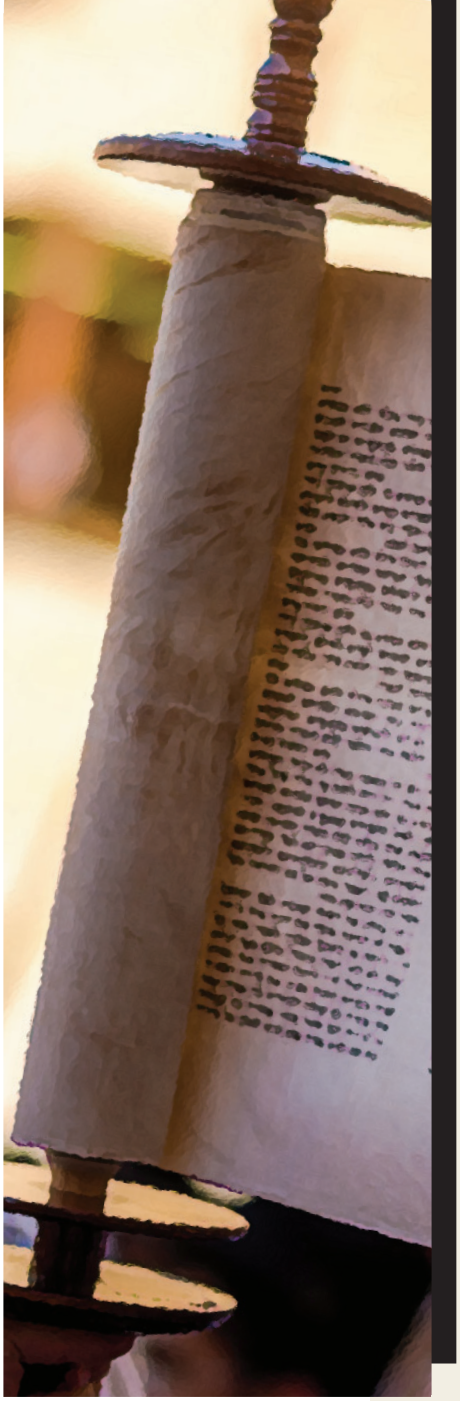


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

HEALTHY SHARING

The Torah first introduces us to Noach at the end of *parshas Bereishis*: "Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem." The Chida, citing the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos, notes that when a person finds favor in the eyes of other people (*"nocheh" heimenu*), this is a sign that he also finds favor in Hashem's eyes. He also quotes the Zohar which states that the double mention of "Noach Noach" in the opening of the next *parshah* connotes being "*naicha*" (pleasant), both above, with Hashem, and below, with people. If the Torah is telling us that Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem, we already know that he found favor in the eyes of man as well.

Some people are naturally the kind of person that everyone loves. They are pleasant, easy-going, and instinctively know how to interact with all kinds of people. Others have a different kind of nature — they prefer to withdraw from society and instead focus on finding favor in Hashem's eyes. While that is partially understandable due to innate personality differences, it's important for us all to know that being liked by others is significant.

Hashem wants us to get along with each other, and as we succeed in finding favor in people's eyes, we find favor in the eyes of Hashem as well.

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A special thank you to a good friend

Dannie Klompsma

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Parshas **Bereishis**

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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Your *shiurim* are all amazing, the one I'm going to discuss included, about a woman who wasn't happy about her husband getting a bike. You brought good, solid points but I think the main points were missed. I want to clarify as I relate to it all too well.

First of all, this woman didn't mention anything negative about her husband getting a bike. She was only unhappy that it was done behind her back. She wasn't asking for a say in the decision, just to be in the know.

With marriage, you sign up for a husband bringing *parnassah* and the wife doing housework, as well as the relationship itself. Perhaps it's not written explicitly in the *kesubah* but it's definitely self-understood and expected that a couple will share their life together.

