

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

BETWEEN PARENTS AND SPOUSE

This week we learn about Bilaam who is described as being on the same level of prophecy as Moshe Rabbeinu. In giving him such powers, Hashem intended to prevent the non-Jews from being able to claim that, "If only we had a navi like Moshe, we would behave just as well as the Jews."

The Rebbe R' Bunim of Peshischa points out that while Bilaam was as great a prophet as Moshe Rabbeinu, the non-Jews could still protest that whereas Moshe was good, Bilaam was evil. Perhaps if they had been given a good navi, they would have turned out better.

To answer this, the Rebbe R' Bunim relates a journey he made to Berlin in search of an eye doctor. He stopped a non-Jew in the street and asked him for a recommendation, and the man told him enthusiastically about a "miracle-working doctor" who could heal "anything."

R' Bunim's reaction was that if he wanted a miracle-worker, he would do far better to visit the Kozhnitzer Maggid. When it comes to matters of health, he explained, while in the past Am Yisrael was able to go to a tzaddik for healing, today we are generally required to act within the natural guidelines and go to a doctor — in which case, we should seek out a doctor who is the best according to natural standards.

Similarly, Hashem gave the non-Jews a prophet like Bilaam in order to silence their complaints. They had the opportunity to follow a "natural" leader which ended up badly for them — and they had no grounds to protest that if only Bilaam had been pure and holy, they too would have been. After all, they had the chance to believe in the prophecies and miracles which came via Moshe Rabbeinu, and they chose not to believe, opting instead for the superstition of Bilaam, which showed that they had the capacity to follow a prophet but not the willingness to follow a prophet of Hashem.

Often, you'll hear a spouse make a similar complaint: "If you're capable of caring about other people, why don't you care about me? If you were truly busy then I could understand, but if you do have extra time why am I the last on your list?" Whenever we're confronted with such a complaint, it should give us pause for thought and prompt us to ensure that we really are available for our spouses.

On the other hand, it's important for the person feeling sidelined to realize that even if someone spends a great deal of time helping others, it might not mean that they care more about those others. A husband who is devoted to his parents, or a wife busy with chessed projects, doesn't necessarily care less about their spouse. It's simply that he or she may care more about the good feeling they get from helping others, or consider this something they do for "themselves."

While such a situation also has room for improvement, seeing things this way can lighten the hard feelings and also offer new insight into one's spouse and their need to feel appreciated. Spouses do need to be there for each other regardless, but it's important to acknowledge that people are allowed to make time for themselves as well, even if the way in which they do so involves giving to others beyond the family.

Thank you to a kind sponsor who anonymously dedicated this essay!

זכות הרבים תלוי בו

Parshas **Balak**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I've been married a few years now, and this issue started pretty soon after I got married. My parents, for all they are wonderful people, so loving and devoted, are very strict in many areas, and very "by the book" in the way they do things. But my husband made it clear from the first that there were things he wanted me to do differently from the way my parents had taught me.

I knew that my parents would take it really hard, because these were things that are very important to them, so I stalled a lot, and didn't make the changes my husband wanted so fast. I kept putting things off, but eventually I couldn't bear the tension this was causing, so I finally resolved to do things the way my husband asked me to, and my shalom bayis improved so much.

The problem now is that my parents see me as a failure. They have no problem telling this to me to my face. They say that I should have stood up to my husband and refused to do things that my family finds unacceptable.

I feel horrible about the situation and I just don't know if I did the right thing. Maybe Hashem also thinks I'm a failure, I don't know. I'd really appreciate your advice here.

Also, I have a younger sister who is still unmarried and living at home. My parents have similar complaints about her — they don't like the way she dresses, or the kind of books she reads. They call her a failure, too, and I'd like to know how I can give her chizuk because I know she takes it hard.

Thank you so much.



The first thing I'd like to point out with regard not only to this question but also to so many questions and issues that arise in people's lives is: If only people had a rav, or someone who can give clear Torah guidance and practical advice, things would be so much more straight-forward. There's no way that I can possibly give any specific guidance on such issues without being familiar with the people involved, their backgrounds, as well as the specifics. All this is aside from the fact that I'm not a rav. Everyone needs a personal daas Torah involved in their life, someone who knows them and their circumstances and who can take everything relevant into account before issuing clear guidance. Once you do have that, you should definitely feel confident to proceed with the guidance you're getting. Being that I believe this is really 90 percent of the answer to your question, let me elaborate just a bit.

