

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

SECRETS

This week's ***parshah*** relates how Yaakov Avinu "went down to Mitzrayim and dwelled there with a small number [***bimsei me'at***]..." The Imrei Emes ***ztz"l*** asks whether it would not be more usual to write that Yaakov "went down to Mitzrayim with a small number [of people] and dwelled there"?

Citing a Yerushalmi, he relates how a ***chacham*** was showing another person a very beautiful and ornate shul and quoted: "***Vayishkach Yisrael oseihu vayiven heichalos***—and the Yidden forgot their Maker and built palaces." In ***galus***, the Imrei Emes continues, it is inappropriate to construct such ostentatious buildings. Rather, we Yidden should keep a low profile and take care not to arouse the jealousy of the goyim. This is the lesson we learn from Yaakov Avinu, who not only went down to Mitzrayim "on a small scale," but also dwelled there in such a manner, teaching us the importance of remaining low-key and not doing or saying whatever we feel like without first taking into account who is around us and what impression it will make on them.

Some people think that this applies only in public, and that at home, one should feel comfortable enough to be able to behave "naturally," with far less (or no) need to take others into consideration. After all, nobody likes the feeling of having to walk on eggshells within their comfort zone. But the truth is that even in our own homes we should be considerate of those around us, taking into account how they will respond to our behavior.

This applies just as much to words as to deeds. Some people believe that in a close relationship, it is always good to be as transparent as possible, sharing everything and hiding nothing. Others feel that it's simply an easier, more relaxed way to live. While it is often true that having fewer barriers creates more closeness, it is always true that showing consideration for other's feelings is an essential part of any relationship.

In general, it is good and beneficial to be open with a spouse, but there will always be times when a measure of secrecy is appropriate and openness could cause harm. While we should strive to be truthful when possible, if we encounter a choice between ***shalom*** and ***emes***, peace and truth, it is more often ***emes*** that should be sacrificed.

This week's essay is kindly and generously sponsored anonymously by a good friend as a Zchus for Yeshous and Refuos, Hatzlacha and Nachas!

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you for your excellent lectures. I enjoy listening to them and have gained a lot of insight from them. Your recent class on hiding information from your spouse bothered me. While it makes sense to hide little things that a spouse will get annoyed at, I think that that only should apply in situations that are insignificant. Otherwise, who could trust their spouse?

However, some of the examples that you gave hint at an unhealthy aspect of a relationship. A husband can't tell his wife that he's fixing his friend's appliance for free? His friend can't tell his wife that he's paying his friend for his work? Unless both families are destitute, maybe someone should speak to the wives about how they should behave. It's NOT a *l'chatchilah* situation.

And if the husband splurges on lunch for $100, maybe she'll feel more comfortable splurging on a dress for $100 — guilt-free.

We all have our hang ups. It seems like the ultimate disrespect of a spouse to assume that they aren't able to hear another side and come around. Personally, when my husband hid something from me that I thought was a big thing, my reaction was, "I understand that my view was unfair and put unnecessary pressure on you, but couldn't we have had a conversation? You could have explained that I was unfair, or found someone else (a rav, etc.) who could have done it. Do you think that I am so unworkable?"

My favorite part of the class was the story of the man who explained to his wife how he'd like her to react when he tells her things. They probably have a respectful, trusting relationship. That story was THE *shalom bayis* tip.

Thank you again for your practical, *Torahdig* classes that cut to the point with clarity and insight. May Hashem grant you much *hatzlachah* in helping people and all other aspects.



I'm glad to hear you enjoy my classes, especially as you don't enjoy every single aspect of them. Let me address this very point for a moment.

There would be little point in me confining what I say to things that enjoy a wide consensus. I don't set out to be controversial, but I do try to be honest about my opinions and perspectives. My aim is to expand people's ways of thinking and introduce them to ideas that often need some explanation in order for people to consider them.

Sometimes, advice or suggestions given during a one-on-one session are harder to accept, as it's more personal. When I publish essays and record classes, there's the advantage that the advice being given isn't as direct, and people find it easier to absorb new ideas at their leisure without any need to become defensive. But if people only listen or read in order to have their preconceived ideas validated, what are they achieving?

