Rabbi Shimon Gruen

Torah Lessons for the Home

{ Mikeitz 5780 }

Are You Like Pharaoh?

It's All Or Nothing

This *parsha* begins with the Torah's description of the two dreams of Pharaoh. Later on, when Pharaoh relates his dream to Yosef, the Torah records *his* version of the dreams. The *meforshim* point out the various discrepancies between the two versions. We will examine one of these.

When Pharaoh relates how the seven famished cows – corresponding to the seven years of famine – devoured the seven fattened cows; he states (41, 21): "The fattened cows that they had just ingested were not discernable, and the famished cows looked just as bad as they did before they ate the fattened cows".

This whole verse about how nothing remained of the fattened cows is not mentioned in the Torah's version of the dream (ibid., 4). Indeed, now that we know the dream's interpretation, that seven years of famine will follow seven years of plenty; we know that it wasn't true. The seven years of plenty were in fact remembered throughout the years of famine. So the Torah's version is right of course, but where did Pharaoh get his version from?

Perhaps it was Pharaoh's attitude that contributed to his perception of what he saw in his dream. Some people have an all-or-nothing attitude. Everything is either black or white. If anything goes even slightly wrong – ולא נודע כי באו אל קרבנה – their whole day is ruined. If things are not so good now – then it was never good. Yosef taught Pharaoh, that one has to save up from the good times to compensate for the bad times. Things aren't "all bad". You can always find some positivity to bring the smile back into your day.

Half Full Or Completely Empty?

They say that the optimist sees the cup as half full while the pessimist sees it as half empty. I would venture to add the Pharaoh-Man. The Pharaoh-Man looks at a cup and if it's not *completely* full, he says "Hey! The cup is empty!" When Pharaoh Man comes home from yeshiva and doesn't like the supper that his mother prepared,

he says "There's nothing to eat in this house!" When Pharaoh-Woman would like to see some more help from her husband she declares "You *never* help me!"

I would like to add an interesting observation. Most of the time the spouse that "never" does enough, the one who "never" helps out, is actually *more* helpful than the average spouse. In my experience I have seen that those married to Pharaoh Men and Women actually help out more than the average spouse, and they're still not appreciated.

But if your thinking is wired for black-and-white only, that's just how it is. There is more black than white in this world, that's reality. The Mesillas Yesharim says that we can never attain full happiness in this world. So if there's never any true white, what are we left with? It's black all the time! No wonder you're miserable.

But think about it; here you have a woman who has dedicated her life to you. She does so much for you all the time. And because it just happened that she wasn't available exactly when you wanted for exactly what you wanted, is that a reason to tell her "You *never* do anything for me"? Think of how hurtful that is!

Spreading The Black

Another problem with black-and-white thinking is that it spreads. "He always criticizes whatever I do, nothing is good enough, he has an issue with everything!" But what's the truth? The truth is that there is only one area where they have a disagreement. But this Pharaoh Woman just ruined her *whole* marriage because she doesn't know how to see things in full color.

A relationship is broad and complex, with many different shades; it's not a simple black and white woodcut. We have to be able to take a holistic approach. Yes he criticized X, but he praised Y. True she didn't do XYZ, but she *did* XY. If you want your marriage to remain whole, you must learn to look at the *whole* picture. Don't generalize, don't blackenize and don't Pharaohize.

If it's your nature to see things in black and white, own up to it. Apologize to your spouse and tell him that you know it's not true. Admit that it is just the way you talk and you're working on changing it. Don't let your predisposition to Pharaoh thinking, get in the way of having a successful marriage.

Spreading The White

It may be that you want your spouse to improve in a certain area. So there's a way of asking for it respectfully, and hopefully seeing gradual change. But change needs encouragement. In order for your spouse to change, he needs to hear that you see that he's getting better and that you're happy with his work. But a Pharaoh Thinker will never acknowledge any improvement unless it is perfect. That means that you'll never get results! A person deserves a compliment even when he's not perfect. If there's a bit of white, don't look at the black, grab onto that white and make it grow!

You only benefit from complimenting when someone is making progress. The more you compliment, and the more you encourage, the better it will get. You might think that by acknowledging your spouse's progress you're stunting his growth. Now that you've noticed and commented, he might stop improving. But experience

proves just the opposite, by complimenting the progress, you're actually stimulating growth, and the more you give the more you will get.

