

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

THE BLESSING OF CHILDREN

This week's *parshah* includes the curses pronounced on Klal Yisrael as a consequence of our behavior. These curses are traditionally read by Krias HaTorah very quietly, which is usually understood to be due to the terrible things promised to happen if we do not do *teshuvah*.

Reb Shloime Kshanover *ztz"l*, a *talmid* of the Rebbe R' Meilech of Lizhensk *zy"a*, presents a different way of understanding the curses and why they are read quietly. He explains that hidden deep within the curses are tremendous blessings, and we know that blessings are best kept hidden from human sight. By reading them quietly we are showing that although on a superficial level the curses certainly don't look like blessings, there's something hidden beneath the surface that we are accessing.

Many aspects of our lives seem like immense challenges and even punishments, but in fact, hidden within them lies a golden lining of blessing that takes time and insight to discern. Everyone has opportunities to look beneath the surface and find the golden lining placed there by Hakadosh Baruch Hu and recognize the tremendous blessing just waiting for us.

If we are not careful, there will be times when even though it should be relatively easy to focus on the good, blessings appear like curses. An example is a couple who manage to buy their first home; such a *simchah*! And yet, it's possible to become so overwhelmed by the stress, the mortgage, the renovations, and the moving itself, that all these challenges end up looming larger than the blessing of having one's own home.

Similarly, the blessing of children, the greatest blessing in the world, can be mistaken for a difficult challenge that has to be bravely faced and endured. Certainly raising children can be very challenging, but if we can only maintain the right perspective and keep reminding ourselves that our children are our greatest *brachos*, we will find it so much easier to recognize the great gifts Hashem is constantly showering us with.

This week's essay is generously sponsored by a set of wonderful parents

Rabbi and Mrs. B.
From Lakewood

as a zechus for nachas from their children



Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for all the *chizuk* you provide for so many in the community. The effort you invest in preparing and delivering *shiurim* is something that I and many others deeply appreciate.

I have a question that I would like some advice with, please.

My husband and I married a few years ago, and we had a wonderful *shalom bayis*, with such a good *kesher* between us. We understood each other so well and I can even say that I don't think we ever argued. We were on the same page in virtually every area and had nothing to complain about.

Then, not long ago, we were *baruch Hashem* blessed with a baby, and of course it has made us very happy — and yet, it hasn't been easy to adjust, even now, months later. It's hard to define exactly what happened, but there's a certain tension in the relationship that didn't exist before. We used to be so close and willingly do anything for each other. Now, however, it's become like each one of us is trying to gain advantage over the other.

We have fights over all sorts of "little" things, such as when to bathe the baby, what to dress her in, whether to cover the carriage when we go out... And we no longer care about each other's feelings the way we used to. For instance, if my husband complains about a headache, instead of expressing my concern like I used to, I notice that I'll dismiss it with something like, "Okay, so go lie down for a while and you'll feel better."

I know that we're both tired and a bit frazzled, but I think it's more than just that.

What advice can you give us to get rid of the present friction; and what can we do to return things to the way they once were?

Thank you



As with most challenges couples face, this is definitely within the bounds of "normal" and nothing to be too concerned about. That said, it's still important to assess and when needed address even normal issues to ensure that they don't morph into something bigger and harder to resolve.

It's interesting to note that with some couples, it takes them a while to become comfortable with one another and to share their thoughts and feelings. It is only when they are blessed with a child that they suddenly have so much more in common and find that their relationship matures in ways they couldn't imagine before. Having a child in the picture changes so much, and this is recognized by the Torah as we see in Rashi's commentary on the words spoken by Rochel Imeinu after Yosef was born.

Then there are couples who get married and almost immediately start a family and find themselves thinking, "So soon? We haven't even had time to get to know each other and now all our time is taken up with the baby. When are we going to develop our own relationship?"

The truth is that while there are challenges inherent in any situation, there are also great *brachos* hidden within every challenge, and our job is to look for them, understand them, and appreciate what Hashem is really giving us. Only then can we find the solutions and get direction.

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Before giving practical advice, I'd like to note two points. Your awareness of the underlying tension before it has exploded into open conflict is itself a great blessing. Not noticing issues as they mount allows them to develop into problems that are far more difficult to address. While it isn't all that terrible to have different opinions over when to bathe the baby, you're right that it can be a sign that you're not seeing things as a couple in the way you used to. Recognizing this at an early stage, when it's still relatively simple to deal with, gives you a far better chance to succeed.

It is also admirable that you are seeking out advice rather than waiting for your husband to recognize the issue and do something himself. Almost all problems involve more than one person, even if both aren't equally at fault. And, almost all problems can be solved, partially or even entirely, even if only one person takes the first step toward doing so, by accepting their own part in the situation rather than looking to apportion blame.

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Getting married itself is also a huge responsibility, but when there's a helpless infant to take care of, things can feel very different and weighty. A baby is a huge responsibility and can alter the dynamics of the relationship in ways that a couple may not expect.

All these "little" questions about how to best take care of the baby may be expressions of how seriously you are both approaching raising your child and caring for his *chinuch*, and that's a good thing.

Both of you want to do what's right, and that has inadvertently pitted you against your husband. This is something that happens in many families as children are born and grow up. Inevitably each parent has his own way of looking at a situation and dealing with a challenge. Each one thinks he is right and the other is wrong. Sometimes, deciding whose approach is the right one is all there is to determine. However, there's another "right and wrong" equation that often must be taken into account, and that's the "*chinuch* versus *shalom bayis*" question. Which comes first? Which should be sacrificed for the other? And is it necessary to pick one and lose out on the other?

