

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

CHOOSING WORDS WISELY

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah describes the clothing of the *kohen gadol*, including the *me'il* whose opening must be "turned inward with a border around it … and it shall not be torn." This head-opening is called "*pi rosho*," literally the "mouth of the head," and the border is a "*safah*" which can also be translated as "language." The Alshich Hakadosh derives from here the lesson of how important it is for us to guard against negative speech of any kind which can "tear open" relationships between people and ruin the entire fabric.

Furthermore, he writes, we shouldn't assume that a word spoken in anger or haste can always be taken back with an apology. Once spoken, words can never be erased. Therefore, we should always carefully consider whether it is wise to speak; perhaps it would be better to remain silent.

The Chida also discusses how irretrievable words can be, and notes that we can learn this from Moshe Rabbeinu himself, who asked to be "erased" from the Torah, which once done, could not be undone. Therefore, Moshe himself is told: "*Ve'atah tetzaveh*—you will command this" — you will be the one to teach this lesson since you are a living example of how careful one must be before speaking.

Between family members, choosing the right words can make all the difference. Hurtful comments are rarely forgotten even if they are forgiven, and it's not unusual for a husband or wife to tell their spouse, "You think I forgot what you said to me back then, but…" or, even worse, "I can't forgive you for what you said."

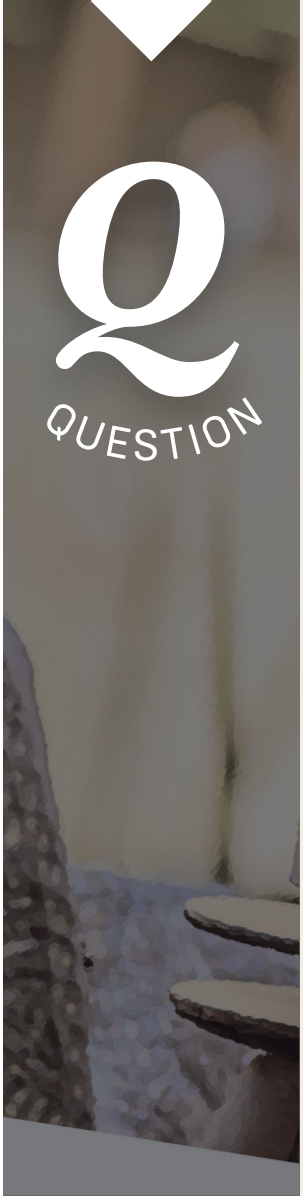
It's wrong to hold onto a grudge; old issues should never be dredged up, especially if they are no longer relevant. But even when we have a complaint about something ongoing, it should be addressed with great caution.

A common and serious mistake that people make is that of openly airing grievances in the name of honesty and transparency. Sometimes it's done in the presence of a marriage counselor in what's presumed to be a "safe zone." These justifications and rationalizations don't alter the harmful impact of hearing such comments. The hurt and shame that can be caused is often impossible to erase, and it's vital to remember that time does not mend all tears.

Would you like to sponsor an edition of Torah Lessons, to help enhance the Chinuch Habanim in so many homes?

Please email to parshalessons@lehair.org, and your donation will be most appreciated.

Parshas
Tetzaveh
VOL. 7 | ISSUE 20



Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

I listen to your *shiurim* often and it's only a shame I don't understand Yiddish. I'm the kind of person who is always reading about *shalom bayis* and my friends often ask me for advice. When I listen to the questions people send you, I try to guess how you'll respond. Sometimes I get it right but at other times, your answer takes a twist that I didn't anticipate. Thank you for opening my eyes.

I'd like to ask a question about my own marriage. The first few years were very hard. My husband is a very sensitive person and also very defensive. His temper can really cause him to explode and it's impossible to predict what will happen then. But after a lot of hard work on both sides, we've learned skills for avoiding such explosions and are very happy with one another. I'm actually really impressed at the way he's faced up to his issues and worked on overcoming them. Aside from that he's also very caring and responsible toward me and loving to our children.

Also, reading *The Surrendered Wife* really helped me a lot to become a real wife and not try to change him or educate him on his anger issues.

But still, I feel that my husband doesn't really like himself. He's one of those guys who everyone loves, and he's very charismatic. But if anyone treats him with what he feels is not enough respect, he gets so defensive and his reaction is actually scary.

