

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

NOT ME OR YOU; US

In this week's *parshah,* we learn about the *brachos* Yaakov Avinu gave to his children, the *shvatim*. Each *brachah* indicates the direction in which they should go, based on their unique characteristics and missions.

Zevulun was given the *brachah* of going out into the world, of engaging in business; Yissachar was given the *brachah* of remaining within the tent of Torah, supported by his brother. But the Chiddushei Harim teaches a fascinating lesson, that these two *brachos* are not mutually exclusive. One need not decide whether to be a Zevulun or a Yissachar. Within the same person, we can be both. All that is needed to achieve this partnership is the determination to channel our *gashmius* pursuits towards *ruchnius* goals. Instead of keeping the material in its realm and treating *gashmius* as something inherently valuable, we need to use it in service of Hashem. This is also what "*yafeh Torah im derech eretz*" means; Torah is beautiful when it is combined with the world, when the world is used to achieve sacred goals. Each person can accomplish this in his own unique way.

In many areas of life, we can feel compelled to make choices. Often it seems like it's one or the other. This way or that way. Me or you. Yissachar or Zevulun. But in almost all cases, there's an option of harmony that's inclusive of two distinct options that may seem contradictory. It may be harder to walk between the lines and cover more bases, but often that's what it takes to be truly successful. The ability to combine individualism and privacy with dedication and relationship is what really defines *shalom bayis,* the third option of two people learning to accept each other and to give to one another without losing themselves.

Mazel Tov to

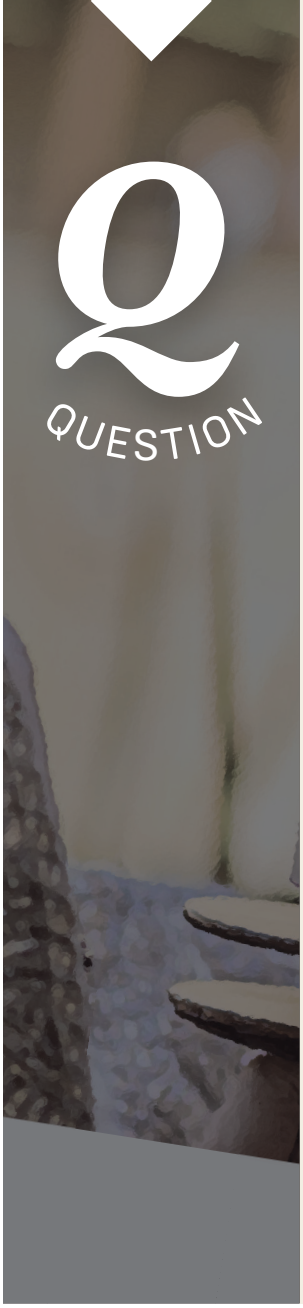
R' Yoel Schlesinger and family

on the Shidduch of their daughter!

May you be Zoche to many Simchos and much Nachas from all your children iyH!!

Parshas **Vayechi**

VOL. 8 | ISSUE 12



Q QUESTION

Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I have this misunderstanding with my wife which I can't think of a better person to ask but you. This situation keeps on coming up in different shapes and forms, so I'll just relay the latest example so you can get the idea.

We want to travel abroad for a family *simchah*, and the only way we can think of to make it work is to ask my adult unmarried sister to move into our apartment for a few days to look after our children. The issue is that she has a full-time job, but I'm a classmate of her boss so I reached out to him to ask him if he would be ok with giving her a few days off and he said that he has to think about it and will get back to us. I've called him a few times since to ask him what he decided but he hasn't picked up the phone or responded to my messages.

Now here comes the difference in opinion: I think it would be rude of me to keep pestering him (and I'd feel it was rude if someone did that to me), but my wife thinks that it's okay to ask again. She's also getting very anxious about our plans, obviously, as we need to book tickets and the prices will only go up, the longer we leave it.

She claims that I care more about my classmate's feelings than I do about hers. Obviously that's not true, but I just think that in this situation, I'd be hurting someone else if I did what she wanted. But my wife says it shows that I don't care about her needs as much as I care about pressuring another person.

I have two questions to ask: First, is it called nagging if I keep phoning him to ask for an answer without waiting for him to respond to my messages? And second, if it is nagging, should I still do it in order not to hurt my wife's feelings?

Thank you!

A ANSWER

Regarding the first question that you and your wife disagree on (whether this is called nagging), it really doesn't make any difference at all what I think — not to you, and not to your wife. Like most debates, it won't resolve itself even if a hundred opinions line up on one side or other of the argument.

More importantly, though, it's not about who is right and who is wrong; it's about your feelings and those of your wife. And since it's about feelings, you can actually both be right. You are right to feel uncomfortable about what you believe to be nagging; your wife is right to feel that you don't care about her sufficiently. Each of you needs to respect the other's feelings regardless of "objective reality," especially as often, there isn't any.