Getting Torah guidance is relevant whenever someone is in doubt, but this is particularly so when someone is stuck between two people who are significant in their life and feeling torn and confused. When someone is actively being pulled in two opposing directions it can be really hard to maintain the clarity needed to decide on the correct path.

This is even more so regarding a conflict between a spouse and a parent — two Torah obligations! The degree of obligation one has to a parent depends on many factors, including whether or not one is married, and whether the parent will know if the child disobeys.

On the other hand, while it's well-known that Hashem commands us to erase His Name in order to restore peace between husband and wife, some people mistakenly take this to mean that when it comes to shalom bayis, "anything goes." This is absolutely wrong. Just as one may not transgress the Torah's commandments even if one's father or mother orders it, the same applies with a spouse.

For all these reasons, and more, one should never guess at or decide on one's own how to behave in challenging moments of uncertainty. Rather, take advantage of the Torah guides we are blessed with.

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A person who really wants to live according to Torah should make the effort to find a rav who understands him and who will guide him in the right direction. Some people, however, are looking for something else entirely. If all you want is to get a "stamp of approval" for whatever it is you want to do, you might be tempted to find a different rav each time to provide the answer you're looking for.

Consistency is part and parcel of serving Hashem. Chazal teach us: "This is the yetzer hara's way; Today he tells you: Do this and tomorrow he tells you: Do that, until he tells you: Go serve avodah zarah." I once saw a beautiful explanation of this which sheds a lot of light on how our minds can work.

One day, the yetzer hara can come to a person and say: Do lots of chessed! It's such a wonderful thing! And the person takes up the idea enthusiastically. The next morning, the yetzer hara wakes him up with a new thought: Chessed? That's for askanim. You should be learning! So he goes off to the beis medrash to learn. The next day, the yetzer hara turns up with a new brainwave: Learning? That's great, but the real avodah is to daven properly. And so it goes on, until the person just gives up on everything.

While people usually believe they're trying to do what's "right," they don't usually realize (or admit to themselves) that all they are doing is what they want and justifying it separately each time. I think the same can be said about someone who goes hopping from rav to rav, until he decides to just drop the whole thing and do whatever he fancies.

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For your specific issue, once you have clear Torah guidance, you will find things far simpler to deal with. It can help a lot to respectfully respond to anyone who questions you with a straight-forward, "I asked my rav, and this is what he told me to do." Sometimes, however, it's more respectful and even easier to make it clear, in advance, that you'll be asking a rav. I recall one such instance when a young man told his father-in-law that he would agree to whatever a rav of his father-in-law's choosing said on a certain issue, and after accepting the offer, the father-in-law was utterly taken aback at the rav's psak, but reluctantly agreed to accept it.

If, after presenting the issue as resolved as far as you are concerned, your parents still insist on bringing it up, you can calmly and very respectfully respond that you are following daas Torah, and that while you understand that they are only concerned about your welfare, you would really appreciate it if they stopped discussing this issue entirely.

Between husband and wife, however, it's usually better for both of them to be involved in the process of framing the question to be asked and discussing it afterward. While there are cases where it's more appropriate for one spouse to ask and only then tell the other, "This is what the rav said," in general people should avoid giving the other spouse the impression that something was addressed behind their back.

Once a person has a response from daas Torah on whatever the issue is, you might still need some help. That's where the question to someone like myself becomes: "This is what my rav told me to do: Please can you tell me the best way to relay it or implement it?"

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I'm of course happy to learn that your shalom bayis improved, but for others reading this, I would like to point out that often, it isn't as simple as that. While this is the correct way of going about things, it doesn't always mean that everything will automatically be wonderful afterward. A wife who puts her husband's feelings before those of her parents is generally doing the right thing and will earn tremendous blessing, but people are complicated, and sometimes, solving one problem is like peeling an onion — all it leads to is revealing the next layer, bringing to the fore the problem hidden beneath.

