RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS TOLDOS

GIVING OR TAKING – IT'S ALL THE SAME

The Torah describes Yaakov Avinu as an "*Ish tam* – a simple person." The Shineve Rav *zt"l* asks why such a term is appropriate, given that the Torah brings many examples of his astute wit and intelligence. Yaakov successfully acquired the *bechorah* and the *berachos*, and he also outsmarted Lavan in his dealings with him. Despite his essential *temimus,* he was also *melumad b'armimus*, well versed in what appeared to be deceit.

The explanation, the Shineve Rav writes, is in the term used itself, "*ish tam*." Yaakov Avinu was not limited by his *temimus*; rather, he was master over it, as the use of the word "ish" implies. Every *middah* – certainly the good ones but even those that seem to be bad – can be used in a beneficial way. And even good *middos* sometimes present challenges. *Ahavas Hashem* and *chessed* can also be used at the wrong times or in the wrong measures. Yaakov Avinu knew that *temimus* is a positive trait, and he also knew that there are times when it should be set aside. He was in control of his *middos*; he used them to serve Hashem. Therefore, when he needed to deal with Eisav, Lavan, or the *yetzer hara*, he was able to put his *temimus* on hold and behave in a way that made him appear to be the very opposite of a *tamim*.

We can apply this idea to our relationships, where there are times when utilizing only good *middos* can work to one's disadvantage. As an example, there are people who are naturally very tolerant, which is generally a beautiful *middah*. Nonetheless, there are certain things that for the benefit of the relationship simply should not be tolerated, such as excessive control or abuse. Similarly, being a person who is lavish with compliments is usually wonderful. However, one should not compliment wrong behaviors, as it can end up promoting them.

Self-sufficiency is another example of a basically positive character trait that can interfere with building relationships. While it can be helpful many a time not to need to turn to others, being too independent can sometimes harm a relationship if one spouse gives the other the feeling that they are not needed or appreciated. A typical example of this is when a wife is off in the mountains for the summer months and her husband is alone in the city. If he doesn't remember even once to tell his wife how much he misses her or how hard he finds it to manage on his own, his wife may gain the impression that he doesn't really feel that he needs her at all. Many husbands counter that they were simply trying to avoid burdening their wives, but meanwhile they're missing out on countless opportunities to convey how much they depend on and appreciate everything their wives do for them.

Everyone likes to feel special and needed. Don't make someone feel sidelined by your independence. Be a master over your independence and know when being dependent is in order. Even if you mean well, your spouse needs to feel that they're an essential part of your life.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY IS DEDICATED IN HONOR OF THE CHASUNA OF THE DAUGHTER OF A GOOD FRIEND

RABBI AND MRS. SHLOIMY GANZFRIED

BY THEIR CHILDREN: PINCHAS & TZIPOIRY, CHAIM & LEAH'LE, YITZCHOK & LEAH, SRULY & HINDY

QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN

I wanted to let you know how much I enjoy listening to your *shiurim* on TorahAnytime. I discovered you while listening to the Keiravtuni series on TorahAnytime.

In general, I feel you make some excellent points in your various talks. Still, I have a question about your speech on Parshas Ki Savo.

We have been married for more than 15 years, so this question isn't coming from a "newlywed" perspective. I do feel that overall, our marriage is a healthy one, albeit with ups/downs like every "normal" marriage.

In your recent speech, you mentioned that if your spouse says "I'm doing it for you," you should simply say, "Thank you." I understand your point on a general level. On the other hand, when I feel my spouse and I need to go out or spend time alone, I don't think it's healthy to say, "I'm taking you out because it's for you or what you want." I feel that when a couple spends time together, it's for US – to improve OUR relationship and keep it moving in a positive direction. Even the one who feels like he's doing something for the spouse should realize sometimes that he's not doing it for YOU – the spouse – but for US, for the benefit of the relationship.

Thank you!

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

You write that you understand my perspective about saying thank you, on "a general level." I would like to clarify that everything I say is "general." The reason I answer certain questions in a public forum is because I feel that these are topics that everyone can gain from.

As such, what I said in that particular *shiur* (when I discussed thanking someone who says they're doing something for you but seems to have himself in mind just as much if not more so) is true – in general. However, I certainly did not intend to imply that someone should present something as "for us" when he really means himself. The question I was addressing there was what you do if you're the recipient of such a "favor." At the end of the day, saying "thank you" is still the right thing to do. Trying to prove that the other person's intentions aren't pure is unlikely to be productive. He may gain the impression that you don't think

he's a good person, and he'll be less inclined to want to do you a favor, genuine or less so, the next time around. It certainly won't help your relationship.

