RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS BO

BUILDING WITH SENSITIVITY

In Parshas Bo, we learn about the blossoming relationship between Hashem and Klal Yisroel. When they leave Mitzrayim and are finally free to serve Hashem, Klal Yisroel begins to learn how to relate to Him. This time period in our history teaches us many lessons which we can apply to our relationships.

We were commanded to eat Matzos when we left Mitzrayim. However we note that Matzoh was the Lechem Oni which we were already eating in Mitzrayim. Why would Hashem give us a Mitzvah to do something we were already doing anyway?

The first rebbe of Sadigur teaches a beautiful lesson from this. He explains that Hashem wanted to forge a connection with Klal Yisroel. Hashem wants it to be easy for us to fulfill His wishes. The start of our relationship was something that would have happened anyway, so that we'd begin on a positive note.

People often get stuck. "I asked my husband to do this." "My wife won't do that." "He only does things that aren't important to me, or things that he wants to do." Often, as much as that's not what you're looking for, the place to build the relationship is through the things that are happening anyway.

Hashem started off with a nation devoid of mitzvos. He didn't ask us to prove ourselves with something difficult. Hashem asked us to do something we would have done regardless. This showed us that Hashem wanted us and proved that we'd be able to provide our part of the relationship. "Look, we're not eating chametz." Once we acknowledged our abilities, it became easier to continue to perform and develop the connection.

If you know your wife is making grilled chicken for supper, you can mention that you're 'so in the mood of grilled chicken.' She was going to do it anyway. But now she's a winner because she's doing what her husband wants. But if you ask her to do something else, something that she was not planning to do, it can become an issue.

Starting with something simple and inevitable gives you the opportunity to show that you're not afraid to ask for your needs, but then also the opportunity to show appreciation and build on that. It just makes it easier for everyone when you create opportunities for others to be kind to you.

This can also work with children. Ask them to do something they're doing anyway or something very small and simple. Be smart. Don't make it difficult to please you. Start building the relationship starting with the simple things.

And be grateful for all those little things they do for you. Thank your wife for the grilled chicken. Thank your child for the errand. Don't start by being resentful that you're not getting those things you really want. Over time, you'll be able to ask for bigger or more difficult things. Still, it's the small and easy favors that build and maintain that connection.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I really enjoy listening to your shiurim on shalom bayis. They are insightful and thought provoking. I was wondering if you could help me with a topic I struggle with.

My wife is very sensitive. I know that can be very helpful when she becomes a mother, but at the moment it seems to cause stress for our shalom bayis. If someone makes a comment that upsets her, whether myself, an in-law, or any family member, it seems to "take over" and prevents her from enjoying the gathering. The comment will constantly fill her thoughts. She will sit on the topic - sometimes for days or months - and it can ruin an otherwise great day, Shabbos, or Chag.

Most of our Shalom Bayis issues stem from comments that other people make. When she's unhappy, she'll also bring up past comments and make the problem much bigger.

I always try to validate her feelings and concerns, but I'm not sure that's the correct approach. How can I defuse the situation so that it doesn't blow up into something much larger each time?

I would appreciate any insight! Thank you so much.

Answer:

Firstly, I want to commend your positivity. You understand that your wife's sensitivity can be an asset and will be helpful when she becomes a mother. Sensitivity is a positive trait. The truth is, any trait that Hashem gave a person is inherently a positive trait. It just has to be channeled the right way. Certainly, sensitivity – or any character trait – makes some things harder and other things easier, yet everything can be used for good.

Sensitivity can be an asset in relationships, but it can also make things more difficult. People who are detail-oriented, notice and are bothered by little things, can channel that in a way that they are helpful and understanding of others. In my book, **Get Along with Everyone,** I discuss the sensitive personality and how it affects people. If this is your wife's inherent personality, it may be helpful to read the book.

I will also add, by way of introduction, that while it's possible that your wife is overreacting and hypersensitive, that does not mean that she's always wrong, or that you should see her as "always" overreacting. People do often lack sensitivity in their interactions with others, and sometimes getting into the mode of justifying others, and judging things based on how you or others might react, can cause you to lose focus and not realize how sometimes your wife was justified in being hurt and offended, as there are people and instances that really are unjust and downright wrong. I've seen many people overlook this possibility, and then get into a wrong mindset and perspective.

My explanations of people's personality as overly-sensitive is in no way meant to dictate that someone who is hypersensitive is always

wrong and/or always taking things irrationally and out of proportion. All that is aside from the fact that people **should** be more sensitive in their dealings with a sensitive individual, and that fact that they are perhaps unaware of this personality in the person they are communicating with doesn't make it right to be less sensitive.

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You seem to be under the impression that it's your job to "fix" your wife's "problem". Aside from sensitivity not necessarily being something that needs to be "fixed", or even something that can be, I'm afraid this may be touching on codependency. Which is when one person has a hard time handling another person's problem and feels that it's their duty to help that person out of it.

