Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Netzavim |

Keeping Secrets

Hidden and Revealed

In Parshas Nitzavim the Torah tells us הנסתרת להשם אלוקינו והנגלת לנו ולבנינו, *What is hidden is for Hashem, and what is revealed is for us and our children*. While there are many important matters this *possuk* teaches us, there is something we can learn from this *possuk* about our *shalom bayis*.

The topic that I would like to touch upon is very sensitive, even a bit controversial. So I want to clarify that I am not stating anything as fact, everyone should follow their own *da'as torah*. All of what I share is focused on relationships, and my observations into what makes them work. If something I say can help you, even if it's not exactly what you wanted to hear, please consider it.

We've discussed boundaries in the past. In my book, I elaborate on the idea that there should be 'mine', 'yours', and 'ours' in a relationship. In short, when something belongs to me, I should be in control, and when it's yours, I should let you control it. We should both have an equal say on the things that belong to both of us. We've also discussed giving your spouse room, not smothering them or being on top of them. Letting each person have their space, makes everyone happier and function better.

One or Two

The underlying principle here, is a common mistake; thinking that because you're married you're like one person. I actually discussed this at length in a class titled 'Ten Mistakes People Make In Marriage'. Certainly, a husband and wife are one as a couple, and they share many things that make them a team. But how far does it go?

People make the mistake of going too extreme on either side. On the one hand, a couple does become one entity. They should never see themselves as just two roommates, that would be a terrible interpretation of marriage. On the other hand, they're not actually one to the point that they can't have anything separate from each other. It would be ridiculous for a husband to say, "how could my wife like a flavor of ice cream that I don't approve of?". They are one entity made up of two individuals, and they have to respect that individuality.

Not allowing someone to have their own private space suffocates them and takes away their individuality. The truth is that most often when this happens it is one-sided, with one spouse not allowing the other his privacy, while zealously guarding her own privacy. Which means that instead of you and me being one, it's really you and me being me! Regardless of that, though, thinking that marriage means losing one's individuality is a big mistake.

People's Right to Privacy

This is also relevant to privacy. As an individual, I have a right to my privacy. If I have something in my pocket, it's mine. I don't expect anyone to go through my pockets. This privacy is allowed, and should be brought into the marriage. If getting married, means that I lose all privacy, then something is wrong.

People don't like to hear this, they want 'transparency', but in fact it is very rare to find someone who doesn't mind sharing *everything* with their spouse. Sometimes I ask clients if it's okay to share everything we talked about with their wives. Most people will immediately say no. Others want to at least review what was said first.

Sometimes it's even people who are complaining specifically about their wife not being open with them. But are *they* okay with everything being shared? As an individual you have a right to talk to someone privately, and you're allowed to keep things to yourself. If you come home, and your wife wants to know what you discussed, you should be polite, but you don't have to share *everything*.

There are some things that are open, נגלות לנו ולבנינו, for everyone to know. And then there are נסתרות, the things that I don't want to share. For example, private communications with other people, texts, whatsapps and emails. Sometimes you're just not comfortable sharing that with someone else, *even your spouse.*

Hidden Secrets

There is a fine line between not sharing and keeping secrets. Keeping a secret means that there's something to hide, which is a problem. But do you have to share everything? It's important to have that healthy boundary. Even regarding an envelope that comes in the mail, if it does not have your name on it, the Cherem D'Rabbeinu Gershom says that you're not allowed to open it. It applies to married couples too. Why not?

It must be clear that this right to privacy doesn't give you the right to do whatever you want, including things that are inappropriate. Just as an example, even though people get dressed and undressed behind a closed and locked door, that doesn't mean that they can do it however they want. There are *halachos* in Shulchan Aruch about how everything needs to be done, and in which order.

Sometimes people feel, "He's my husband, I have to be responsible for what he's doing", or "She's my wife, I have to be on top of her". Is that true? Is it your responsibility to check on your husband or wife all the time?! You have to realize that there's something about letting someone live and make their own choices, and part of that is that they're entitled to their own privacy. If someone has a cabinet where they keep certain things they are entitled to lock it secure in the knowledge that no one will touch it.

