RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Bereishis

Open Communication

HELPFUL CONTRADICTIONS

Parshas Bereishis features the fundamental concept of marriage. "*Lo tov heyos ha'adam levado*", it is not good for man to be alone. Simple. As successful and independent as he thinks he might be, he will not be able to reach his full potential without an *eizer k'negdo*. It is just not good for him.

There are many commentators on the phrase "*eizer k'negdo* - a helpmate against him". It seems contradictory. Is she there to help him or is she there against him? There's a *vort* from the Ishbitzer Zatzal (Mei Hashiloach, Chayei Sarah) in which he expounds on this idea. He writes that if both the husband and the wife would be exactly the same, it would have disastrous outcomes. Suppose both of them were extravagant spenders, the result would be that there would be no money left in the bank. Conversely, if both of them would be stingy, their home would be left lacking the basic necessities. Therefore, Hashem created a couple with opposite natures and tendencies so that there would be a healthy balance in their relationship. Often, a spender husband will be gifted with a money-conscious wife, and vice versa. The same can be found with many other temperaments.

Often people complain when they notice that their spouse is diametrically different from them in ideas or behaviors. They don't realize that precisely this "flaw" will help them achieve their personal greatness. There's a reason why their spouse was created that way. It is to "help them" build a healthy home and become the best person they can be, as they learn from each other. So that's *eizer k'negdo*, she is against him, while helping him at the same time.

Another reason why Hashem gave man a wife, as Rashi explains, was so that he won't think that he is the only thing in existence. When he gets married, he realizes that there is another person whose needs he needs to take into consideration, for his own benefit! He learns to think outside of himself and thus loses his innate selfishness. By means of *k'negdo,* her opposing his will from time to time, she becomes his *eizer* who helps to refine his personality and bring him to the next world.

In summation, even though marriage may involve hard work and sometimes even personal sacrifice, it is impossible for us to reach our maximum potential if we remain all alone, *lo tov heyos ha'adam levado*. Working on our marriage is the biggest favor we can do to our very own selves.

Question:

We have been married for a little over a year and have a great marriage overall B"H. There is one thing that bothers me, and I'm sure it bothers other people as well. It seems like my wife is very closed up into herself. As much as I try to ask her for her opinions or her feelings about things that are important for our day to day living, I feel like I come up against a wall. Worse still, I sometimes find out things about her that she shared with my siblings but never told me.

I would like to hear your advice on this matter.

Answer:

Thank you for reaching out with your question. Here are some points to ponder that might help you better understand your situation and possibly serve as a guide to bettering your situation.

•

I appreciate the fact that even though you find your marriage to be "great" you still want to make it better by addressing this problem. Often, people decide to look past something that is easily fixable, just because everything else is fine. That's a big mistake. Even a great marriage has the potential of becoming greater with a little bit of work, so why not put in the effort and be truly happy?

I will also point out that when you mention that you believe others struggle with this as well, you are taking a huge burden off your heart. So many people think that they are the only ones going through a particular difficulty, and the idea that they are alone in their struggles can be very disheartening. Very many, and probably most problems in marriage are fairly common, and it's a bit of a consolation to know that there are others going through the same thing.

•

As mentioned above, a person might sometimes find their spouse so different than they are, that they assume that something must be wrong with them. For example, a really gregarious, talkative person might think his wife is closed or reticent just because she isn't quite as effusive and animated as he is. Conversely, when a wife constantly feels the need to share her feelings about everything and doesn't see her

husband reciprocating, she might be under the impression that he is a cold, unfeeling person. But that is not necessarily so! It is possible that while two people have very much they can learn from each other, and become better people, there isn't anything remarkably *wrong* with either one of you.

•

The first thing that you should be careful about, in either case, is to never label her or let on that you think she is "closed". Often, when a person feels judged for their behavior or placed into a certain category, it does more harm than good. They might start overexerting themselves to show you that you're wrong in your assumption, placing a strain on the relationship. They might even throw the accusation back at you and tell you that *you* are the one with the problem, turning it into a full-fledged conflict. Alternately, they will try to justify their behaviors by telling you that everyone is like that. None of these responses will be helpful in furthering your quest for marital harmony. Instead of talking about your suspicions or trying to force her to change, be smart in finding a way to remedy the situation.

