea), protesting that, "That's just how I am," or, "I know I have a fiery temper," doesn't change the fact that you have a problem.

Admitting that you have an issue isn't a solution, and it certainly doesn't justify a resistance to going for help or working on doing things differently. Self-criticism doesn't absolve you of your responsibilities to others. Unfortunately, this is something I see often in *shalom bayis* issues.

Self-awareness and self-criticism should be catalysts for growth — they should lead to honestly taking ownership of your issues rather than trying to deflect responsibility with excuses. I would suggest that both of you reach out to someone to help you take your next steps in improving your skills, tackling your weaknesses, and working on your *middos* (as all such work used to be called). Your efforts to work on tolerance, humility, or whatever other issues will have a tremendous positive impact on your *shalom bayis,* and may you be *zocheh* to see the fruits of your labors.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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