Not a Red Flag

A husband's or wife's desire for privacy is sometimes misinterpreted as a sign that something is wrong. "If you're not sharing something with me, you must be hiding something. And if you're hiding things, I'm not comfortable", and so on. It's very important to understand that the fact that someone wants to keep something private doesn't mean that there is a problem. If you're worried, maybe discuss it with a trusted adviser, but don't jump to accuse your spouse.

If you really suspect that someone is doing something questionable, get guidance, ask a Rov or a mentor what to do, but don't make a federal case out of it. Don't say "He's not being completely open". That's not the problem. He doesn't have to share everything; the problem here is only the question of doing something wrong.

A Locked Smartphone

It's wrong when a spouse insists on always knowing where the other one is or who they're talking to. If they're aren't comfortable telling you exactly what they're doing, maybe think about that. Why doesn't your spouse want to tell you what's happening? He may be doing something that you don't approve of and he knows that you'll get upset. But, does he always have to do only what you like? So it comes back to the healthy boundaries of allowing someone to have their privacy and their space as long as you don't have any real reason to suspect them of doing anything wrong.

What about if a spouse has a phone that's locked and you're not comfortable with that? That should be dealt with, and maybe

it's an *eitzah* that someone else could have the code, or you can set up some type of accountability system. Yes, if someone isn't accountable they can end up doing wrong things, but it's not an issue in your marriage that your wife doesn't enjoy when you go through her texts, she's right, you probably wouldn't appreciate it the other way around either.

This shouldn't be taken to the extreme on either side. Saying that nothing should be hidden is wrong, but at the same time you can't hide everything either. Where do you draw the line? You have to use your common sense, and recognize that people are entitled to some privacy. Let people have their secrets, unless there's actually a question of something inappropriate.

Chinuch: Privacy for Children

How often do parents assume that they have to know everything that is going on in their child's life, and that he should realize that. They demand that he should tell them everything that's going on, and they go through his pockets at night.

They don't realize the effect this has on a child Knowing that his parents are looking through his stuff, and that he can't do anything without being asked a million questions is very disconcerting. By forcing him to tell you everywhere he goes, what he does, and unlocking something he's closed, you are literally coercing him to find new ways to hide things from you.

If you want to check his things once in a while when he's not there, you can discuss that with someone to find out the guidelines, (and how concerned you should be). But don't think that letting your child know that there is no privacy will help you; it will probably work against you. As a matter of fact, there's something very positive about showing a child that you trust him and respect his privacy. And if *chas veshalom* there's some type of problem, then you'll deal with it.

-Q&A-

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

Question: My wife goes to *simchas* on her side, but on my side she only goes if she feels comfortable. A *simcha* is coming up, and my wife is already talking about not going. My mother is very upset about that. What should I do?

Answer: This is a question that comes up all the time on both sides. and needs to be dealt with case by case. First of all, let's discuss this regarding your mother getting upset. How often do we make the mistake of trying to please others at the expense of our spouse and our *shalom bayis*. Of course it's important to try to make your parents happy, but if it's at the expense of your wife, who says you have to do that?

If it does mean something to *you*, mentioning your mother will only complicate things. Just express how much it means to you if she will come to the *simcha.* Even if your spouse doesn't appreciate that, you're certainly allowed to express how you feel about it. In addition, letting them know that they don't have to go, might actually make it easier for them to agree to go.

Let's just point out something that happens often, even though in this case, it doesn't seem to be the situation. Don't make it black and white, "My husband always leaves *simchas* early" or "My wife never goes to *simchas* on my side". That's usually taking it out of proportion. It's important to understand that everyone has their own way of doing things, and to let people live and have their individuality. Remember, you're not looking to be on exactly the same page, you're just looking to respect and understand each other, and to avoid causing anyone pain.

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