Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Vayishlach |

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

BEING PREPARED

Let's study a relationship that is discussed in this week's *parsha*, an extremely rocky relationship – the one between Yaakov and Esav. We learn in this week's *parsha* how Yaakov prepared to meet Esav: ויאמר אם יבא עשו אל המחנה האחת והכהו והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה "Yaakov was very afraid and the situation pained him. He split his group into two camps, saying: If Esav smites one camp, at least the other will be rescued".

Yaakov of course loved his wives and children dearly, and wasn't ready to give any of them up. But he also knew that he needed to choose his battles. He couldn't just charge unthinkingly into battle and take the chance of losing everything… In life, we must learn to make choices, difficult ones sometimes, and accept that perhaps we will not have it all.

DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Of course we don't battle our wives and children. But we do sometimes get into little skirmishes, and the way to avoid them, to 'choose our battles', is by not sweating the small stuff. There are things we can expect and others that we must accept. "In relationships you don't want to be right, you want to be successful".

While all this is true of course – still, having healthy expectations isn't only about lowering your expectations when you're disappointed, or when things don't go your way. The trick is to have realistic expectations in the first place. If you want to relate to someone in a normal and healthy way for long term, having healthy expectations would be a good place to start.

YOUR EXPECTATIONS MAY BE INSANE!

It's sad, but unfortunately so many people enter into relationships with unhealthy expectations and end up feeling pain because of it. Expecting something will not bring you any closer to achieving it. Whether you express them or not, your expectations will be communicated to your partner, who will feel your profound disappointment. This is not beneficial to your relationship.

I remember once seeing this quote on a sign in an electronics store: "If you don't find what you're looking for, lower your expectations". If you keep looking for something and you can't seem to find it, chances are that it doesn't exist! Knowing what it is that you can and cannot expect will save you much aggravation and disappointment. Cameras and kitchen appliances may not require you lowering your

expectations, maybe you just need to check out the competitor, but when looking for a person you can't just draw up a list of the features and specifications you would like; you must lower your expectations! They say that "Insanity is trying the same thing over and over, and expecting different results".

DID YOU MARRY A ROBOT?

Now, even if what you are looking for does exist; not everyone is perfect. Your spouse cannot necessarily deliver something just because it's humanly possible. Your spouse is perfectly human and still not perfect.

A person is not a machine. Don't build expectations based on what happened in the past. Just because your spouse was able to deliver something in the past doesn't mean that he will be able to deliver that consistently. Recognize that people's moods and abilities fluctuate.

WHY EXPECTATIONS ARE DETRIMENTAL

Being realistic will save you much aggravation and heartache, but it will also clear the air in your relationship and improve it vastly. You may not realize that your unspoken expectation is actually putting an invisible strain on the relationship. If you are constantly looking for what you can get out of your relationship, your spouse will feel it. You want to show your spouse how much you appreciate every little thing he does for you, you want the atmosphere to be open for love to come in. But by having expectations, you're creating an obstacle to love; "only when my expectations are met will I be able to love you". So we want to scale down our expectations as much as possible.

Time and time again I've seen relationships fail only because people were too hung up on their expectations. They were so focused on the "wrongs" being perpetrated against them that they couldn't do what was necessary to make their marriage work. Lowering your expectations doesn't mean that you're "settling for less". It just means that you're ready to be realistic, and work towards your goals rather than just selfishly wishing your expectations into reality. Either come to terms with what you have, or learn how to achieve what you want. But clear the air. Don't leave your expectations out there.

RECOGNIZE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

By the way, if you do have expectations, you should at least identify them, and let your spouse know about them, (respectfully of course). So many times I've heard people say "If only my wife would make me happy". But when asked what they expect that will make them happy, the response is invariably "I don't know, let her figure it out". If you want a chance of getting what you expect, you have to be clear about what it is that you're expecting.

Another thing; don't expect someone to be good at something that's hard for you. Quit grumbling that your wife won't do the dishes and admit that you're not delighted to do them either! Don't expect your husband to magically balance the checkbook just because you can't. Let's not expect difficult things from our spouses, we are always great at finding excuses for ourselves, so let's find excuses for our spouses as well.

ACCEPTANCE IS THE KEY

The real key to this is accepting your spouse for who she is. Realize that you married a person, who like all people, has strengths and weaknesses. So accept that. Accept the person for whom he is. "I don't have it all, and my spouse doesn't have it all either." Not everyone is super organized and super creative and a super conversationalist and a super parent; in fact very few people are all that.

A real problem causer when it comes to expectations is comparisons. Never compare your home situation to that of another couple. First of all you have no idea if it's so wonderful – for all you know they're staring at *you* enviously. Besides, while it may be that they're doing wonderfully in a certain aspect; they're probably struggling with something else. Nobody is perfect, perfection is an illusion. You have to know *your* situation. What makes sense for *your* marriage today?

BE REASONABLE

You know, sometimes I see people who have expectations

without comparisons. They're not comparing their marriage to anybody else's but they have expectations anyway. That's even more unreasonable than comparing your marriage! For instance, they'll say "my parents were always like this, I don't want that" well, maybe it's just not possible, you never saw something different, did you?

Instead of expecting things you don't have, try appreciating what you do have. It's a wonderful feeling and brings closeness to your marriage. והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה even when it seems that you have nothing. Not all is lost, look at the good.

CHINUCH: DON'T EXPECT YOUR CHILD TO BE AN ADULT

Unreasonable expectations show up in raising children as well. You can't expect a child to be an adult, and you can't even expect a child to be like another child. It all boils down to being realistic and familiar with your situation. I'm not saying that you have to settle for less and not expect anything, but you have to be familiar with the child and know what it is that you could expect.

Placing unreasonable demands on a child can be tremendously damaging. Many adults struggle well into adulthood because they never had a chance to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem. They were constantly criticized for not living up to unrealistic expectations, and it stuck.

We need to be happy with what others do for us. Not 'tell them' that we appreciate it, but really and genuinely appreciate it. We cannot allow our unrealistic expectations to get in the way of someone's genuine kindness towards us. Let's encourage others and ourselves by being reasonable and realistic and watch our homes and family lives thrive.

-Q&A-

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

Question: When I was discussing shidduchim with my son, asking him what he's looking for he said that he's not ready to get married. Understandably I was very surprised at this comment, and we got into a whole argument about what Hashem wants and whether or not my son is being selfish. He claimed that he can't get married before he improves his relationship skills. Eventually he told me what he's looking for and it turned out to be different from what I thought he needs. In short, it was a very frustrating conversation.

Answer: I would like to mention a short point in response to this question. This may not be what you were expecting to hear from me, but my intuition is telling me that I should address it from the following angle…:

Don't make a big deal about something someone said in passing. The fact that you take issue with it and argue on it, may turn it into a bigger deal than it was to begin with. In this case it is not clear that the son was serious about not wanting to get married. It's not like his father asked him to meet a girl and he refused. They were just discussing shidduchim in general and this bachur made a general comment. It doesn't mean that he actually stands by it. In fact, later the bachur did present the vision he has for a shidduch, so he was thinking about it. By arguing a point that someone said, you may in fact be causing it to become more entrenched, you're making him defend his statement and clarify to himself why he took this position, and why he believes in it. Most of the time it's better to just let such comments pass.

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