Respecting someone else's feelings isn't always easy when we don't agree, and it's certainly not easy when we misunderstand the concept of respect. You can and should respect your wife's feelings, even if you don't agree with her; and she can and should respect that you feel too uncomfortable to make another call to your friend, even if she believes you are mistaken.

Spouses shouldn't be afraid of disagreements. Husband and wife enter marriage as two individuals and remain two individuals throughout their married life. That's exactly as it should be. The skill is in harmonizing two different perspectives and creating something larger, something very special.

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This can be hard to see for many married adults who have become accustomed to manipulating their spouses with variations on, "If you really cared about me, you would..." Therefore, I'll bring a different example that provokes less defensiveness, one that will be just as familiar to most of us: our children.

How often does a young (or older) child try to get us to do something with a veiled threat? "You don't really love me! If you did, you'd buy me xyz / let me go to abc..." Most parents remain unintimidated when faced with such tactics and don't immediately begin second-guessing themselves, wondering whether they really are a terrible parent for not giving in. They know that their refusal to go along with whatever the child wants has nothing to do with love or lack of it, and so they have the confidence to reply securely: "Of course I love you and want what is best for you, and therefore..."

With a spouse the dynamics are different but the principle is the same: one does not give in to manipulation under the threat of being called "uncaring." Often, it makes even less sense to do so with a spouse, given that the one being threatened could easily turn the tables and demand of the manipulator that *they* be the one to give in "for the sake of peace and love and understanding."

Loving someone and caring about them deeply doesn't mean that we stop loving and caring about ourselves. It can and often does mean that we prioritize the wishes of a spouse because we want to build a relationship, but that should never happen under threat. If it does, the giving in is motivated by fear, not love, and *shalom bayis* is not the result.

Therefore, if anyone ever finds himself in a similar situation, the correct response (regardless of who is "right" or "wrong") is to first acknowledge the difference of opinion and then to gently explain that while you of course do want to make them happy, you feel unable to be flexible in this particular instance. If there were a way for both of you to feel good about the outcome, that would be different, and it would be a shame not to choose that option. But when it's only one of you, and you are being asked to forgo what's important to you and instead only do what's important to someone else, it's different. You should also add that you hope they will understand and will appreciate it so much when they do so.

Make sure to stress that you genuinely respect your spouse's point of view; you can even admit that they may be right (even if you feel they're not). Add that you would love to be able to see things through their eyes and that if you didn't feel so uncomfortable about doing things their way, you'd be delighted to.

It's important to be considerate of others, but just as you respect your spouse's opinion, you should respect your own. Both of you have a right to your feelings and to express them in a reasonable way; and both of you have a right to expect the other to take your feelings seriously.

If your approach is sufficiently calm and confident, you may be able to avoid any protest from your wife. If she does protest, don't allow yourself to be drawn into a debate. Just reiterate that she could be right and that you respect her feelings and that your own feelings on the matter don't permit you to make constant phone calls to

your sister's boss. You can even suggest she make the call herself if that's an option.

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Regarding whether you should ever give in for the sake of your wife's feelings: the answer to this depends on the way they are expressed.

If someone is making open demands of you, it is wrong to allow yourself to be manipulated or controlled, especially as you describe a recurring pattern of this kind of disagreement, not a one-off dispute. If, however, you're being asked, it's a different story. Often, setting aside your preferences in order to build your *shalom bayis* is a tremendous *mitzvah*.

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But don't just assume that you're always confronted with a zero-sum game — either she gets her way or you do. Sometimes, there could be a third way, another option that neither of you have thought of yet.

One such option is slightly bending the truth for *shalom*, which Chazal tell us is something that has its time and place. You could tell your wife that you already called several times (which is the truth), implying that you called a third time, and that you still got no answer... It's definitely a terrible idea to accustom oneself to twisting the truth, but there are times when *shalom* overweighs *emes* and it is just sensible and harmless to do so.



Once this question of "who backs down first" is behind you, it's possible that you'll be able to find a more creative solution. Why not brainstorm together with your wife to find a way forward that will make both of you happy? You may even end up deciding that traveling abroad at this point in time is just too complicated and not worth the trouble of all the necessary arrangements. But whatever you do decide on, make it a joint decision — become allies rather than adversaries.

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Until now, your conflict with your wife has taken the form of a battle, due to the "misunderstandings" you describe, which are really misunderstandings about the nature of *shalom* in marriage. It's often easier to say what *shalom bayis* isn't. Harmony between spouses isn't achieved by one of them allowing himself to be obliterated or dominated by the other. It consists of mutual respect for feelings and opinions and the ability to be humble enough to admit that one might be wrong. It often demands a great deal of patience and willingness to explain yourself without trying to convince someone of how right you are, along with a sense of when to be flexible and when not to bend.

It's often easier to give way and convince oneself that it's in the interests of the relationship, but ultimately, both husband and wife need to learn both how to give and how to take.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: VAYECHI 5786

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