

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHEN TO ACCEPT, WHEN TO ACT

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem repeats his promise to Moshe Rabbeinu, emphasizing that he will redeem the Jewish People from Egyptian slavery: "And I will take you out from beneath the *sivlos* of Mitzrayim." *Sivlos* can be simply understood as suffering — that which is being endured. However, there are other, more direct ways of referring to bondage.

The Rebbe R' Bunim of Peshischa comments on this specific choice of word, explaining its deeper meaning in this context. At the start of the period of slavery, he notes, the hard labor was experienced as unbearable, almost impossible to endure. As time went on, however, the Yidden became accustomed to it to the point that they did feel able to endure it — as the truth is that people are capable of becoming accustomed to almost anything.

Once they do so, however, this indicates that they have become desensitized to the situation and that it is no longer having a distinct impact upon them. When things reached this point in Mitzrayim, the Rebbe R' Bunim writes, Hashem realized that it was time to redeem the Jews as they needed to be shaken out of their despondency before they were lost forever, *chas v'shalom.*

Many situations in life involve suffering that we would prefer to avoid. When avoidance isn't possible, there are two options remaining: trying to solve the problem; and trying to endure the problem. Although many people are convinced that their particular problem is unsolvable and must be endured (or ignored, which comes to the same thing), the truth is that there are no situations in life that are completely impossible to change.

Enduring a problem may seem easier; even though it certainly takes a toll, it demands less thought, creativity, and energy to deal with it. However, enduring difficulties instead of dealing with them has a deadening effect; it dulls our sensitivities and leads us to lose parts of ourselves. Putting up with a situation in which others are active participants can also enable them to continue inflicting damage. Hashem doesn't want us to go through life passively, wasting the opportunities for growth that He sends us. Sometimes He shakes us awake; at other times, He waits for us to wake up ourselves.

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Parshas **Vaeira**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I recently discovered your *shiurim* and truly enjoy listening to them. I am often overwhelmed with feelings when I listen; I can even find myself crying through an entire *shiur*.

I have been married for six years and we have a few children. My husband is an outstanding *talmid chacham* who learns with a *hasmadah* I find hard to comprehend. He is *b"H* very *matzliach* and is also *mentschlich* and likable and everyone holds him in very high esteem. I do everything possible to support him wholly in all his endeavors.

My difficulty is that we do not spend time together. When he is home he is usually listening to his phone. I have gently asked him in the past to try not to be on the phone during supper, but if he puts his phone away he usually reads something instead.

I have expressed to my husband that I feel we need to spend more time together and he listened — as he always does — and was very well meaning — as he always is. But this has not changed the reality. We tried setting aside designated times for conversation but more often than not, it didn't happen. I should add, however, that there are times when he does tell me how much he appreciates me and the support I give him, and how much he loves and values me. I truly treasure his words, and there are times when I do feel very close to him.

The thing is, we do not have much to talk about. My husband is the very opposite of expressive and my attempts at conversation are often met with monosyllabic responses. He genuinely does not need to share. I know that he in no way means to hurt me, and I don't want to hurt him by telling him how much he falls short. This is partly why I don't make more effort to spend quality time with him.

On the other hand, I sometimes see my husband so animated with friends and I feel that I am trying to mourn and accept that perhaps my husband does not particularly need or want specifically my company. I don't take this as a personal offense since I know that other people find me interesting and fun, but there are times when I feel that the whole world except for my husband enjoys spending time with me.

There's also another, unrelated problem which is that my husband gets up very late (after midday). Since I work out of the house, this means that while I'm getting the kids up and ready for school, he's still asleep, even though he must know that it's very hard to cover the morning routine on my own before heading out for a full day of work.

I have told him a few times, including in a letter, how I feel about this, but nothing changed. I even suggested that he get blood tests to see whether there's some medical problem, but he didn't appreciate the suggestion.

Am I supposed to do anything about my husband's sleeping habits or should I just accept that this is the way he is, while hoping that he will change?

I do ask him nicely, and if there's a crisis (such as something breaking, or the kids fighting when I'm in the bathroom), he will get up and deal with things. So I wonder if I should stop being so tolerant? Maybe things won't change unless I stop putting up with them? But maybe this is just what Hashem has sent me to deal with, and if he finds it so hard, I should deal with everything on my own?