It almost seems that the man has all the power and makes all the decisions and the wife, according to the Torah perspective, is supposed to stand at his side, smile sweetly, nod in agreement, and show support for whatever his heart desires. If she has an issue with anything, she's supposed to reconsider many times if it's worth mentioning. If yes, she should say it gently and with respect, being careful not to hurt his big ego.

In other words, she has no identity of her own — she's just her husband's puppet.

If he doesn't include her in decisions or give her the sense that he respects and trusts her by sharing his life with her, what is left of this poor lady? She's just his servant, to wash his clothes and cook his food and take care of his children. He notices her well enough when he needs something from her, but in any other area of life, it's as if she disappears.

If it was just an isolated incident, perhaps you could explain it by saying that he's afraid of her reaction, but she wrote that he never shares anything at all. Maybe she's exaggerating a bit, but it does sound like a pattern of wrong behavior, and that her husband just doesn't understand how relationships work.

Now let me tell you about my own situation. My husband was in *kollel* for years, and then suddenly left without even telling me. Overnight he changed the way he dresses, without saying a word to me beforehand. Then he was offered a great job which he accepted and still didn't tell me — I heard about it from someone else. He joined another *kollel*, again without telling me, worked on a project that I would have been thrilled to know about… only he didn't tell me… There was a *shidduch* in his family that everyone knew about a week before I did… Am I his wife or not?

He bought a gift for our son, and I didn't know a thing until a moment before he gave it when he whispered in my ear that he bought it for him. I told him how hurt I felt that he hadn't told me before, especially as it was clearly a whole process, from having the idea to buying it, writing a poem etc. But he did it again, a second time.

Am I a mother in this home — what am I in his eyes — a maid?

I want to add that my husband isn't mean or bad. It's just that he seems to view our relationship as employer-employee instead of husband-wife.

I admit that most of the examples of things he hasn't shared are "his" things rather than "ours," but certainly not all of them. And it's not like I want to have a say. I just want to be part of things. After all, shouldn't a wife be a life partner and soulmate to her husband? That's no contradiction to what the Torah says, that "*ve'hu yimshol bach*."

So it happens that when such a wife isn't available for her husband, it's not tit-for-tat, but just the natural consequence of the way he behaves. When the deep feelings aren't there, it's just impossible. You speak a lot about communication and how speaking

nicely can bring real change, but what about when it doesn't? And, why assume that the problems started because he got scared off sharing things? Maybe he wasn't sharing and that killed the feelings of closeness between them?

I like how you address things bluntly without sugar coating, which is why I prefer that you address this in a public forum. When a therapist addresses things one-on-one, they tend to try to leave the client feeling good so the message doesn't come across clearly, and that's what happened whenever me and my husband spoke to professionals — we always came out having heard two different things, wondering who's right and who's wrong. But I want to hear the truth.

Thank you



You end off with wanting to hear the truth, which is a wonderful thing. In my upcoming book, *Help That Helps*, I designated an entire chapter to how dishonesty ultimately works against people. Nonetheless, there's a limit to how much truth I can provide when all I know is your side of the story. As you write yourself, even when two people are told the same thing, what they hear is so individual (something I elaborate on in the same book). It's possible that if your husband wrote me a letter, he'd not only give me a different version of what you describe, but also add missing context.

To be clear, I'm not questioning your account in any way. It's just that everyone, without exception, experiences life via their emotions and expresses themselves emotionally, and this inevitably distorts things.

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It's common for people to express themselves using language that is more extreme than the situation deserves. I always try to avoid extremes and try to help other people see things in more nuanced ways, which not only brings them closer to the truth, but is ultimately more productive. Let me show you what I mean.

You start by referring to a class in which I answered a question posed by a woman whose husband bought a bike without telling her (she found out by accident, seeing him riding it). Concealing significant information from one's spouse, or simply failing to inform them of it, can sometimes be a sign of an extreme breakdown of communication. Demanding that one's spouse share absolutely everything and keep nothing at all private is the other extreme.