My question is about our oldest child, who is 10. He's actually quite similar to my husband in that he can also get really loud and angry and exaggerate a lot. My husband has no patience or sympathy for his feelings. He keeps telling me how when he was 10, he wasn't bothered about the things that my son gets so upset about, and that he would never have used such language.

I feel like my son's just a kid and should be allowed to experience his feelings. But my husband says he's just ungrateful. I don't know what to do. I wish my husband would change his approach, especially as my second son is two years younger and is treated entirely differently, even though his behavior is far from perfect.

Seeing my oldest being singled out like this hurts me so much and sometimes I do speak up, and then my husband turns on me as well. All I want is for my son to be loved for all his good qualities. And I also just don't get it, because my husband himself is still suffering the consequences of feeling unappreciated by his parents, so why can't he see it and treat his own son differently?

I'd be very grateful for your advice. Thank you



A ANSWER

I'm glad that you enjoy my *shiurim* and that you try to guess the answers to the questions too. My goal is not just to offer advice, but to make people aware of certain basic truths and helpful ideas, which they can then apply on their own. As a matter of fact, while I can only do my best in my responses, it's quite possible that the answers you think up yourself are just as good as mine.

Your question is a common one. Parents often feel like the monkey in the middle between their spouse and their child. Such situations can be very complicated and it's often very hard to figure out whether to prioritize your relationship with your husband or your son.

Shalom bayis and *chinuch* are both so important. Neither are worth compromising on, and generally, it's not necessary to do so. In general, a strong *shalom bayis* is a prerequisite for being successful in *chinuch habanim*, because parents usually need to present a united position before their children.

Very often, while you may disagree with your husband on the best way to deal with your son, that doesn't mean that your relationship with your husband has to suffer as a result. And even if *chas veshalom* things do evolve into a *shalom bayis* challenge, parents have to be very careful not to involve their children,

and should certainly never try to get a child to take their side, against their spouse.

• • •

In your letter, you describe the pain you feel at seeing your son harshly treated, and you admit that sometimes you do speak out. There are many ways of doing so, and while one has to be careful, I do believe that it's important for a child who is not getting the support he needs from one parent to at least get it from the other parent. Feeling that both parents are against him can be devastating for a child.

One way of achieving this without making the situation worse is to talk to your husband and your son separately. You can tell your son that you understand him; you can also tell your husband that you understand him. And in each case, you need to be careful about different things.

With regard to your son, you should never tell him (nor even hint) that his father was in the wrong. There are enough ways to make a child feel understood without saying that.

With your husband, you must avoid giving the impression that *he* struggles with relating to this child, whereas *you* don't find it hard at all. In most families, each parent finds it easier to understand and relate to some of the children, and this isn't the sign of a problem — it's simply a matter of personalities.

When you speak to your husband, therefore, you should agree with him as far as possible on as much as possible. You can even agree with his complaint that his son isn't grateful enough, because the truth is that children are not, in general, grateful enough to their parents.

In reality, your husband's way of viewing his son may be just as valid as yours, as each person has a unique perspective, and probably nothing will be gained by telling him that he should "see" things differently.

Therefore, with both your husband and your son, the focus should be on trying to find creative ways to improve matters, without bashing anyone or getting emotionally entangled.

• • •

Aside from dealing with specific issues, there are practical steps you can take to improve the situation in general, such as emulating Aharon Hakohen and bringing your husband and son good regards from one another. It's okay if you have to be a little creative and bend the truth. Achieving peace is such a noble goal that it is the only valid excuse for stretching the truth, as Chazal teach us. You can tell your son how much his father appreciates something he did or the tone of voice he used. And you can tell your husband that your son told you how happy he was at a comment he made, and so forth.

Meanwhile, until the situation improves, you can try to gently compensate just a bit for your husband's attitude towards your son. Here you have to tread very carefully indeed. You should never say anything that your son could interpret as, "Mommy is the nice parent trying to make up for Tatty's failings."

• • •

Sometimes, well-meaning parents slip up in this area and try to get their child to make allowances for the other parent's neglect or wrongful behavior, saying things like, "Tatty doesn't really mean it; it's just that he gets so stressed out about things," or, "Mommy really does love you, but she doesn't know how to show it because of the way she was brought up." Such statements can be incredibly damaging in so many ways.