Thank you for reading my letter and I look forward so much to hearing your advice.



Not so long ago, at an informal Q & A session following a *shiur*, I was struck by the fact that each person approaching me with a question posed it in a low voice. Some people were carefully looking around them to ensure that no one could overhear. I understood their desire for privacy, but my sense was that they were also ashamed of their questions and the issues they were facing. They seemed to be convinced that they were dealing with something so unique and awful that others would look askance at them if they knew — when the truth is that almost everyone deals with a variation on one of a few key themes, with many people sharing similar issues and difficulties.

The situation described in your letter is quite classic, even if it is nearer to the severe end of the spectrum than others. A great many couples have communication problems; a great many parents struggle with getting up in the morning. And, just as situations are similar, so too are the possible solutions similar, although each person should ideally reach out for personalized guidance on how to implement a solution in their particular case.

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One piece of advice that I can harmlessly give to literally everyone, however, is to focus on the good. It's highly commendable that you do this, repeatedly, in your letter, stressing your husband's good points despite the fact that you are clearly suffering. Too often, people let their suffering cloud their vision and blind them to all their spouse's positive qualities, seeing them only negatively.

The extension of this advice is to not only be aware of your spouse's good points, but also to verbalize your appreciation of them. It could be that you do (you don't make this part clear) — but in general, it is hard to overdo showing appreciation. Almost everyone needs more of it and almost everyone responds positively to it.

One good way of checking whether one gives enough praise is to ask oneself, "If someone asked my husband what I think of him, how would he respond? Would he say that I think the world of him, or would he perhaps say otherwise...?"

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An outshoot of seeing a person as a composite of both good and less desirable points is that one should always compartmentalize issues. Even if a person is acting problematically in several areas, those areas should be dealt with individually rather than blended into one huge problem that can appear overwhelming or even impossible to deal with. It's instructive that when it comes to good qualities, we don't simply lump them into one huge category of "he's basically a nice person" unless we are actively seeking to downplay their strengths.

Compartmentalizing also means that if a particular problem existed in the past but has since been resolved, it should be left in the past and not resurrected, even if it feels "relevant" to what is currently happening. It can be very tempting to stress past problems, if one wishes to make a point or justify a position, but it should be determinedly avoided.

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Now that we've set the scene for viewing the situation from a correct perspective, let's move on to action — because taking action is essential in virtually any situation that is experienced as extremely challenging, and yours does fit that description.

Your situation, like any, is indeed from Hashem, but that doesn't mean that it should be accepted without further thought. Don't downplay your exhaustion and frustration. Remember that just as Hashem sent you the challenges in your marriage, He also sent you the feelings you have about those challenges, not in order to ignore them but in order to act on them and grow from them.

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You describe "gently" asking for changes and mention that although you have taken some steps, you don't tend to follow through, allowing designated times for quality conversation to slip through your fingers. It's understandable, and commendable, that you don't want to hurt your husband's feelings,

but there are always ways to express one's feelings nicely, without attacking or disparaging, choosing a calm moment to raise a topic. If you do that, and it seems you do, there is no reason to fear any type of response from your husband as you will not be guilty of having provoked it. If he is nonetheless hurt by you pointing out how upset you feel when he spends time on his phone that could have been spent with you, that is not necessarily your problem.

What you must do is, very clearly, outline the problem and how you feel about it, and then ask for a particular modification in behavior that you think would solve it. This doesn't include any comment on what type of person he is for acting this way; it's entirely framed as something you find difficult to deal with, something you are asking him to help you with.

It should also be made clear that the modification you're suggesting is just that, a suggestion, and that he is not obligated to do exactly as you set out. You should add that if he has ideas of his own for resolving the problem, you're entirely open to them; you don't want to control him in any way. But it is important to suggest *something* so that it doesn't look like you're bringing up a problem for which he has to come up with a solution.

When you do agree on something, it should be both reasonable and realistic. Not only that: you should be firm about implementing it. If, for example, you arrange that every Tuesday night after the children are in bed, you spend an hour together just talking, or taking a walk, with no phones allowed, and then someone "important" calls just as the hour begins and your husband implores you to let it go for this week, you should not just give up on what you agreed upon unless it genuinely cannot be avoided.