Obviously, it's vital to understand the difference between "mine/yours" and "ours" before assessing a situation. Concealing information is a violation of the "ours" boundary, where aspects of a husband's and wife's shared life are hidden from one another. Invading another's privacy is a violation of the "mine/yours" boundary, where one spouse feels compelled to give up information they are entitled to keep to themselves. In general, however, it's clear that when husband and wife chronically fail to share their thoughts, plans, and decisions, this is an indication that something deeper has gone wrong. Even if there are "good" reasons why sharing has ceased or never existed, that's no way to live with one's spouse. Furthermore, there are almost always better ways of dealing with the underlying causes.

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There's also another type of extreme that I'd like to mention, and that's having extreme perspectives. One example of this is the way many people speak: "He always… she never… it's totally impossible… it's just not an option…" Using such terms often makes it harder to resolve the problem as it tends to make us very inflexible.

Some people see any situation that upsets them as extreme, regardless of the objective facts. While I don't ever discount the validity of emotions, it's so important to distinguish between what's happening and what we feel about what's happening.

From the situation you describe with your husband, it is clear that you are struggling not only with his behavior, but also with the emotional impact it is having on you. Leaving *kollel*, starting a new job, changing one's mode of dress are all significant moves to make, and keeping one's wife in the dark about major life changes is not normal behavior — in fact, it's quite extreme. A wife should feel that she is part of her husband's life, and discovering significant developments about him

from other people can understandably leave her feeling excluded and deeply hurt. Whatever may explain his behavior, I agree with you that this is not how a healthy husband-wife relationship should function.

Now consider a different situation, where a husband isn't going to *kollel*, isn't going to work — in fact, isn't doing anything. There's no money in the house and he doesn't seem to care. Obviously these two cases are very different — one is far more extreme than the other, and what's more, it involves a dereliction of a husband's basic halachic duty to provide for his wife.

So while I'm not minimizing the pain you feel at your husband's secrecy, and certainly it does affect the level of emotional connection you feel toward him, at the same time, just as he is not failing in his obligations toward you as outlined by the Torah, you should not consider failing him in response.

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You refer to the Torah's model of marriage, which is one of very practical, straightforward duties, for both spouses. These duties are for the most part non-negotiable and one of the things that this teaches us is that if one or both spouses neglect these duties, the marriage is in trouble.

Another thing this teaches us is that if one or both spouses neglect the marriage in other areas, while this may cause problems, it's far less likely to be catastrophic and doesn't usually reflect a fundamental problem.

For instance, if a husband or wife refuses to attend *simchos* on their spouse's side of the family, while they should try to resolve their disagreement, this is fundamentally different from a case where either husband or wife is failing at the basics within the home and the marriage. If something isn't directly abusive in any way, even if one spouse intensely dislikes something the other spouse does, and has protested to no avail, it's often best to see it for what it is and not turn it into something defining the relationship.

This is why a wife withdrawing and being "unavailable" for her husband is almost never an appropriate or helpful response to situations couples encounter, just to give one example of lopsided behavior.

What, then, is a wife who feels so frustrated by her husband's non-abusive behavior to do if it impacts her feelings of closeness to him? One answer is to focus on all the things he does do for her, including fulfilling his basic Torah obligations as a husband.

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You mention the basic Torah obligations of a wife: "Standing at her husband's side, smiling sweetly, nodding in agreement, and showing support for whatever his heart desires." I'm not entirely clear what you're referring to, given that you don't write that your husband expects such behavior from you, nor are you behaving this way. You describe having expressed your feelings on numerous occasions, and there's nothing wrong with that, as long as it's done right.

"Doing it right" includes not only the words and tone of voice you use, but also the topics you discuss. If something falls into the category of "his," a wife has to tread very carefully if she wants to be taken seriously and not merely sound like she is demanding that he put her feelings above his own. And regardless of whether it's something in "his" or "our" category, she needs to be very careful not to make him feel bad, guilty, stupid, and so forth. This is not just because it's wrong to do so, but also because it will likely backfire.

