

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

ALLOWING ROOM FOR DIFFERENCES

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah describes the gold, silver, and other precious items donated for the Mishkan. The *passuk* first tells us about "all the gold..." and then specifies the precise amounts.

According to the Sforno, this hints that the value of the items used in the building of the Mishkan was quite limited, as well as being significantly less than the value of the precious items used in the construction of either the First or the Second Beis Hamikdash. In fact, the value of the precious items used in the building of Bayis Sheini was far greater than that in Bayis Rishon, which was in turn far greater than that used in the Mishkan. And yet, the Sforno writes, the presence of the Shechinah was felt far more strongly in the Mishkan, less so in Bayis Rishon, and far less so in Bayis Sheini.

This comes to teach us that although we might assume, from our human perspective, that greater material expense has a correspondingly greater spiritual benefit, the opposite can actually be true. What Hashem really wants from us is the desire of our hearts to serve Him in truth and sincerity. When we are genuinely devoted to Him, we open up the space for His Shechinah to enter, even if we are not able to donate so lavishly in a material sense.

In our own homes, the *mikdash me'at* into which we seek to usher Hashem's presence, the same lesson applies. The Shechinah will feel welcome in a home of harmony in which each spouse respects the other.

Often, people experiencing issues with *shalom bayis* assume that "more" will solve the problems — more gifts, more helping out in the home, more compliments... The Torah teaches us that "more" in the material sense is not always the answer. Sometimes what we need is to respect more, not give more presents; to find more ways to show that we care and love, rather than give a new credit card.

And when we get to the root of the problem, we will often find that instead of needing to always give more, "less" can usually be just as good, because often it's the intention and meaning that counts.

This week's essay is dedicated in loving memory of a proud Abba and Zeidy

ר' שלמה יהודה
ב"ר אליעזר טסלר ע"ה
נלב"ע כ"ז אדר תשמ"ו לפ"ק

Who survived the Holocaust and rebuilt a family of בנים ובני בנים עוסקים בתורה ומצוות

תהא נפשו צרורה בצרור החיים
עדי נזכה לקיום הפסוק יקיצו וירננו
שוכני עפר בביאת משיח צדקינו

Parshas
Pekudei
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Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

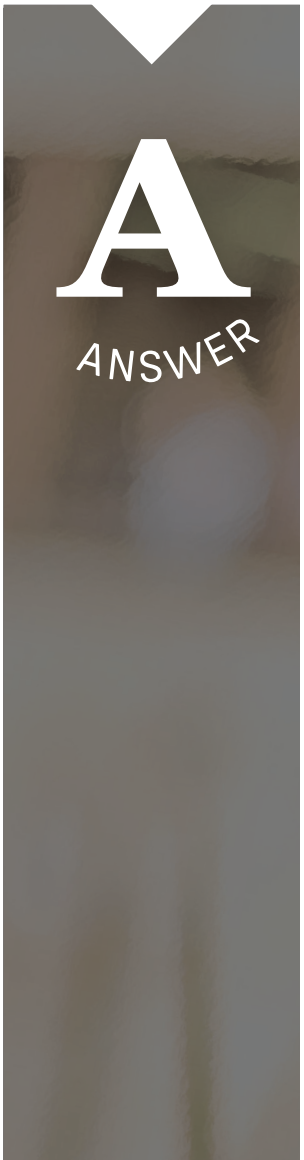
I hope you can give me some advice, because lately, things have been very tense between me and my wife.

She claims that I'm not frum enough for her, and is constantly complaining about how when we were dating, she got a very different picture of the kind of person I am.

I don't feel that I did anything to mislead her before we got engaged, and so I don't see why I should be obligated to change my nature and become someone I'm not, simply because that's what she expected. Instead, I think it's her duty to find a way to accept me for who I am.

The things she complains about are really quite minor and unimportant, but still significant enough to damage our relationship. I really hope you can help me sort this out to everyone's satisfaction.

Thank you.



How often do we hear of relationships being destroyed because of "minor, insignificant issues" and wonder how it could be that a husband and wife allowed something so small to have such a powerful impact? I don't doubt that your and your wife's conflicting perceptions of what is an acceptable level of *frumkeit* are causing difficulties. However, if things were really that simple, one could take a husband who is dissatisfied with a wife who "isn't frum enough" and a wife who is dissatisfied with a husband who "isn't frum enough," and marry them to each other for a "happily ever after" outcome — only in real life, it doesn't work like that.

In most cases, relationships are only challenged by serious underlying issues, even though a superficial difference of opinion may be the only obvious sign that something is wrong.

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In your case, I believe that a misunderstanding of healthy boundaries in a marriage is partly responsible for the tension between you and your wife. In every relationship, even marriage, there are three categories: mine, yours, and ours. It's very common for people to assume that in marriage everything falls under "ours" and that they are therefore entitled to not only express an opinion but also to impose their views on their spouse in order to ensure a "united" outcome. When such impositions are unjustified, problems arise.

The general rule in all questions of boundaries is that if what the other person is doing doesn't affect you directly, you don't have the right to impose your own views, opinions, or preferences. You are entitled to have views and opinions, and even to express them, but that's where it ends.

When we think about this dispassionately, it makes perfect sense. Why should one spouse be permitted to dictate to the other that everything they

do must conform to their own preferences? While you may discuss anything that bothers you with your spouse, and should feel comfortable doing so, it should always be with the recognition that they are entitled to do things as they prefer in any area that pertains solely to them.