Your husband may not be consciously testing you in the way children tend to instinctively test our boundaries, but because he is so accustomed to doing things a certain way, it's likely that at first, he'll find it very hard to do things differently, and if you are not insistent on the inviolability of this time you spend together, you will soon see it frittered away on trivialities.

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You mention finding it hard to start a conversation, and this is a common problem with couples. In general, one solution that works is to imitate those with whom he seems to enjoy schmoozing and talk about something that interests *him*, which is most likely to get him going. It's true that you don't want to spend all your quality time focused solely on your husband, but view this as a starting point and stepping stone to other topics — and to building his communication skills.

While he has friends with whom he can talk animatedly, these may be conversations on topics that don't interest you especially, or he may be talking "in learning". As a matter of fact, many couples learn together during their quality time and that could be an option for you; if it isn't, you could perhaps still talk about Torah topics, or ask him questions in practical *halachah* that affect you. Start with something that can make him feel good and let him shine.

Conversations that revolve around your children, often of shared interest, might also not seem what you are looking for, but here, too, see them as an entry-point to developing a closer connection with your husband. In general, any topic that you start with should be something that won't make him feel defensive or defective — focus on his strengths and interests, not his weaknesses.

You can, of course, also discuss your job with him, but don't mention your difficulties with the morning routine during time that is set aside for warm and non-threatening discussion. That should happen at a separate time, when you talk about possible solutions to you feeling so overwhelmed.

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I would like to stress that until this point of you reaching out, you have been doing admirably, giving up so much to enable your husband to learn and grow in Torah to the full extent of his capabilities. Feeling that it has become just too much doesn't detract from all that you have achieved, and certainly no one should ever suggest that not reaching out for advice and help earlier was wrong in any way.

Now, however, you've reached a different stage in life even though nothing has outwardly changed. This happens in most marriages; things change, people change, and we are called upon to adapt. Looking at your situation from this new vantage point, it seems possible that if you continue to take on so much, you will be enabling your husband to continue to take on so little, including getting up so late in the day. The lateness you describe truly is

extreme, while getting up at ten o'clock, for instance, is not necessarily *as* problematic, although it could still be extremely disruptive. Another reason for you to confront this issue head-on is that it undoubtedly does affect you. A mother who has no job outside the house might come to an amicable agreement with her husband that she sends the children out to school while he sleeps late and takes care of other things, and that could be just fine for them. For you, it's not fine, and you are fully entitled and possibly obligated to admit that and do something about it.

It's unfortunately true that you are somewhat limited in how far you can simply step back and wait for your husband to step up to the plate, because you have your children to take into consideration. That doesn't mean, however, that you can't suggest an arrangement in which he gets up and helps you send them out to school at least twice a week (as a starting position, if you prefer). You can even stress that on those days, you will be relying on him and that the children will be late to school if he doesn't come through.

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You don't mention it, but since you don't I'm assuming that your husband does fulfill the basic duties of a father and is caring and attentive to their needs, in a general sense. Therefore, when you ask him for more help with them, you should stress that you know how much he already cares and that you are confident that he won't let the family down.

You may be tempted to try to meet him halfway (or even three-quarters of the way), by, for instance, waking him up in the morning on those days when you've arranged that he'll be the one taking care of things. Most often it's best not to. Make it clear that you trust him to do the right thing, and do what you can to show him that you believe in his ability to do more, because of his love for you and his children.

If you can obtain individualized guidance from a rav or mentor, this is ideal, as you may need help in knowing what next step to take in the event that your husband does let you down. You're attempting to change the very model of your marriage that has existed for years, so this is no small undertaking and you do need help in knowing how to implement the advice I can offer.

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This advice is relevant to virtually any relationship, even ones with less problematic aspects. We can all enhance our relationships, by giving more praise and positive feedback, expressing gratitude, and asking for what we need in the right way.

Furthermore, we can and should ask not only for what we need but also for what we would like, even if it's not strictly essential. While many difficulties can be overcome by just one spouse exerting themselves sometimes to a superhuman extent, this risks allowing and even enabling the other spouse to simply wither away and never develop their capabilities and, perhaps more importantly, their sensitivity to others.

You've been doing the best you can and becoming the best you can for many years. Now is the time to give your husband the chance to do and become the best he can, so that your marriage and your family become the best they can, and your home becomes a home for the Shechinah.



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To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

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