

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

SAD BAD PATTERNS

This week's parshah includes the tochachah, which depicts terrible predictions of what will befall Am Yisrael if they persist in following the wrong path: "You will become lost among the nations and the land of your enemies will consume you ... those of you who survive will rot away in the lands of your enemies..." In the middle of this list of curses, appears the passuk, "They will confess their sins and the sin of their fathers..."

The Imrei Yehudah of Brezhan comments on the apparently odd inclusion of this passuk among the tochachah — surely confessing one's sins is a good thing and should bring blessings rather than curses? Instead, the tochachah continues and we are told that ultimately, Hashem will forgive us due to our suffering, not due to our repentance.

He explains that while confessing one's aveiros is ordinarily a wonderful thing, there is a right place and a right time for everything. When a confession is made at the right time, it's great. However, at a time of strict judgment, when we are already being punished, confession is out of place. Just like on Rosh Hashanah, when Hashem sits on His throne of din, we do not say vidui, so too when punishment is already underway is confession out of place.

In relationships, timing is a crucial factor. Generally, you don't have to worry as much about the timing when giving a genuine compliment as you do when you want to give some "constructive criticism." But even the best words can have a negative impact if spoken at the wrong time. Conversely, even the harshest message can have a positive effect if spoken in the right way, at the right time.

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Hi Rabbi Gruen,

I hope you and your family are well.

Thank you for your class from some weeks ago, which is, sadly, so applicable to me and my husband. We aren't in the best of places, but we really both want to make it work.

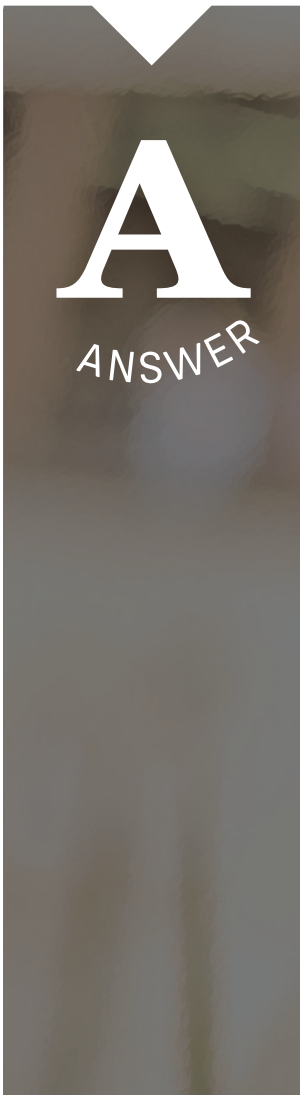
My husband brings up the concept of divorce too often, probably due to his parents being divorced. So it's a natural thing for him to think of divorce, unfortunately. It's very, very hurtful for me to hear, but I know he doesn't mean it literally. It just means, "I'm mad at you and I need a breather."

I work very, very hard on our marriage. Baruch Hashem I have an excellent therapist and solid Daas Torah who support my hard work. I know it's for the greater good, and that's what keeps me going, but it's lonely and exhausting work, and as you mentioned in the class I referred to, "It's important to realize that some people need to get a lot before they can start giving back."

I'll admit that this morning, after a painful episode yesterday, my husband sent me a text saying, "I'm very sorry for saying that yesterday, I just responded without thinking, I'm sorry" — which is huge huge huge and I told him that I appreciate it — but this is the first "returns" that I'm seeing in our eight years of marriage. So it's hopeful, but it's hard to wait so long for returns.

My question is, what can I do to maintain my own koach while I'm not seeing returns?

Thanks so much



It's wonderful to hear that both you and your husband are solidly committed to making your marriage a success, and that you're prepared to accept the need to give a great deal before getting your "investment" back. In a so-called ideal world, each spouse would give 100 percent and receive 100 percent back; in real life, there's almost always an imbalance. And in some marriages, the imbalance is large and painful, leading to the feelings you're experiencing: loneliness and exhaustion. This is certainly a big challenge.