Opening one's mind to new ideas isn't always a simple thing to do, of course. People often have a great deal of inner resistance to concepts that challenge what they believe and their way of doing things. Whenever we encounter resistance, it can be an invitation to pause and explore what is really going on, rather than falling into the trap of dressing up emotional blocks in the language of logic. We may convince ourselves that we have well-balanced, grounded arguments against the new concept being presented, when in reality, our resistance may be coming from somewhere deeper.

Your letter, like many I receive, is well articulated and presents your thoughts in a clear and compelling manner. Nonetheless, it's not hard to detect the emotional current beneath the surface. It seems this topic touched a raw nerve as it's relevant and challenging to you. When that happens, it's important to remember that one cannot successfully debate emotions using logic. The most reasonable solutions will usually be rejected by the person who is motivated by feeling and circumstance. This is not to

say that solutions can't be found. They can, but usually only when we recognize what we're dealing with.

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I don't know anything more about your situation than you reveal, making it hard for me to provide a full answer. However, I do wonder whether there really was a "discussion-based" solution to the disagreement you had with your husband. While I can only guess at the nature of your objections, when you write, "We all have our hang ups," and then continue, "it seems like the ultimate disrespect of a spouse to assume that they aren't able to hear another side and come around," I find clues to what's really going on.

Everyone has blind spots—areas in which, at least for the time being, we can become immune to logic and find it difficult to listen to another point of view with an open mind. Acknowledging this isn't disrespectful; it's simply human nature. We all have blind spots, just in different areas.

It's natural that you take personally your husband's decision to conceal something from you, and it may also be natural that he chose to conceal something specific. In fact, it's quite possible that it was his anticipation of how you might react that led to him deciding as he did. In many cases, a husband or wife keeps certain matters secret not because they want to, but because they have learned from bitter experience that when they disclose those things, their spouse simply can't handle it and responds in a very hurtful manner.

I am assuming — and please forgive me if I'm wrong — that the incident concerned something that he believes is in the "his" category rather than "ours," as otherwise, you would have made it clear that he was out-of-order (and you would probably be right, as I'll discuss soon). Did he have the right to keep something personal a secret from you, is, it seems, what you're asking. The short answer is: In many cases, yes. The long answer follows.

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Secrets aren't ideal. As a general rule, a husband and wife should want to share and feel able to share most things with each other.

That said, they should also have a healthy sense of privacy, of when not to reveal things when doing so would be detrimental. One of the reasons why Hashem created us with thoughts that are inscrutable to others is to protect others from knowing every thought that passes through our minds, and to protect us from how they would react if they knew what we were thinking.

Privacy doesn't disappear when we get married. It would be silly to tell one's spouse, "Yes, of course I have secrets from you! I'm allowed to!" But "radical transparency," as some call it, is generally harmful. People sometimes reveal highly personal information that they later regret. Not always do we correctly predict how the other person will respond. It's clear from Torah sources that being discreet about personal matters is often the best course of action. Certainly no one should tell their spouse anything that could lead to them being viewed with less respect, unless it's something they need to know.

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This should be contrasted to shared areas of marriage, which I like to refer to as "ours," where decisions affect both husband and wife directly. Keeping secrets here is almost always unjustifiable and doing so really does destroy trust between spouses. Anything that involves the children, the home, joint plans and schedules, and so forth, is in the "ours" category and should obviously be openly discussed by husband and wife.

Defining "ours," however, isn't always so simple. Many people believe that if something affects them, they have a right to know about it and have a say in the final decision. Some people take this to extremes that they don't see as extreme at all, such as a woman who wants to decide where her husband davens, or a man who wants to dictate his wife's clothing choices (assuming that it's not a question of ***tznius***). Their rationale is that "your decisions affect me and impact the way I feel." This is not what "ours" means. Of course most things a husband does affects his wife, and vice versa, but "ours" means direct effect and a shared responsibility.

This doesn't mean that it's always going to be comfortable to be open and transparent in this area. If ever a husband or wife finds themselves unwilling to discuss something that clearly affects both of them directly, they should discuss it with a third party and try to figure out the best way to be open. Unwillingness to share what both need to know is a red flag in a marriage that shouldn't be ignored.