You can also try to compensate a little for your son's attitude toward his father, because even if you don't personally see things the way he does, your husband probably feels his son's insufficient respect for him as very hurtful. While you may not be obligated to boost your husband's self-esteem, if you can do so, everyone will gain, so do try to be a little more respectful of him in general. It could have a positive domino effect for all the members of the family.

• • •

On the subject of your husband's lack of self-confidence and his resulting defensiveness, I commend you for understanding his nature and accepting it without resentment. I also commend him (as you do) for doing what he can to modify his behavior. Part of understanding his nature is realizing that there will always be things that he cannot change, just as there are aspects of your nature that you cannot change either, even if you wanted to.

This may be the reason why he doesn't treat his child differently from how his father treated him, even though he may objectively admit that he "should" do things differently. In fact, you aren't claiming that he admits this, only that you see the parallel. It's quite possible that he doesn't even see (or can't see) the parallel himself, and you may have to accept this.

• • •

As for the book you mention, *The Surrendered Wife*, some of the ideas expressed there can be useful in knowing how to relate to people. However, one of the fundamental problems with the book and its approach is that it only teaches people how to avoid problems — and not how to address them. Trying to control one's spouse is never a good idea, but it's often not enough to stop controlling; one also has to do something positive, to be proactive.

In your husband's case, this may mean doing what you can to build him up, irrespective of his relationship with your oldest child. Almost all highly sensitive

people respond extremely well to being shown more respect, and can be so easily devastated by criticism. This includes anything you might say that implies that there's something wrong with him if he can't get along with this child — after all, you manage just fine, so why can't he?

Given that you enumerate so many good qualities that you see in your husband and appreciate, you have plenty of material to work with. Any improvement whatsoever in the way he treats your son should obviously be stressed as much as possible without making your husband feel like a child who needs to be praised. You can certainly find ways to compliment him. For example, being extra patient when your son was being difficult — and there's no need to dispute his perception of the son being difficult, because, firstly, that's the way he perceives him, and secondly, most children really are difficult at times...

As for addressing the negative, first of all make sure it really is negative and not just the way you see things. There isn't really a good way of telling your husband, "You shouldn't have said/done that," but you can suggest ways for him to do things differently: "Maybe Shmuly could use an extra compliment when he comes home from *cheder* this evening. I'm sure it would mean so much to him."

• • •

There's so much just one spouse can achieve, even if the other spouse isn't (yet) on-board with making changes. To anyone reading this who wonders if he or she might be that other spouse, please do try to consider the possibility that doing things differently might be a good idea and do your utmost to ensure that you aren't setting up a conflict between yourself and your child in which your spouse is forced to pick sides. There are many cases in which a parent actually should put the child first, even though they don't want to, and this can potentially have a terrible impact on the family unit.



Too often, a parent who finds a child difficult to deal with is tempted to blame the other spouse: "If only he was stricter with that child, I wouldn't have to be so strict myself"; "If only she was more loving, I wouldn't have to devote so much time to that child and I would have more time for..." It's almost always possible to fix a relationship with a child irrespective of how one's husband or wife is behaving, and so it is neither justified nor helpful to blame the other parent instead of doing what you can to improve things yourself.

And, even if the child himself complains about the parent, it doesn't necessarily mean that their complaints are justified. Children are usually dissatisfied with their parents as well as ungrateful or not grateful enough for all that they are given, and sometimes their grumblings have to be seen in this light. That doesn't mean that we don't listen and validate their feelings; it *does* mean that we don't accept what they say at face-value while simultaneously failing to do so when a spouse has complaints about the child.

• • •

Sometimes, when our children are being especially frustrating, it can be helpful to think back to our own childhood. No one can claim to have been the perfect child and for most of us, many years of adulthood pass before we are ready to admit that there were things we did wrong and that our parents suffered as a result.

Tzaar gidul banim is written into creation and no one gets to dodge it. However, there are better and worse ways of dealing with it, and the best ways of all are those in which we partner with our spouses to see things in a different light, to understand each other better, and to build a harmonious home in which personalities of all types can thrive happily, *be'ezras Hashem.*

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: TETZAVEH 5785

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call **718.841.6557** or e-mail **rabbigruen@lehair.org**
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email **parshalessons@lehair.org**

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