Parenting decisions, in general, need to be weighed against the other factors that must be considered. Take the example of a boy just starting to learn Gemara. His parents feel that he can take his older brother's Gemara to *cheder* — there are no pages missing and it will serve him just fine. The boy makes a face and protests that he wants a new Gemara — the old one is a bit creased and everyone else has a new *sefer*... The new Gemara costs 20 dollars, and perhaps it's totally unnecessary. But what's the value of a child's enthusiasm for learning Gemara in a *sefer* with crisp new pages? It's important to do the math and figure out whether it's really worth the argument.

Similarly, maybe the baby "should" be bathed in the evening, but your husband is too tired then and wants to give a bath midday, when he comes home from *kollel*. Is it worth fighting over? Maybe, respecting your husband's wishes will end up being "worth more" in the long run when he sees that you are taking his feelings into account. In general, parents often tend to forget that a home with happy parents who aren't fighting is more important to the baby's well-being than the time of day that she gets her bath.

Making good decisions means identifying the different factors and learning to broaden our vision and take all the variables into account.

This doesn't mean that you should always "be *mevater*" and resent doing so. There are more and better ways of making peace than having one side constantly surrender.

In areas where you find it easy to give way, do so — and feel good about it. In areas where you find it hard, by all means discuss it with your husband. As long as the discussion is respectful of everyone's feelings, it can only be productive.

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I would suggest that you address this topic respectfully on a general level. You can start by accepting your role in bringing about the recent tension. You don't have to take 100 percent of the blame, but make sure not to blame your husband. You can say something such as, "I realize that things have become tense between us, and I know that I haven't dealt with it in the best way, and I've become less patient and respectful toward you recently. I really want to improve things."

The next step is to define "things." Leaving the issue as a broad generalization of "trouble" makes it seem too vague to address or resolve. Instead, be specific: "I keep arguing over the best time to go out with the baby and how to dress her, and I'd like to clear this up so that we don't argue like that anymore."

Another thing to be aware of when discussing your different ways of seeing things is that feelings matter more than "facts." It's clear from your letter that you realize this already, but I'd like to stress how very important it is. Both of you must recognize that the underlying issues are things (like feeling disrespected or sidelined), not the actual dispute about when bath time should take place.

Therefore, even if some experienced and expert third party comes along and says, "The right way to do it is having bath-time at six p.m.," the problems won't go away. Your discussions with your husband should therefore be aimed at restoring a sense of respect for each other's feelings. When to bathe the baby is just an irrelevant piece of the puzzle that gives you the clue to the real problem that is buried beneath the surface.

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It's not always easy to introduce such a discussion or to do things the right way — without blaming, generalizing,

or exaggerating. It's also not always easy to be patient and remember that it can take time for you to see significant changes. However, it's very important to recognize even the smallest improvement and appreciate it.

Making changes doesn't come easy to most people. It's often tempting, even when someone makes a small move in the right direction, to say, "Big deal. That's what you call trying to make things better?" Sometimes we're genuinely frustrated and fearful that the other person has no intention of going any further. Sometimes we think that if we appreciate the tiny change made, the other person will stop there and think there's no need to go any further. But the opposite is true. Showing appreciation for even small changes makes it easier for the other person to keep moving in the right direction. Every little change brings a person to a new plateau where they see things differently and sometimes, change can be exponential, starting small but accelerating fast.

Appreciating every effort people make on our behalf is important and productive.

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Discussing challenges usually focuses on what seems negative. But there are also ways to focus on the positive and use the challenges to bring you closer to your husband. You can accustom yourself to appreciate the fact that your husband is deeply involved in looking after the baby and really wants what's best for her. You can express your admiration of this trait, which not all fathers have, and use it to build your respect for him in a way that you couldn't before you had children.

In general, you can use all the new opportunities having a baby provides, to strengthen your *shalom bayis*. For example, you can go shopping for baby clothes together, or go to *kivrei tzaddikim* to daven for your children together. As your baby grows up and your family expands *be'ezras Hashem*, there will be many more things to discuss and share and they can all be used to bring you and your husband closer to one another, and to recognize strengths in one another that you didn't formerly realize were there.



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Children are a tremendous *brachah* — the most tremendous *brachah* in life — and how tragic it is when we don't recognize this, or even see our children solely as challenges to be overcome. Too many couples today have lost their perspective and focus instead on making their lives more easy and comfortable with "family planning." While there are times when Daas Torah will agree that some element of "planning" seems advisable, we have to be very honest with ourselves about where our request for some "time out" is coming from.

After all, one rarely hears of a successful businessman going to his rav and saying, "Kavod Harav, I'm doing so well, my business is expanding, my profits are growing — but it's so hard. Can't I take a break for a few years?" And, if there is such a businessman asking that question, one would assume that he has other, greater priorities for which he wants to take a break and recoup his energies.

What are the greater priorities than investing in our children and building the next generation? If a parent needs a break, it's important to be honest about the goal of that break. If the goal is an easy life, then every challenge will be viewed with tinted glasses, and the tint isn't rose-colored.

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Building a family, bringing new *neshamos* into the world is a tremendous privilege. In today's world, there are many voices "out there" and even within our communities encouraging us to "think of yourself," or "put yourself first." It can be very hard to stand up against such pressure and focus on the true goals we should have in life — but when we learn to do so, we will be able to view challenges in a new light and draw strength from them rather than finding our strength sapped. *Be'ezras Hashem*, when we alter our perspective we will find the guidance and energy to successfully build families of *ehrliche Yidden* and bring true yiddisher *nachas* to Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

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