I firmly believe that almost every marriage has the potential to bring great dividends for both spouses, even though things may start out very uneven. There are all kinds of reasons why some people need to receive a great deal before they can start giving back. Fortunately, you're already seeing some movement on your husband's side.

I'm glad that you noticed that I didn't say that people need to get a lot before they "want" to give back. It's often not a question of wanting, but one of ability. With some people, their personality causes them to behave in certain ways; with others, it's more about nurture than nature. Some people enter marriage with baggage that makes them so distrustful of others that it can take years for them to accept that what they receive from their spouse comes without ulterior motives and that nothing is behind it aside from the desire to build a strong shalom bayis.

Without knowing anything more about your husband, it is possible that with his first-hand experience of divorced parents, he may have had his sense of security broken at an early age, so that it takes him longer than others to feel secure in his own marriage. This doesn't, of course, excuse cruel or neglectful behavior, but seeing it this way can help you to gain some perspective.

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It's great that you are able to see your husband's movements toward you as "huge" and that you recognize that what for another person is nothing to get excited about,

is for him a major step forward. Unfortunately, so many couples get stuck long before the place you've reached. Some spouses insist, "I've invested enough — now it's his turn," or "I'll start giving when she does." This attitude fails to take into account a very simple fact: Everyone's different. What is easy for you may be very hard for someone else, for reasons you thankfully may have no way of understanding. When someone is physically disabled, it's easy to feel compassion and make allowances; when someone is emotionally limited, their challenges are usually invisible. In those cases you need to work much harder to judge them favorably and not make unreasonable demands — demands that may seem so completely reasonable to you.

But I don't want to downplay that it can be exhausting. Being married to someone who's somewhat emotionally handicapped can be hard work for the healthier spouse, just as pushing one's spouse in a wheelchair is hard work. The difference is that if you had married someone in a wheelchair, you'd have known what you were signing up for. The truth is, however, that we all get married with a bunch of unknowns and virtually no marriage is equally balanced in terms of IQ, EQ, or other differences, though some cases are more extreme than others. And, naturally, some spouses are stronger in one area while the other is more capable in a different sphere.

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You ask how to maintain your koach and there's really only one main answer to that, which is to keep reminding yourself why you're doing this. At the end of the day, it's for the benefit of your marriage; that's beyond question. The proof is that you are in this marriage and you are seeing the fruits of your labors as both you and your husband access more of your hidden potential and build a stronger relationship.

You're also doing it for your children, to give them a stable home and provide them with living examples of what it means to work on one's middos. Maybe you're also teaching them, subtly, to love other Yidden even when it doesn't come easily.

You're also doing it for yourself, because this is the path Hashem set you on, the one that leads to you becoming your higher self, the one you didn't know you were capable of becoming. If no one else knows how hard it is, be your own cheerleader and validate your struggles and congratulate yourself on your successes and achievements, each time you try to understand and forgive.

Not always do we see how our efforts bear fruit. Sometimes, it's even better when we know that it's not necessarily our own efforts at all.

A yungerman once went to the Spinka Rebbe, asking for his brachah to go on a vacation — he insisted he needed it, as he had a very demanding set of responsibilities and carried a stressful work load. The Rebbe gave his brachah, adding, "And come to see me when you get back."

When he returned, the chassid did as he was instructed and the Rebbe then told him, "You know, if you want the secret of not needing a vacation, it's realizing that you don't do anything; it's Hashem who does it all. You put in your hishtadlus, but it's Hashem who gets the job done. You won't get so stressed out when you remember that."

This may not resolve all stresses or resentments for typical people who aren't on a very high madreigah, but the idea behind it is an important one to keep in mind, and one that can keep you going when things get tough.

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You mention the support you have, which is excellent and very much needed. I have no reason to doubt your account of the situation, but I would like to address the general question of couples in situations seemingly similar to yours though actually quite different.

Sometimes, a husband or wife will claim, and genuinely believe, that they are investing massively in their marriage but their spouse is just a hanger-on. They complain bitterly that they give and give and give and get almost nothing in return. And their suffering is real. However, when an objective observer takes a good look at the relationship, it turns out to be far more complex.