•

You mention that your wife "seems to be" closed. While I don't know for sure, it's possible that she does share with you, just not in the way that you are used to. If your wife tells you things about her day, what she wants, or what she thought of something, then you can be sure that she isn't closed. She might not share *everything* on her mind, but there might be certain indications in her behavior or speech that let on what she's thinking. It's possible that she still needs to learn how to share more of herself with you, but it doesn't mean that she is a "closed" person. If you're smart, you might be able to hear the things she says, even when she doesn't actually say them. However, I will take your letter at face value and answer your question as if you are right and she really is exceptionally reserved.

•

When my clients tell me about an issue they have with their spouses, I often ask them, "Do others have that problem with her, too?" The answer to this question grants me insight into the nature of the matter at hand. With you, it does not seem like your wife has this problem with everyone. After all, your siblings know things about her that you don't. Perhaps there is something about the way you ask her questions or respond to her words that is putting her off?

If she wouldn't be talking to *anyone*, then you would know that there is a real problem. But the fact that she speaks to other people might just mean that you have to step up your own communication skills.

Could it be that she feels put on the spot or interrogated when you question her? Maybe your siblings are more accepting of her views? Maybe she thinks you are contradicting her every word? Maybe you don't have the patience to sit there and listen to her get to her point, and she feels like she's wasting your time? While I assume none of these are necessarily relevant to an extreme, it's worthwhile to consider if any are relevant, or if she at least may think so, or more than one, and that alone might give some direction as to how to change things.

•

It's also important to give someone the space they need before getting information from them. For example, instead of bombarding her with questions, try opening up a discussion and let it progress on its own. See where it goes. You never know what information might come up over the course of an open and unrushed conversation.

In this week's Parsha alone, we see several demonstrations of how productive conversation works. The Nachash didn't just pounce onto Chava and start harassing her to sin. He chatted her up. He sweet talked her

into defying the Heavenly order. Even Hashem Himself didn't immediately reprimand Adam after he joined his wife in tasting the forbidden fruit. Hashem first asked him where he was and why he was hiding. The same thing happened after Kayin killed his brother Hevel. Hashem didn't immediately accuse him of wrongdoing. Instead, Hashem asked him, "Where's your brother?" Once you have your subject's interest and you pull them into a conversation, only then can you continue to move on to the topics that you would like to discuss. Sometimes the only way to get there is the roundabout way.

•

Another important thing to remember is that when you do hear something about your wife from a third party, use the information wisely. Don't use it against her by pretending you don't know while you wait for her to tell you herself, or worse, using it against her with a complaint about her not sharing enough. Use it for her benefit.

Suppose you find out that she would like to get a specific gift or go somewhere on vacation, "surprise" her with exactly the thing she really wants! When she sees how much you care for her, that might serve as an opening for her to become more trusting of you, and feeling comfortable being more open and vulnerable with you.

The same can be said when she's upset. Don't wait for her to come out and say that she's angry. Don't pretend that all is fine and dandy just because she didn't actually tell you that something is wrong. Address the issue on your own to the best of your ability.

•

Although you can't really force anyone to tell you things, you can still let your wife know that you would so appreciate it if she'd share with you more. Don't say it as a complaint, but maybe if you start that conversation about how much it would mean to you, you will hear from her what it is that's preventing her from telling you things. Maybe she does want to share with you, but on her terms.

•

Please bear in mind that often it is not about you. If you try to improve your communication and listening skills and you still don't see a change, it might just be about her and her perceptions. By taking it personally, it will only make matters worse. Wait it out patiently, give it some time. Change doesn't happen overnight. Show her how much you care and want to hear what she has to say, and eventually – with time and Siyata Dishmaya – she will come around.

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