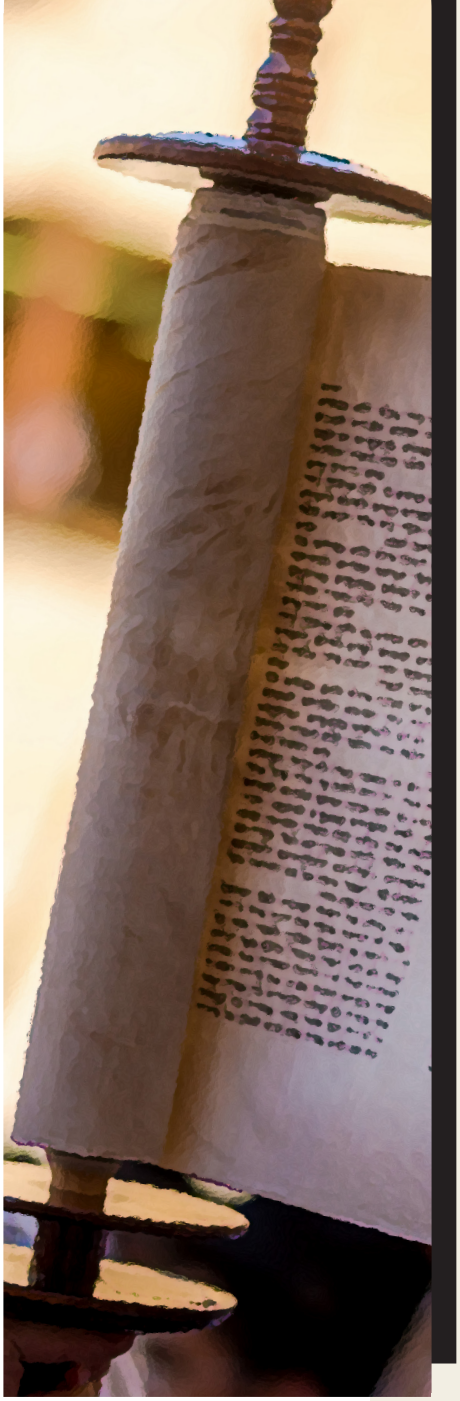


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

REWARD AND (SELF-INFLICTED) PUNISHMENT

Some people delight in *avodas Hashem* and experience a taste of Gan Eden with every word of Torah learned, with every *mitzvah* performed. Others (like most of us) find *avodas Hashem* a struggle, at least some of the time. The Bnei Yissaschar calls these two types of *avodas Hashem* "*avodas massa*" and "*avodas matanah*" — service of Hashem that is experienced as a burden, and service of Hashem that is experienced as a gift and a privilege. We see an example of the latter in this week's *parshah*, where Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu, "I have given your *kehunah* the *avodah* as a gift..."

Detaching from the physical world to the degree that *avodas Hashem* involves no effort, only pleasure, is something that very few people can do. The *tzaddik* the Rebbe R' Zusha said of himself that he only expected to be rewarded for his younger years, when serving Hashem was still a struggle. Each of us defines struggle differently, but it's clear that as the struggle intensifies, so does the reward increase.

This concept can be hard to apply to our relationships. Rarely do we feel that the relationship is itself the reward and that we don't want or need anything in return for what we invest. It would be unrealistic to demand that someone feel so close to their spouse that they feel wonderful just from giving. In any case, a one-sided relationship in which one spouse does all the giving and the other, all the taking, is very far from the ideal.

Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that we give *in order to* receive. We can give wholeheartedly without doing it just for the return. Rabbi Avigdor Miller would often advise married people to, occasionally, do something for their spouse in secret, without telling them about it — something that they won't even find out about. When done often, this can genuinely shift our mindset and transform a self-centered partnership into an other-centered marriage. And doing so can be not only for our spouses, but for Hashem too, thereby serving Hashem as we improve our marriage.