There's giving, and then there's giving. There's giving with no strings attached and there's giving with a huge truckload of expectations following close behind. There's also giving with arrogance and a sense of, "I'm carrying such a heavy load and he's not pulling his weight so I have to drag him along too." For the person on the receiving end in such a marriage, seeing their spouse constantly "giving" can feel very bitter indeed.

Giving is still better than taking in most cases. But when someone gives in order to receive — whether it's praise, compliments, or payment in kind — this causes extra stress. The ultimate giving between spouses is giving that makes both husband and wife feel wonderful about the exchange. If the husband can give to his wife in a way that makes her feel like she's doing him a favor by receiving his gift, both of them gain immeasurably. What's more, this kind of giving is far more likely to inspire her to give back.

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I can see from your letter that you are already implementing this idea, as you told your husband how much you appreciated his apology. You could have (and many would have) responded, "Okay. Just make sure you don't do that again," or even, "I don't need your apologies — I need you to stop saying such awful things." Instead, you encouraged him to see himself as someone moving in the right direction

and didn't belittle the progress he made, realizing how significant it is for him (even if someone looking in from the outside might find little to admire).

In essence, this is the path you need to take, helping your husband to connect with the side of him that you know lies hidden and needs encouragement to emerge. In telling him how much you appreciated his apology you were according him respect for what he did and making it so much more likely that he will keep moving in the right direction.

You can also build on this, by creating the circumstances for him to keep giving. You don't have to wait to react to events — you can make them yourself. For example, you can tell him how much you would enjoy a walk once a week with him, and how much you'd appreciate him making time for you. Don't fall into the common trap of telling him that this is something that he should be doing without you having to ask for it, turning an opportunity for growth into an attack on his self-esteem. Instead, present it as something you, personally, would like so much. You'll accomplish more by adding that he totally isn't obligated to do it for you but you'd feel like a million dollars if he did.

You might have to ask a few times for him to get the message and that's okay. Everyone needs time to become accustomed to a new way of doing things, but don't give up too easily. At first, he might doubt that you really want this walk or whatever other thing so much, so be patient until he sees that you are serious and that he really can give something significant to you.

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Now I'd like to address one point you mentioned, which is his constant references to divorce. It's great that you understand where this is coming from and that you realize it's not personal, but rather the outcome of his own painful experiences growing up. I'd also like to stress that that doesn't excuse him from speaking this way, which is wrong.



This isn't about you — it's his way of telling you how hurt he is. Therefore, you have to help him find better ways of communicating his hurt feelings which don't involve hurting you back with words that can be so harmful, especially if your children hear them.

Sometimes, the simplest approach is best. You just don't respond whenever he makes such a comment, and later, when things have calmed down, you tell him, "I know you were angry, and perhaps I did something wrong. I was very hurt when you said that, and please don't say it again." This might be enough to get him to change his script. You can also add that you know he doesn't mean it and that nonetheless, you find it very upsetting to hear, and that if it does happen again, you might have to step outside so as not to hear such painful words.

If that doesn't help, you could try a different tactic, but only if no one else is around. You could respond, "I hear you, and if you think that's the solution, perhaps it's what we'll have to do. I'd hate for it to happen." Sometimes, hearing such a blunt response wakes the person up to the enormity of what they are suggesting. But be very careful with this approach, as someone very sensitive may hear it the wrong way.

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You end your letter writing that you're hopeful, and for good reason. Slowly, slowly, with a great deal of effort, you are shoveling away all the layers covering your husband's essence and allowing the real him to emerge — and shine. In the process, you are uncovering your own essence as well and realizing how much you need specifically this husband in order to grow. Each of you are doing your best in difficult circumstances, even though from the outside things can seem so uneven and unfair.

And, while you're the one working so very hard right now, b'ezras Hashem with time, patience, and siyatta diShmaya, your husband will join you in your efforts and recognize and appreciate all that you have done.

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