Your question here is how to make things more pleasant. But the premise of your question seems to be that it's your job to fix the issue. This can come from a person's general attitude towards problem solving. It can also come from having strong feelings for the other person and not wanting to see them struggle. It can also be that the person who is struggling projects that need onto the other party. "How come you're not helping me?"

However, no matter where that feeling is coming from, it is not your responsibility to solve another person's problems. Make no mistake, as a spouse and good Jew, it is your responsibility to be caring and helpful. But there's a way to do that. And that isn't by assuming the obligation to fix the situation that the other person can't fix on their own for whatever reason.

Aside from the fact that it's not your job to fix it, you may not be equipped to do so. Especially because often when you take the responsibility, she may let go and rely entirely on you. Then, if she feels you're not dealing with it correctly, you become part of the problem. It can go so far that you are considered the cause of the problem even if you aren't.

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So what can you do? You can certainly offer a listening ear, or as you mentioned in the question, you "try to validate her feelings." Instead of saying, "Oh, this is terrible and has to stop," you can say, "tell me more about it. How did it feel?" Listening and validating doesn't have to go on for hours on end, but giving her the time and listening ear can be helpful. Show her that you care and feel. You can even say, "I wish people would be more considerate."

Be careful, though. After validating, don't try to mitigate or justify the insensitivity. "They didn't really mean it. Maybe you don't have to take it personally." Such comments are killers to sensitive people.

Besides, saying this creates a new problem. In your wife's mind: "Not only was that person's comment hurtful, but it seems like you don't understand me, and agree with them".

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While you should be there to show that you care, you don't have to take the reins. If she asks you to reach out to your mother/sister/friend/etc. and tell them to be more sensitive, you don't have to do that. It's not your responsibility and doing so may work against you.

You should certainly not throw it back at her, saying, "I don't have to, you can tell her yourself…", and you can politely yet assertively express how you'd love to do it for her yet don't feel comfortable, but it starts with realizing that you don't have to be the crutch or problem solver.

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If your spouse asks you for advice and you feel able to offer it and that they're ready to hear it and won't take it wrong, present it as your opinion. Rather than saying, "You should do…" etc. try something gentler like: "I think that's it's possible that you can try…", or "I might be wrong, yet I feel the right thing to do is…"

Most people, but especially those who are sensitive, don't appreciate being told what to do and can take it the wrong way. If they challenge you about your suggestion, don't repeat yourself and don't get pulled into a debate. Clarify, "I could be wrong, I'm not sure, I simply feel it would help, but you certainly don't have to try it."

Don't get stuck in who or what is right or wrong. Don't be afraid to share how you feel. Be confident with your opinion. Don't fall into a never-ending conversation and allow it to turn into a debate and/or shalom bayis issues. Just continue to be there to lend a listening ear.

Often, offering a suggestion without imposing it on someone, is all they need to be able to pick up on it and try it when they feel comfortable, something they may not have been able to do when

it turned into a debate and they felt "forced" to try it or agree that it was the right thing to do.

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When you change your way of dealing with your wife and her issues this can at first make her say that you don't care about her. Don't get defensive. It's a projection of her own negativity and a way to get you to take the responsibility back.

Calmly and politely say that you feel you do care. "But if you'd care you would…" "Maybe, but I feel differently." If you try to **prove** that you care, that person may try to prove that you **don't** care. Realize that she's stuck in emotions. Debating logically to prove that you do care won't get you anywhere.

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Going for therapy may have its place and can be beneficial, but only if done very carefully and with the right person, and when there's a clear goal and motive in mind. The wrong therapist can cause more harm than good, especially with a sensitive woman, and without a goal it can be hard to properly assess if something is being accomplished or new problems are being brought up but not being resolved.

Someone who will tell her that her husband should be doing more or that it's a result of past trauma and requires extensive therapy, will only cause more problems. If you or your wife decide to go for help, make sure you go to someone who is **helpful**. Having a place to discuss and vent can be beneficial, but if you don't see positive change or worse, you see negative results, have the courage to stay away.

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We spoke about your wife's general sensitivity. It's possible, though, that there is one person who is less sensitive toward her and causing more of an issue.

In that case, you may decide to delicately and sensitively approach that person and describe the situation, while suggesting what and how to change. (It may be helpful to get guidance on how to do this in a way that will be helpful and not harmful.) Be careful when doing so, either to have your wife's permission or to do so in a way that you know she won't know you've done so, and be hurt or feel betrayed by it.

Aside from her not being happy that you spoke about her, if she finds out about it, it can once again take you right back to the codependency problem where it seems like you're taking responsibility or that you're part of the problem.

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You care for your wife. Still, when someone else hurts her, it's that person's problem. If you are the one that hurts her, whether unintentionally or due to her extreme sensitivity, you should try to avoid doing those things in the future. At the same time, realize that your job is to be as careful as humanly possible to avoid doing so, but beyond that, it's her responsibility.

When you abdicate the responsibility, it often becomes easier for the other person to pick it up.

With best wishes,
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME
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