

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

HOW TO LOOK BACK; HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

In this week's *parshah*, Yaakov Avinu makes his way to Charan and stops for the night. While asleep he dreams of *malachim* ascending and descending a ladder. When he wakes up, he says in wonder, "Hashem is in this place, and I did not know."

Commenting on these words, the Chemdas Dovid *ztz"l*, a *talmid* of the Kotzker Rebbe *ztz"l*, stresses the importance of each person making a *cheshbon hanefesh* — but only in the right way. We must review our actions each day, recognize where we went wrong and resolve to fix things. However, we must also constantly be on guard against becoming depressed at all the slips and falls. The focus should be on picking ourselves up again and believing that we will do better next time, with effort and determination.

The Chemdas Dovid adds that we shouldn't be deterred even if we don't feel good about our *avodas Hashem*, because in a world of *sheker* we shouldn't expect to feel wonderful even when we do the right thing. We must not feel discouraged and falsely assume that something's wrong even when we analyze our behavior and don't find an issue. In any situation, we should just keep going and doing our best.

Feeling depressed about where we've gone wrong is a problem not just for the individual, but also for all those around them. People often mistakenly believe that their bad moods are their own business and fail to recognize the impact they have on others, especially those closest and dearest to them. If one spouse is moody, whether depressed or frustrated, the other spouse suffers a great deal as a result.

But if you're the one living with a spouse who's depressed due to circumstance and situation, try to be understanding. Recognize that we all have our challenges and that the main thing is looking forward with determination not to fail again. It's only natural to be upset at seeing someone close (a spouse, a child, or a parent) failing, but it's a mistake to take it as a personal affront. We all slip and we all need a helping hand to get up again, along with a smile of encouragement and someone whispering into our ear, "I believe in you."

This week's essay is dedicated in loving memory of

Mr. A. Goldhirsh A"H

ר' אהרן ב"ר אלטר צבי ע"ה

יאה"צ ד' חשון

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

Parshas **Vayetzei**

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband and I have been married for over ten years, and we've had a good *shalom bayis b"H*, with normal ups and downs — until two months ago, when I found out something about my husband. I was going through his phone, which I rarely do, and came across some very, very inappropriate messages between him and a male colleague from work.

I was shocked and so hurt and I confronted my husband. Then, our Rav called me to say that it was the colleague who had been running after my husband, that my husband was the victim, and that I should understand that.

I tried to be a listening ear to my husband after that and he didn't stop talking about it over the next few weeks, but it was all about him and how much he'd suffered and that it had been going on for over a year.

I tried to give him all the support I could and to forgive him, but it wasn't easy, especially as I had no one I could talk to about this, and therefore no support. My husband was empathetic but I felt he didn't take enough responsibility for what happened.

A few weeks later, our Rav told me that we need to move on and that he'd follow up in a few months to see how we were doing. Since then my husband stopped talking about it, but I don't feel that I've moved on at all.

I feel betrayed and violated. I don't know how to deal with the breach of trust, or how to trust him again. No one can guarantee it won't happen again. I feel I was too "nice" to my husband, and that I forgave him too quickly. At first, when I found out, I was angry at that colleague (because of how the story was presented) but now that my head is clearer, my anger has shifted towards my husband.

I won't go into detail about how hard my days and nights are but it's not easy. Am I making a big deal out of nothing? How does one rebuild after such a breach of trust? I want to move on, be happy, and sleep again.

Thank you



A ANSWER

The situation you describe is a painful one. It's understandable that you feel upset and disappointed by what has happened. Anyone would and should be disturbed at the knowledge that someone close to them has made a serious mistake.

You describe feeling betrayed and violated. While your feelings are valid, it's important to acknowledge that as wrong as your husband's actions were, they weren't directed against you. I understand that this realization won't necessarily resolve your feelings, but it's crucial to differentiate between a personal violation and one that is about him and not you. This doesn't detract from the fact that your husband kept something very troubling a secret from you, which is clearly very challenging.

Keeping something secret is not in itself always bad, however. While there are those who advocate for couples to "share everything" and "be totally transparent" etc., I believe that there are times when not everything must or should be shared. Spouses are entitled to an element of privacy in their lives and it shouldn't be assumed that something being kept secret is automatically shameful or wrong.

In this case, it seems that it was *hashgachah pratis* that you found out about what had been happening and possibly it's a good thing you did. I will

point out, however, that generally speaking, going through a spouse's phone or listening in on their phone calls is not a good way to build a relationship. Few of those who demand total transparency would feel comfortable having all their own conversations recorded.

We find in Chazal the concept of not sharing everything with one's spouse, as the Bartenura points out in his explanation of the famous *mishnah*, "*Al tarbeh sichah im ha'ishah.*" Not everything should be shared, as we learn from Korach who told his wife of his dispute with Moshe Rabbeinu, with disastrous consequences. Sometimes, sharing can be destructive to a relationship, and I have personally seen several such cases.

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It's possible that you would feel differently if your husband had come to you and told you what happened of his own accord. Perhaps you wouldn't feel betrayed if he hadn't kept this a secret. Secrecy can be painful — but it's important to be aware that it can also be a very healthy sign, one that tells you that your husband realizes that he did wrong and intends to change.

Bear in mind that a husband who slips and feels ashamed of what happened is less likely to confess. Feeling comfortable enough to share wrong behavior isn't necessarily a sign of closeness. Sometimes, it is the result of justifying the behavior, which then makes it more likely that the person will slip again. Chazal (*Brachos* 12b) teach us that a person who sins and is ashamed of his sin, is forgiven.