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Everyone knows how important "giving" is in a relationship. What is often overlooked is the art of taking. Taking is actually just as important as giving. When done right, it's actually just a more creative form of giving! Some people are willing to give but they don't want to take anything from anyone. But how does it feel to live with someone who's always giving but never takes anything in return? How does it feel when you want to express your gratitude and even return a favor, but the other person refuses to accept?

Knowing how to take is an art, one that most of us need practice in. A person may feel resistance to accepting a gift and believe that his feelings are due to the other person's giving not being genuine. But how often are gifts or favors one-hundred-percent altruistic? All of us act out of a mix of motivations, and we should certainly give others the benefit of the doubt and assume that they had us at least partially in mind when giving.

However, there's another reason for being reluctant to be on the receiving end of favors, one that we might not always be aware of in ourselves. Many people try to avoid taking because they confuse gratitude with indebtedness. The consequence of receiving a gift, they believe, is: "Now I'm going to have to return the favor." They feel so much discomfort at this idea that it makes it hard even to say a simple "thank you," even when the gift *was* genuine, and even if it was something the person actually needed!

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Hard or not, however, expressing gratitude is something we should *always* do, without second-guessing why the other person acted as they did, and without wondering whether acknowledging the favor obligates you to return it (it doesn't – why would it?) Just give the giver the good feeling that comes from being appreciated, and move on. What if you don't appreciate the gift – if, for instance, your wife gave you a wallet that you don't like or need? Focus on her good intention, and appreciate that instead. Both of you will gain. What if you're sure she only had herself in mind? Maybe she's embarrassed whenever you pull out a wallet you got from one of the kids that's held together with pieces of tape. So she buys a wallet *for herself* and says she bought it for you. You should *still* say "thank you." Give her the gift of your appreciation and the good feeling that comes with it. It doesn't matter why she gave you the wallet – what really matters is building your relationship.

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The trick in relationships is to be able to give freely without expecting anything in return. It's not easy, but it's often what your relationship will benefit from most, and essentially you *are* getting quite something in return.

In this case, if you can do a favor and *not* point out that you're doing it for the other person, even though when they do the same, you thank them warmly, that's great. Try to give the impression that what you're doing is for both of you so that the other person doesn't feel indebted for taking. Your example of taking your spouse out because you think the relationship needs it is an excellent one. And even if you think it's just your spouse that needs it and you could manage without it, it doesn't matter. You can still say, "Thank you, we had a great time."

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It's easy to find ways to give. What about finding ways to take? When I ask a husband how often he asks his wife for a favor, I point

out that if he never asks for anything, he's giving her the message that he's fine without her. The trick is to ask for something small enough that the person won't have a problem with it. You should create opportunities for your spouse to give to you, and by doing so, you're giving them the wonderful feeling of being needed and appreciated.

Possibly this is something we can learn from the Avos and Imahos, although as always one must exercise much caution when offering simple explanations regarding people we cannot ever hope to comprehend. I once heard a *darshan* explain what seems to be an inconsistency in Avraham Avinu's policy regarding gifts. He pointed out that while Avraham Avinu refused to accept gifts from Avimelech, when Sarah was taken by Pharaoh and he wanted to give them gifts in compensation, Avraham did agree to accept them. In the case of Avimelech, the *darshan* explained, Avraham didn't want to create a situation in which people would think that his riches were due to Avimelech rather than from Hashem alone. When Pharaoh gave gifts, however, and said that he was doing so because of Sarah, Avraham accepted and clearly said he was taking them on her behalf. Why? Because although Avraham didn't want either Avimelech or Pharaoh to take credit for his wealth, he did want to create the impression that his wealth was in Sarah's merit, thus "giving" her the feeling that he was "receiving" via her.

In fact, this is something we often do for our children. If a child comes to give us a drawing and says, "I made this for you," we instinctively say, "Wow, that's so nice of you," even though we know he only colored the picture because he was bored, or because he wanted your attention. But you also know your child needs your appreciation and will gain so much from it, including the encouragement to genuinely give in the future. So much of the time, adults are just children in large bodies and have the same needs.

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With all that said, it's an even better idea if both spouses can discuss doing something they will both enjoy. As much as you can both show appreciation for everything you do for and because of each other, it will move your relationship a lot further forward when you consciously work together to make each other happy.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!