It's Not Optional

By the way, all of this isn't optional, it's imperative! Sometimes when I speak to black and white thinkers I feel like I have to spell it out in black and white terms: – "If you don't learn to stop being so focused on the negative, you will get divorced. As miserable as your life is, it will get worse". I'm not joking, I'm speaking from experience. I have seen so many people ruin their lives because they were intent on focusing on a bit of black, and blowing it up until it obscured everything else.

Learning to focus on the little bit of white in a situation is not a game. There really is a bit of white, and that bit can save your marriage and your relationship. You have to learn to see the good, appreciate it, and verbalize it. Besides for what it will do for your relationship, it will make *you* into a better person. You're a better person if you don't blame and find fault all the time. You're a better person if you can see the good in people.

Chinuch: Treasure Your Child

Seeing the good in your spouse may not be so easy all the time. Some people hide their good very well. But in a child it's so easy to see the good, there is always something positive to see in a child, so why focus on the negative? People come to me for counseling; they feel like failures, they are not succeeding, their self-esteem is nonexistent, and where did it all start? "My father never saw any good in me", "I was never good enough". You have the power to ruin your children, be careful! If you must mention the negative, be careful to mention the positive as well, make sure that you acknowledge your child's successes and not only his failures.

Some people are careful not to mention only the negative. They mention the positive too, but in a wholly destructive manner. A parent might say "You *daven* very well, but who cares about *davening* when you never *chazer* your *mishnayos*!" So what did this Pharaoh Parent accomplish? Will the child *chazer* his *mishnayos* now? No. but you can be sure that he'll invest less in his *davening*! This is very important for the black-and-white thinker, and for anyone else: Never negate the good, and always be ready to praise the good; the Better will come.

Chanuka: Gradual Growth

Chanuka teaches us this lesson as well. We don't begin with eight candles. We begin with one light, then we add another, and another. You don't have perfection from day one. It's not all eight or nothing. We start off with one candle and slowly but surely we build up until our home is aglow with bright shining lights.



Q&A

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org



Question: I'm tutoring a *bachur* and I was BH very successful with him. When we began he was barely learning anything, and now he is BH at a level where he really understands *gemara*. But that's the problem, I felt like we reached a standstill, like we hit a plateau. In the beginning I was really excited with this *bachur's* progress and I felt like he was really growing, but I don't see it anymore.

Answer: The Baal Shem Tov once said that spiritual growth is only noticeable in the beginning. For example, it might be argued that a first grader learns more than a *beis medrash bachur*, after all the first grader is growing by leaps and bounds, every day he's increasing his knowledge by great amounts. Yesterday he only knew *alef*; today he doubled his knowledge and he knows *beis* as well! But although he's sitting and learning all day long, the *beis medrash bachur* barely grew in his knowledge from yesterday.

In this case, everyone understands that although the growth is no longer noticeable, it's certainly there. Similarly, the Baal Shem Tov explained, once one hits certain levels of *avodah*, there are no longer new exciting revelations every day, but one has to persist in his *avodah* anyway.

It may be that up until now you were being enthusiastic about every small step that "your *bachur*" took. When you began with him, nothing was really expected of him and so every little step he took was cause for excitement and celebration. This in turn encouraged him to continue growing. But it could be that all of the excitement silently turned into expectation. As your charge became better, you slowly stopped being so enthusiastic and began to *expect* growth from him. Now that it's expected, he is no longer feeling encouraged to grow.

Make sure that your *bachur* doesn't feel that he needs to accomplish who knows what in order to make you happy. Let him feel appreciated for who he is *today*, and for what he is doing *right now*. Even if he's not doing as well as he could, even then appreciate where he is holding. You can share your vision and hope for his future, but only after affirming and reaffirming, many times, how great you think he is and how proud of him you are.

You never know what your encouraging words will accomplish, so keep giving them. There sometimes comes a point when educators say, "Ok, we've done enough מקרבו בימין, we've given enough encouragement, now it's time for שמאל דוחה, now it's time to get a little strict". This is so wrong. לעולם תהא שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת (Sanhedrin 107b): you need to *simultaneously* use both hands, you need to be דוחה and מקרב at the same time! You can't say that you tried "unconditional love" and now you'll try "tough love". Unconditional is unconditional, and it goes on no matter what! So remember to continuously encourage your children and students. Hopefully, you'll be zoche to happy positive results.

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