Unwillingness to share something private, by contrast, is often healthy and normal. All the same, if one finds himself hesitating about revealing something to their spouse, it's definitely worth taking the time to understand why, as it will often reveal a lot about the relationship.

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In general, sharing is something that is supposed to be beneficial to both husband and wife. Consider the Ropshitzer Rav ***ztz"l***, who would come home every morning after Shacharis and respond to his wife's question about how the davening went with, "***Gevaldig***! Really great!"

Once, a ***talmid*** asked the Rav whether the davening was really ***gevaldig*** every single day.

"Well, no," the Ropshitzer said. "When the davening is great, of course I tell my wife so that she can share my joy. But when it isn't quite up to par, why should I distress her? At least let her have the enjoyment, even if I don't."

In a similar vein, I once heard advice from an ***adam gadol*** who would suggest to young men about to get married that they have somewhere to rest during the day if needed, explaining that: "Your wife doesn't need to know each time you take a nap…"

So, if it's unnecessary to upset one's spouse with information they don't need to know, why do it? And similarly,

if it's unnecessary to upset oneself by divulging information that one's spouse doesn't need to know, also why do it?

To give an example: Suppose your husband is always on your case about going on a diet. Should you tell him about each time you give in to temptation and eat a portion of ice cream? Suppose you are always on your husband's case about fixing the leak in the bathroom and he just hasn't made the time for it yet. Does he have to account to you for every moment in his day to prove that he really didn't have time (or "wasted" time you think would have been better spent fixing the leak)?

Some issues in marriage are recurring ones — the topics that always cause long arguments and end in stalemate, with each spouse insistent that they are right and the other is wrong. (As you write: We all have our hang-ups.) Is there really anything to be gained by the wife sparking such a dead-end argument by revealing to her husband that she did the very thing he disagrees with, or vice versa?

Even the "best" marriages have their areas where husband and wife simply don't see eye-to-eye, and that's perfectly natural. Why tell your spouse something that will only upset them — isn't it better for them to remain oblivious, as long as this doesn't harm them in any way?

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There will still be those who insist that regardless of the consequences, there should be no secrets between husband and wife. "We'll work it out, whatever it is," they respond, when you suggest that radical transparency sometimes backfires. "Even if I don't like something my spouse does, I'd still rather know about it than have them keep secrets from me."

Interestingly, such people don't always turn the tables on themselves and consider whether they would really like their spouse to know about everything they do, read their every thought, and track their every action. Would they agree to having their spouse listen in to all the conversations they have throughout the day? Unlikely.



Of course, choosing not to reveal something should be a thoughtful decision, not the default option. If anyone has a spouse who seems to be keeping far too many secrets, this is certainly a sign that things may not be okay and shouldn't be ignored. It might be best to consult with someone to try and figure out what's going on, rather than insisting that one's spouse "comes clean."

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You write that what you most enjoyed about the class you refer to was the advice I gave to a husband, suggesting that he explain to his wife how he would like her to react when he tells her things. Of course if there's a way for husband and wife to be open and share things, that way should be pursued. The ideal state is one of sharing that is mutually beneficial.

This is distinct from transparency, which assumes that keeping something private is always wrong. Sometimes, secrecy is simply a form of ***tznius*** and something desirable. Sometimes, it is a decision not to reveal something embarrassing or shameful that will enhance ***shalom bayis***. And sometimes, it is simply a pragmatic decision, a choice not to enter into a fruitless debate and spare the other spouse the ***agmas nefesh***.

To sum it up, a decision to keep something secret should never be made lightly. Especially if it seems likely that the other spouse will find out, it's better to be open in the first place and not harm the trust between them. And definitely, any topic that belongs to both husband and wife should never be hidden by one from the other.

Too many secrets can be a sign that something is wrong and should prompt both husband and wife to figure out what. The answer might simply be that one or both of them need to learn how to enhance their communication skills. It takes two to have a productive conversation that involves being open to another person's point of view as well as willingness to be flexible and make compromises. Few people are truly "unworkable," to use your term, but most people need to work hard to not only share with others but accept others even when it's challenging.

B'ezras Hashem we'll be willing to put in that work and Hashem will bless our efforts with success.

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