Perhaps your husband kept this a secret in order to spare your feelings. Perhaps the furthest thing from his mind was a wish to betray your trust in him.

On a similar note, Rav Yisrael Salanter *ztz"l* would ask what one should do if he harmed another person, for example by talking negatively about him to others, but that person doesn't know about it? Now he feels bad and wants to apologize — but by telling the person what was done and asking for *mechilah*, it will cause him great pain. Who said one's allowed to do that, just for his own peace of mind? Sometimes, people want to "get things off their chest" and feel better about themselves — and fail to take into account that they are causing other people pain in doing so.

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With regard to what your Rav told you about your husband's challenge, I wonder if he was clear enough about what he meant. You understood him to mean that it wasn't your husband's fault — that he was the victim, and therefore that his reactions were at least partially justified. I'm not sure that this was the Rav's intention.

Perhaps what he meant was that your husband went through a challenge just as we all go through challenges. Without justifying the slip, the Rav wanted to stress to you that your husband can pull himself up again and do better in the future — just like anyone else facing a different kind of struggle.

In your case, where you see genuine remorse in your husband, I do believe that there is reason for you to trust him enough to move on and try to put this behind you. If the situation were ongoing, I would perhaps advise you differently. Sometimes one needs to exercise caution and not naïvely assume that things will improve despite the lack of any hopeful sign. But too often, one spouse deliberately holds onto a painful incident and keeps on bringing it up to hold against the other spouse. This is very rarely constructive and can cause a great deal of damage.

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Another thing to bear in mind is that there is still so much about your husband that you don't know. You describe a positive relationship with him lasting for over a decade, and in all likelihood, he has faced many challenges over those years (just as you have), challenges that he overcame and never told you about.

Your husband likely has many positive aspects that you don't know about, aside from those you are familiar with and which have been overshadowed by this situation. That's understandable, but part of moving on involves resetting one's perspective and recognizing that one slip, or even a series of slips, does not define the entire person. Your husband must have many fine qualities if you have had a good *shalom bayis* for so long, and it will be very helpful for you to focus on them and show him that you see his good points and not just his struggles.

As in all relationships, things tend to improve a lot more and a lot faster when we sense that the other person thinks highly of us and believes in us — in our good intentions, in our potential, in our *ehrlichkeit*. Seeking out the good in your husband will benefit both of you.

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As you write, it's hard to do that — to restore the right perspective and move on — without someone to talk to and offer support. You definitely should find someone to share this with, but only as long as you are absolutely clear about what you want to achieve with your sharing.

Too often, people in a situation where they feel wronged set out to become a "licensed" victim. It can feel comforting and empowering to have a tale of victimhood and a self-justifying narrative to hold onto, especially when circumstances seem to have left you

feeling powerless. That "good" feeling about having been wronged is, however, very dangerous. It usually serves only to keep the arguments and resentments alive, and to intensify the tension.

That's not what you want — you describe wanting to rebuild and that's exactly the right frame of mind to have when you seek out someone to provide a listening ear. If you know, for example, that confiding in your mother or sister, or a close friend, will only lead to their shocked expressions of, "How awful!" or, "I would never be able to move on!" and "How could he do such a thing?" then don't choose them to confide in. Find someone who can responsibly empathize but will also help you to move on, with positive feelings and an optimistic outlook.

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Please don't worry that this translates to being "too nice" to your husband, as you write. Seeing the good in him and in your relationship is good for both of you. Holding on to difficult situations will benefit neither.

You also mention forgiveness, and while I understand the feeling behind this, I feel the need to point out something important. Your husband did not directly harm you and he certainly doesn't seem to have intended to hurt you in any way. You don't need to forgive him and he doesn't need your forgiveness. Both of you need to focus on the good in one another as you resolve to make a fresh start.

Moving on doesn't mean forgetting. That would be unrealistic and it's unnecessary. It can include taking any relevant steps to ensure that the future will be better, such as encouraging your husband to have a closer relationship with his Rav (without demanding it or trying to control him). During the course of a peaceful discussion, you can brainstorm together on how to avoid something similar happening again. This can be a unified effort against the challenge, as opposed to a confrontational debate in which you demand that he prove himself to you.

What will likely help the most going forward will be building a stronger relationship of trust where you both do your utmost to be loyal to one another and see the good in each other. Moving on means living in the present and looking forward to the future rather than back to the past. It means being open to the opportunities that the present offers and not negating them because of mistakes once made.

You mention the relative "guilt" in the situation of your husband and the colleague. I don't think it's really important to determine who was more at fault. For you, what matters most is showing your husband that you believe in him and trust him, just as parents should naturally take their children's side, within realistic boundaries.

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As we learn the *parshiyos* of the Avos and Imahos and look into the Torah for guidance, perhaps we can learn from those situations that seem like a "breach of trust" (such as Rochel giving the *simanim* to Leah, and Yaakov disguising himself as Eisav). Maybe one lesson we can learn is that those "breaches" did not define the future relationship or "spoil" anything, going forward.

You describe over ten years of a good and healthy relationship of trust and love with your husband, and there is no need to let this issue, painful as it is, ruin the rest of your lives together. Renew your trust in your husband and let him know that you still believe in him. Trust him again just as you trust yourself even though you have been through your own struggles, and let this situation create an even stronger bond between you.



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