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Parshas **Korach**

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Introduction

This week, I'd like to discuss some of the feedback I receive from various readers and listeners on different classes and articles. It seems that while many people find it easy to relate to the advice I give on issues that don't touch their own lives, when the advice comes up against the cold reality of their own situation, suddenly it's, "I don't agree with that," or, "Excellent advice — but it's not practical", or simply, "Yeah, but it won't work in *my* marriage."

Sometimes, they're right. Perhaps the advice really isn't suited to them, because of the particular dynamics of their situation that I'm not privy to. Maybe one-on-one counseling would help them apply the ideas to their situation, something I can't do in a public forum. And sometimes they may simply be running away from facing up to painful or challenging realities. Changing the habits of years, decades, or a lifetime is incredibly hard, and it's understandable that people resist acknowledging what has to be done. But it's not impossible. If I can help people to make even a small positive change in their lives, then I am grateful for the privilege of doing so.

1.

Thank you for all your *shiurim*, which are offered free of charge, and with such clear advice. I'd like to ask you about a bit of a sensitive topic if that's okay.

My oldest child is almost at the age of *shidduchim*, and I find myself feeling traumatized at the thought of it, because there's still so much that I haven't figured out for myself in my marriage, in the area of marital relations. As a *kallah*, I was taught virtually nothing and I didn't glean much more over the years. Sometimes I feel ashamed at having done or wanted to do things that aren't allowed.

My husband's not the type to feel comfortable asking a rav about these things, and I believe that people should be given the information on what's okay and what's not, without being made to feel uncomfortable.

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[from another writer:]

I'd like to ask you about the area of intimate relations, as it's never really spoken about in detail. I feel that this is desperately needed in today's times — in fact, I think probably 95 percent of frum Jews use the internet to access information in this area. I wish you would give *shiurim* on this topic and respond via email to people's questions in this area. Only you can do this!

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[and yet another:]

I listened to your *shiur* about marital relations with awe. Let me explain: I'm one of those women you spoke about who belong to an online forum on these issues. Once, I read something there and it prompted me to ask my husband to ask a *she'ilah* on a certain matter, and after a long conversation with a rav, my husband realized that he had never really fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *onah* properly.

Things really improved after that (after quite a few years of marriage), and one the one hand, I was happy about this, but on the other hand, it made me resentful of a system that cheated me out of this knowledge for so long, to the point that I had to go and seek it out in non-kosher places. I wish I'd got the information from a kosher source!

You mentioned in your *shiur* that "eventually, almost every couple gets it." Well — we didn't! And I always thought of myself as a well-informed person. It didn't help. I mentioned to the rav that I was bothered that neither my husband nor I was told about this and his response was: "It's a painful *parshah*." Why should it be this way?

Response

I frequently answer questions in this area from married men whom I counsel one-on-one. Most people are asking questions that have been asked by thousands of men before them. If so, why not answer the questions in a public forum, one might ask?

First of all, I have no wish to become a specialist on issues that would turn me into a "controversial" figure, especially as I have many ideas on all areas of *shalom bayis* and *chinuch* that I want to share with people and don't want to confine myself to a single issue.

Secondly, I believe that there are good reasons for only addressing questions in this area on an individual and personal basis. While the anonymity of email is very appealing to a lot of people, it's precisely that anonymity that can cause problems to arise. In order to respond to someone's question appropriately, it's often necessary to know more about them than an email will reveal. And even when the question requires only a straightforward "yes" or "no," replying over email is in itself inappropriate, because one never knows who is hiding behind that email address. It could be someone who is seeking information for the wrong reasons, or, worse, someone who will distort or disseminate the answer.

When someone is looking for clarity, they need to ask someone who is qualified to provide the information. That means not only refraining from consulting "Google" but also refraining from posing questions to whoever is willing to answer over email, because that's how you feel comfortable asking. Yes, it can be embarrassing to ask these questions. That's normal and actually commendable, as we are supposed to be modest in this area and deal with these issues with sensitivity and only in private. But, just as we overcome our reticence and seek out professional advice when it comes to medical matters, so too (*lehavdil*) should we overcome our embarrassment and seek out halachic and hashkafic advice in any area which is so fundamental to a Torah marriage.