Above all, she needs to remember that in virtually every non-halachic area of life, there is a range of acceptable opinions and that his may be just as valid as hers, even if she intensely dislikes it. Respecting the other person's right to an opinion and way of doing things is key to finding common ground and solutions.

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You don't mention whether your husband was always secretive or whether this is something that developed over the years. Understanding how such a situation evolved can be helpful.

There are husbands (and wives) who are simply secretive and private by nature and don't see anything wrong in that. If your husband literally sees nothing wrong with failing to tell you that he left *kollel*, for instance, then trying to make his mind work a different way is very likely to fail. Yes, it's not really "normal" to be quite so private, but at least it's nothing personal against you and doesn't imply that he doesn't see you as an equal, or that he doesn't care about you. You may be able to accustom him to sharing things with you using patient reminders; you could even accustom yourself to asking questions, as long as you do so respectfully and gently. For some husbands, injecting a touch of humor might even be effective, as in: "Are you going to *kollel* today, or did someone offer you a job overseas?" Humor can take the edge off a question, making it sound less interrogating while still helping you get an answer.

It would also be helpful to know how he reacted when you found out about all the life changes he made without telling you. Did he go to lengths to ensure you wouldn't find out, and become upset at having his

secrets uncovered? Or did he just respond with, "Oh, right. I didn't know you were interested," or "Didn't I tell you? It must have slipped my mind."

But here's another important factor to consider: Is it possible that he didn't share the information with you not because he wants to deny you emotional closeness, but because he feared that when you found out, that itself would harm or destroy your emotional closeness? Hiding things from one's spouse may not be a good solution in general, but if a husband knows (or thinks he knows, based on previous experience) that leaving *kollel* will be interpreted by his wife as a tragic and drastic move, and that she's not open to seeing his point of view, concealing it may seem a sensible decision to make.

Additionally, in general, people do want to share things — thoughts, feelings, opinions, decisions — that's just human nature. People share in different ways, of course. In your husband's eyes, it's possible that whispering in your ear that he bought a gift for your son *was* sharing. And it seems he felt entitled to buy a gift for your son without telling you "first," which is what made him feel comfortable sharing it with you when he did. You may prefer a different form of sharing and you can ask him to take that into account, but you should consider respecting that his way of sharing may be just as valid as what you think sharing should look like.

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In general, it's important that you express openly and clearly how you'd like things to be done. Before you begin, however, remind yourself that you and your husband are on the same team. What you are essentially asking for is more love and caring from someone you love and care about. So, tell him that when he includes you in his inner life, you feel more loved and that in turn cements your relationship. Make it about "us" rather than "me" versus "you."

With that, you should let him know (again, respectfully and gently) that when it comes to sharing significant life events that affect you both, you want to be informed in advance and involved in the decision-making process when appropriate, and that it distresses you when he doesn't involve you in his life or your shared life. Clarify that you realize he has a very different style when it comes to discussing things, and that you know he doesn't mean to exclude you. Then repeat how much you'll appreciate any effort he makes to change the way he does things.

And meanwhile, even before you see any change on his part, keep investing in your relationship. However much this aspect of your marriage pains you, it isn't the defining feature. There is so much more to your *kesher* with your husband than this, significant though it is.

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Remember, you have only a few options. You can keep fighting your husband to get him to change; you can become despondent at the situation; or you can accept him as he is while asking for adaptations. Fighting just reinforces the idea that this issue is more important than anything else, which is a distortion. Giving up with resentment achieves nothing and denies the potential in your marriage. Accepting your husband as he is, reminds you that there is an underlying relationship that persists and can be strengthened even while you're still ironing out the details.

When you look at your husband not as your adversary but as your partner who has a different, sometimes frustrating way of doing things and in spite of this still brings so much to your marriage, you will find it easier to see his good points and build the emotional connection that you so much desire.



TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BEREISHIS 5787

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