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Your letter doesn't provide any clues regarding to what your wife is objecting to in the area of *frumkeit*, so I cannot comment on whether her complaints are at all justified. However, I will just note in a general sense that where the question is one of *halachah* (rather than a more *mehudar* way of doing things), a spouse (husband or wife) is not just entitled but actually obligated to point out the wrong behavior. This applies not only to spouses, for that matter. We are required to care enough about all Jews, that we feel pained if we see them behaving wrongly, and to gently point out to them anything they may be doing wrong.

I recall a certain husband who once came to me complaining that his wife would remind him to *bentch*. He was extremely indignant about her doing so, and told me how much it bothered him. I told him that in such a clear *halachic* matter, his wife was doing the right thing in reminding him, if he really wouldn't *bentch* otherwise.

If you are unsure whether what your wife is complaining about is something that you genuinely should change, you should obviously ask your rav.

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But let's assume that what you write is accurate — that the issues are minor and you didn't deceive your wife in any way when you were dating. Does that mean, as you suggest, that it's your wife's "duty" to accept you as you are? The truth is that it would probably be wise for your wife to accept you as you are even if she isn't obligated to do so. Likewise, it would be wise for you to accept your wife as she is — along with her complaints — even if you aren't obligated to. But it's hard to "demand" acceptance.

Most of us could come up with a list of things we would like to change in our spouses, and we often think that we would be happier if we could mold them just the way we want. And most of us accept that life just isn't like that. Realizing that there will almost always be some friction in the area of "I like things this way; you prefer them another way," helps us to accept the differences in our personalities.

Once we internalize the fact that the other person isn't exactly like us and that it's okay, it's far easier to avoid becoming defensive each time the other person complains, asks us to change, or behaves in ways that bothers us.

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There is of course a vast difference between asking respectfully for someone to change something, and attempting to prove that they are obligated to change because they're wrong and you're right. Arguing with your spouse in the hope that you'll "win" the debate is very unlikely to help resolve your problems. The real issue here isn't finding the "correct" level of *frumkeit*. It's about your feelings and your wife's feelings, and debating the topic is just a way of showing that you don't respect the other person's way of seeing things and want them to conform to your way.

What you can and should do instead of arguing about who's right is simply state your feelings and ask for understanding. "I would feel much better if you could suggest..." "I feel very hurt when you say..."

No one can force another person to alter their opinions unless the issue is truly black-and-white. All you can try to do is persuade your wife that both of you have valid ways of seeing things. This of course means that your wife's way of seeing things is also valid. She would truly like you to be more frum in certain areas and you should accept that this wish is valid, and may actually be coming from a good place.

Furthermore, just as you don't enjoy feeling that she looks down on you for being "not frum enough," she probably doesn't enjoy feeling that you look down on her for being "excessively frum." Coming to terms with the idea that there really are certain areas in which she does things better than you may help you to respect her views. If you can, tell her how much you admire her for being stronger in certain areas and that you wish you could be, too — but at this point in time, you don't feel capable of it.

This is the right thing to do regardless of the outcome, but you may find that if you start expressing your respect for your wife, she will stop putting so much pressure on you to change.

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All this is assuming that the issues your wife is referring to are "yours" and it's only her feelings that need to be resolved. However, if the issues concern "ours" and she (and possibly the rest of the family as well) is directly affected, then you will have to be more

forthcoming in finding a solution. If you can't reach an agreement after discussing the issues respectfully, you might be best off involving an objective third party, ideally your rav.

While you may feel convinced that what your wife is requesting of you is truly beyond your capabilities, sometimes, all it really means is stretching yourself beyond your comfort zone and becoming accustomed to doing things differently. There are times when doing so for the sake of your *shalom bayis* is the right way to go. This is not because you must do as she says, but because it's smarter and better than "standing up for your rights." If her concern pertains primarily to what the children are seeing, it's okay to adopt a certain practice for when you are at home or with your children. Most of us recognize that one or other of our parents are stronger or more lenient in certain areas and this isn't necessarily problematic. However, if your wife is very concerned about the impact on your children of seeing one parent being far more lenient in certain areas than the other, this is something you should take into account.

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But let me add a few words of caution to the wife in this story. While your intentions may be *leshem Shamayim* — you really do want to build a home based on firm Torah principles — denigrating your spouse is not the way to go about it.

Firstly, it is wrong to make anyone feel "not good enough." Each and every one of us has stronger and weaker points, and it is wrong to generalize from just a select few issues and write off the person entirely. This applies not just to questions of *frumkeit* but also to considering someone not smart enough, not generous enough, not social enough... It also applies to "labeling" a person (such as calling someone OCD or neurotic).



Aside from being wrong, I've seen these behaviors backfire. If a person senses that you disapprove of them, their motivation to address specific issues will plummet. "Even if I improve in this area," they may think, "it won't help as they'll still find plenty of other things to complain about."

Unless your spouse is a truly terrible person, the issues you find difficult to deal with are a tiny fraction of his personality and it's so important to maintain a sense of proportion. Pinpoint the truly significant problems and ask, respectfully, for change there. This approach is far more likely to succeed.

It's also very important to recognize that sometimes, what appears to be more or less frum is simply the result of having a different type of personality, or a different upbringing. We can see this even among *talmidei chachamim*, where one *gadol* may appear "greater" than another simply because he has a different type of character.

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Feeling that one's spouse is not on the same level of *frumkeit* as oneself can be very challenging — for both spouses. When husband and wife learn to respect each other and focus on the many things they share and are satisfied with in one another, they will find it much easier to overcome their differences.

Whenever we encounter our fellow Jews, we are obligated to seek out their good points and judge them favorably. How much more so with a spouse, when there is so much at stake. The investment we make when stretching ourselves to accept others even when we would like them to be more like us, is one that will *be'ezras Hashem* pay great dividends.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: PEKUDEI 5785

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