Furthermore, by stepping into online cesspits, people are exposed to ideas that they end up wishing they had never heard about. Just as we don't trust our health to quack doctors who offer to give advice in secrecy, we should not trust our spiritual health to those who offer anonymity in exchange for the sanctity of our marriages. And, just because those cesspits exist doesn't mean that *rabbanim* and *madrichim* should compete with them. When assessing the larger picture and the success rates of marriages in general, it becomes obvious that we have nothing to feel intimidated about from the secular world and their marriages.

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Many people have complaints about how they were taught (or rather, what they weren't taught) before they got married. It's important to note that there are various valid approaches and opinions about this and just because someone thinks differently doesn't mean that the way he or she was taught is wrong. Furthermore, it's often impossible to know, before marriage, which approach suits which person.

Getting things right in this area is of course very important. But the question of what is right for a particular person or couple within the general category of right isn't always clear. This is why each person needs to reach out and obtain the information they need from the right source.

Sometimes, people complain that lack of information in this area contributes to (or even is the main cause of) *shalom bayis* problems. This would make sense if the divorce rate in the modern world, where all information is public knowledge and easily accessible, wasn't staggering. Without emotional connection, physical intimacy is a travesty of what Torah marriage is all about. No amount of information is going to address that.

So, please reach out to someone you trust, and don't let any shame get in your way, and with the proper sensitivity to these matters, you'll get the advice you need.

2.

Thank you so much for an outstanding *shiur* on not being a victim and the *Mishpacha* article you referred to. I totally agree that playing the victim isn't helpful to anyone, and that each person should see what he or she can do to improve their marriage.

That said, can you give some practical ideas on how spouses who are emotionally disconnected can somehow build a closer relationship? I am way past victimhood or vindictiveness in my marriage. I'm totally at peace with how Hashem orchestrated my marriage and my life. I know that in theory, when one spouse reaches out, the other should respond appropriately, and that's your position, the idealistic

one. I just feel that the realistic position that you object to in the article in *Mishpacha* speaks to me in a way that your ideas don't. The article addresses what happens in a sad, dysfunctional marriage, where one spouse just loses all interest after years of disconnect. I don't feel it's helpful to tell a person in such a situation, "Just stop being a victim." It's like telling a depressed person to just stop being depressed.

I wish I'd read that article years ago, as it would have spared me so much heartache. While bad behavior is always bad, I don't understand why you're shooting the mailman. Why would a wife show such an article to her husband in the first place? Why shouldn't she feel validated after years of trying and not seeing anything improve? Do you really think people can just shut their eyes to years of pain and move on with no reference to so many hurtful things that have happened?

(P.S. Was it my husband who asked the question about the article? It would be a weird coincidence if it wasn't.)

Response

It actually wasn't your husband who wrote to me about the article published in *Mishpacha* magazine. Many people did write, however, which just made me more convinced than I already was that such articles cause more harm than good.

The article was about a woman who claimed, after years of marriage, to be unable to forgive her husband for many things that had happened (or failed to happen) over the years, to the point that she feels no emotional connection with him. She was then validated in her position by the writer of the column who agreed that in such cases, the husband should not expect his wife to be able to move past the past.

You write that you would have been better off having read this article earlier. I really can't understand what you would have gained. An article promoting the weaponization of pain is extremely problematic. I hope so very much that people who want help find advice that improves their relationships and doesn't drag them into despair and worse.

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Being in such a situation is incredibly painful and I truly feel for anyone who feels burned out and exhausted after investing in a relationship for so many years with very little or nothing to show for it. Yes, telling someone to not feel burned out is as ridiculous as telling someone not to be depressed. People feel what they feel, and still their feelings cannot serve to justify wrong behavior (as you write: wrong is wrong). Advice that gives a stamp of approval to cold-heartedness and tells a person to give up and distance themselves is advice that helps no one.