It's quite common for what seems like a question of priorities to be masking something else entirely. A husband who complains that his wife is more interested in pleasing her parents than him could be generally insecure and lacking in self-confidence. While her decision to put him first will quiet down the initial complaints, it won't really solve everything. Similarly, a husband who simply likes feeling in control, might not change this pattern, and this issue will probably have to be addressed in order to really make the situation improve.

There are also cases where giving in on one thing just leads to the next demand, and more unhappiness and conflict. In such situations, one way of avoiding disappointment and frustration is to discuss things in advance, and make sure you both know what to expect after a change is made.

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You asked about your sister and the chizuk you can give her. You may want to discuss this with someone who can give you clarity based on the specifics, but let me just provide some general ideas. Certainly listening to your sister and understanding her feelings is already so much. What else are sisters for, and who else can be as understanding as you can?

However, listening and understanding shouldn't morph into giving advice, and you should certainly not encourage her to flout her parents' wishes or imply in any way that you support her doing things that you know will upset your parents. I would assume that you don't feel that you should be rebuking her or educating her, yet it's also not your place to advise her in her decisions and encourage anything that might be questionable. Doing so would be very wrong and would also make the situation much worse — between your sister and her parents, and perhaps also between you and your parents.

It's possible that, seeing the changes you have made in your life, your parents are coming down much harder on your sister out of their fear that she will go the same way. This is just one more reason to be careful with what you do and say, because if your parents ever sense that you are encouraging her, their fears will actually be confirmed.

In general, there's no need at all to offer that kind of "encouragement" in order to give your sister chizuk. Offering a listening and non-judgmental ear should be helpful enough.

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While it may seem at times that all of this threatens to ruin your relationship with your parents, I would like to stress that this definitely need not be the case. This is even more true here, where you describe your parents as dedicated and loving.

While your parents may never entirely come to terms with the fact that you are doing certain things that they disapprove of, this doesn't need to define your entire relationship with them. In order to make sure it doesn't, you have to keep the focus on other areas where things are calm, and also seek out ways to give them positive feelings.

There's no need for your parents to gain the impression that you no longer respect them at all, and you should do what you can to avoid them getting that impression. This could mean asking them for advice in non-controversial areas, and then thanking them and telling them how much their advice helped. And it doesn't have to be fake at all. You can genuinely try to engage and show respect in any area that you can.

People often don't realize how many opportunities they have to give their parents the good feelings they deserve, and how they can connect and build the relationship with them. It's a shame when one contentious issue unnecessarily places a strain on everything. Because contentious issues naturally get more attention than areas where things are smoother (especially if your parents see you as defiant of their wishes), you might want to go out of your way to tell them about times when the example they have always set of following Torah guidance even when it's hard gave you the strength to do the right thing, and so forth. You can also share with them things you or your husband have done that they will appreciate hearing but might not notice otherwise.



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For any parent of married children reading this, I would like to stress that I know it's hard to take that step back and let your children find their own way forward in life. This is a tremendous challenge. (For those who aren't aware, I have a weekly column in The Voice of Lakewood on this specific topic.)

While we all know that each of our children is a world in himself and that each one has his own path in life, so much of our effort as parents is invested in ensuring that our children go in "the right path" that it can be very hard to see them choosing something different from what we envisioned. Very often, parents can feel that they have failed if their children don't turn out the way they wanted. It's so important to realize that there are many ways of doing things right, many paths toward becoming an ehrliche Yid, and while we may choose what we feel is right and transmit it, things might be different for our children based on many different factors.

In general I don't like using the expression "pick your battles" regarding children, because we should never see ourselves as in conflict with them, but the underlying idea that we should focus on the more important areas and try to overlook minor issues, is correct. If something isn't critical, it would be such a shame if focusing on it results in losing the relationship entirely. This is true enough of our young children, but once they are married, we also have to take into account the effect it could have on their shalom bayis if we intervene.

If the issue is something where we feel that we simply cannot stand aside, then the first step must, on the parents' side, be to consult a daas Torah to find out whether we may intervene, and if yes, how to do so. Otherwise, we risk doing very grave damage indeed.

May Hashem grant us all guidance that is pure daas Torah, the wisdom and humility to implement it, and shalom in all our relationships.

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