Going back to your own example of depression, imagine a depressed wife telling her husband, "You have to work extra hard to earn my loyalty and devotion, because I'm depressed." As Torah Yidden, we are expected to overcome any difficulties we have (no matter how justified) and behave correctly. It's hard to change how you feel, but feeling like a victim isn't an excuse for not investing in your marriage.

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When someone asks for advice about a marriage that is going through a rocky period, it's wrong to label one spouse the victim and the other, the perpetrator. Life is rarely as simple as that, and therapists who simple-mindedly accept one spouse's assessment as an accurate picture of the situation are not doing anyone any favors. Additionally, it's actually quite common for the more problematic spouse to pinpoint the other as the perpetrator, because their vision is more clouded and they are more likely to engage in the blame-game. Just because the other spouse refuses to be dragged into the argument over who is more guilty doesn't mean that they are the one making the problems. It could be (and often is) the other way around, as they are the one who wants to keep investing rather than acting like a prosecutor, judge, and jury rolled into one.

To avoid this dynamic, when meeting a husband seeking help I simply focus on the person in front of me and tell them what they can do rather than mirroring back all the things their spouse is supposedly doing wrong. I've yet to come across a case where the person looking for help doesn't have options they can try — that is, if people are willing to put in the work.

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To clarify: I'm not denying your suffering. The main question now is whether you are willing to try and set aside that suffering and move forward, after what sounds like years of having adopted the suffering as part of your identity, hiding behind it, and using it as a crutch.

It's a tremendous shame when people become one with their justified victimhood and refuse to consider new approaches toward a better future, all because of

the weight of baggage that they won't release. I don't want it to sound like I am making light of the challenge of dropping baggage. It's incredibly hard to do. People don't generally make a conscious choice to become a victim as their core identity. But once they have slipped into such a mode, it can feel like stripping off armor to leave the baggage behind.

It might mean finding new methods of communication that you haven't tried. It will mean dropping all use of statements that include, "You always..." or "Yet again you're..." or "Why can't you ever..." It also, critically, means being humble enough to turn it around on yourself and ask what you have perhaps "always" or "never" been doing that has contributed to where you are right now. Without that humility, you won't be able to forgive and turn the page.

No matter how right you are, it's a waste to not acknowledge how much happiness you can create in your life, despite the challenges, if you just dare to say (even to yourself!): "Until now, we both made mistakes. It's been terrible and I feel so awful about it. Let's start again." You don't even need to wait for your husband to share the responsibility. You can do this on your own.

As I noted, I've yet to come across a marriage where literally nothing can be done to improve things. What's stopping people from doing just one, small thing differently? Only their thoughts, their beliefs, and their fears about who they will be without the huge suitcase of pain they are lugging around with them.

3.

Thank you very much for an amazing article on not blaming a spouse for your own unhappiness. It resonated so much with me, and you really opened my eyes to the fact that my husband may be as unhappy as I am, though he's suffering in a different way.

However, my situation goes beyond what you were discussing. When I got married, I was determined to make my marriage work and help my husband shine. His *middos* were so terrible at the beginning, to the point that I thought he had a psychological disorder (it appears not, but he had serious childhood issues).

Hashem blessed me with the ability to bear this challenge and gave me the wisdom to work with it, and in fact both of us worked so hard, for the past few decades, and we moved mountains.

My husband came to accept my openness to the world while I helped him resolve his emotional issues, and we both worked with affection, tolerance, respect, unconditional love, patience, humor... to the point that anyone looking from the outside would never realize how much I'm still hurting inside.

My husband is today a respected person, totally transformed from the person he once was — people saw him as very problematic and never believed he'd make a success of marriage and fatherhood. He also adores me and would do anything to please me. I'm not saying that to promote myself, but just to show how hard I've tried to make things work.

In theory, I should have the happiest marriage but I feel miserable. The huge lack of physical attraction and emotional connection is pushing me further and further away from him. I know I am very difficult to please — but only where my husband is concerned. My biggest heartache comes from the fact that I could be so satisfied by another man with just a bit more compatibility.

Please don't judge me for this. I have kept my marriage kosher but my husband's behavior and in fact his whole being pushes me to observe other men and the way they behave. We've discussed this so many times but nothing works on my side, while he only loves me more (and I see him as nothing more than a friend). He just doesn't know how to love me.

The frustration is huge and nothing further can be done about it. The connection is not broken, it's simply not there. I utterly hate everything he does and says when it comes to personal matters. It's not his fault, I just find his personality totally incompatible with mine. The more he tries, the more I get irritated because what I need from him is not him. I can't force him to be someone he is not. Firstly because this is ethically wrong and secondly because it just won't work.

If I didn't have children, I would have divorced him but I want to put my children's needs first. I hope I

will be able to resist and hold on to life until 120.

Anyway, I do want to stress that I'm sure your ideas will help hundreds of couples with more superficial issues. Thank you.

Response

This is a painful situation, and I really feel for you. I also feel the pain of the many people who reach out to me with other serious problems, where they feel so very stuck in their lives, certain that while for others, there is advice that can help, for them, there is just no solution.

This is a very normal response to being presented with a general set of suggestions and ideas. Often, unless advice is tailor-made for you, it may feel alien and impossible to implement. Even people who give effective advice to others may feel that for them, "nothing works." Often, they give up and don't even try, simply dismissing the suggestions of well-meaning people and feeling that, "They just don't get it."

Maybe they don't. We can't ever really "get" anyone. If only we could "get" ourselves.

The million-dollar question is then whether we should give up, when perfection is out of reach. That sounds like an extreme way to present the dilemma, but as I mentioned earlier, I have yet to encounter a situation that couldn't be improved at all. So, is an improvement of one percent not worth anything? You already decided that you're not going to seek a divorce, so what do you have to lose by doing what you can to make your load just a little lighter?

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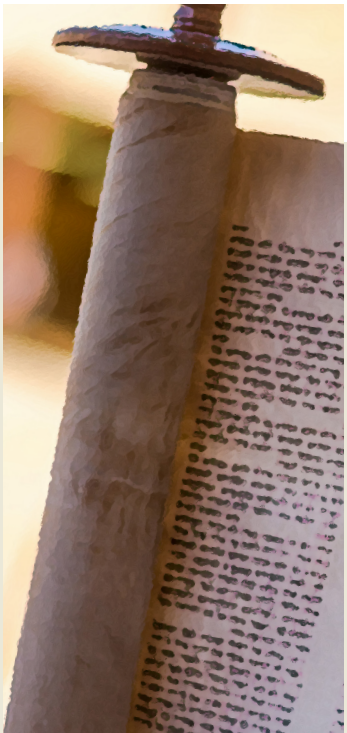
You write that you are very difficult to please. It's commendable that you recognize that in yourself. Using that level of honesty, try to find even just one small thing that your husband could do to make you a little bit happier. It might be just a drop in the ocean compared to what you need or want. But it is still a drop. It's not nothing.

I would also really urge you to take the word "divorce" out of your lexicon. It's not doing you any favors. If you really do want a divorce, go ahead. It's not forbidden — in fact, the Torah introduced the concept. But if you don't want a divorce, erase the word and move on.

Moving on means acceptance, which you seem to realize. Accepting reality is always the first step, especially in a life of *emunah*, where fighting reality is essentially fighting Hashem's plan. But it's a huge step to take, and while many people convince themselves that they have accepted their lot in life, all they really did was give up on improvement (while they continue to simmer with resentment).

Parents of a special-needs child sometimes master acceptance, recognizing the limitations of the child, not necessarily being happy about them, and yet setting that feeling aside in order to focus on the blessings (as well as what can be done in a healthy way). That can be harder to achieve when the limitations aren't as easy to comprehend, and when, at the back of our minds, we still think, "If he really wanted to" or "If I could only get through to him," things would change.

It's not so simple. We can't make anyone else change. We can only change ourselves and ask, kindly and gently and respectfully, for other people to do small things that are feasible for them. But changing ourselves can affect the whole picture, so much more than we realize.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: KORACH 5784

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**

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