

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

CUSTOM-MADE COMMUNICATION

Parshas Ha'azinu opens with Hashem describing how He will address Klal Yisrael: "Listen, Shamayim, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth."

The Imrei Chaim *ztz"l* notes that this hints at how each different audience needs the message packaged differently. When talking to *talmidei chacham*im (as the term *Shamayim* suggests), one can use firm, even harsh language, as *v'adabra*—speak implies, as they are able to hear the rebuke and take it to heart. When speaking to simple people (as the term *aretz* suggests), one needs to speak softly and gently, as *imrei-fi*—the words of my mouth implies.

People are familiar with the idea of adapting the style to the recipient when it comes to *chinuch* (*chanoch l'na'ar al pi darko*), but the truth is that this lesson applies to all relationships. While choosing the right words is of course extremely important, the manner in which we speak them is no less so.

At Kabbalas HaTorah we find a similar concept, with the Torah given to men in a different manner from women. Bringing together these two ideas teaches us that just as each person is unique, each person needs a unique approach. There are boys and men who need a gentler approach, and girls and women who would benefit from a stronger tone. Each case should be judged individually, and hopefully we will get it right and communicate effectively with everyone we encounter.

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Parshas
Haazinu
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My husband and I have been married for several years and have a number of children, *baruch Hashem*. My husband is friendly, clever, emotionally in tune, a great father, and extremely sensitive. Over the years I have become more sensitive too. This can be a wonderful thing, but it can also make things very painful.

When we got engaged, we spoke about facing life as a team, making decisions together, and communicating our desires and feelings. At first, whenever one of us was bothered by something, we would discuss it respectfully. Eventually, though, it became too much for both of us. Even beginning a conversation with, "I'd like to share something..." created tension, and it became difficult for either of us to give the other validation and reassurance. My husband has now almost completely stopped these conversations. I still believe communication is important, although not to the extent we were doing it, but when I share my feelings, he often cannot give me the reassurance or validation I need.

You often discuss "yours, mine, and ours," which makes a lot of sense to me. I also know that the husband is the head of the home, but I am unsure how these ideas fit together. Does being the head of the home mean that even in the "ours" areas, he has more say? For example, with something like choosing a school for our children, should I express my opinion and then leave the decision to him?

My husband seems to believe that a wife should not have as much say as her husband even in matters affecting them both equally. He has also said that a wife should generally not tell her husband when he is doing something wrong, although a husband may sometimes tell his wife. There may be a *halachah* he is unaware of, or something he is doing that I believe is harming our children, yet he feels I should keep quiet and leave it to him. I understand that a wife must respect her husband and I try to speak respectfully, but does respecting him mean that I should not raise something that I believe is wrong or harmful?

One example happened shortly before Shabbos, when my husband's brother urgently needed something. About twenty minutes before candle-lighting, my husband told me he was going to help him, leaving me to finish all the last-minute preparations alone. When I later told him that this hurt me, he responded that he is in charge of his own decisions and does not need my permission. I felt that instead of being the most important person in his life, other people were taking priority over me.

There are also things he does that I do not want in our home. For example, he enjoys hearing the latest gossip about people he knows, which can involve a lot of *lashon hara* and not being *dan lechaf zechus*. These are areas I have worked on, and I want our children to grow up in a home where we avoid *lashon hara* and look for the best in people. I know that I am far from perfect and have plenty to work on myself, but I sometimes feel that he does not share the same goals for what we want our home to become. When I express concerns like these, he feels that I am trying to control him and should not be commenting on how he lives his life.

Because I am sensitive, when my husband makes a decision without my input or says something that hurts me, I sometimes shut down emotionally and find it very difficult to show him love, talk normally, or even smile at him. Since he does not believe he has done anything wrong, he does not apologize, which hurts me further and makes it difficult to get out of that cycle.

I know that we have tremendous potential to build a beautiful marriage and home, but there are days when the situation feels hopeless. I also know that I should be speaking to someone who knows us personally. I have tried doing so without much success and am looking for someone else who may be able to help. In the meantime, I would greatly appreciate any guidance you can offer.



You describe an entire situation, not just a single issue, which makes it even more important that you speak to someone competent who can give you customized advice. Meanwhile, I can offer some general guidance as well as reassurance that things are not hopeless at all, even though it might feel that way sometimes.

Before I do so, I want to caution that implementing the advice I'll give may not be simple. You describe both you and your husband as sensitive, and from your letter it's clear that emotions are clouding the picture. While this is normal, it also means that sensible advice can come across as hard to accept or even just plain wrong. This is why it's so important to get input from an objective third party who can provide a more balanced perspective.

I also want to note that, had your husband been the one to reach out for advice, I would probably have offered different ideas. Since it's you asking, it will be you getting the answers. Contrary to what many people believe, real change can be achieved even with only one spouse putting in the effort. Regardless of whether your husband has more to work on than you do, you will only be cheating yourself if you wait for anyone other than yourself to make the first move.

Let's start with a general overview. You describe a great deal of disappointment, having gone into marriage with high expectations based on what you envisioned and discussed before you were engaged. There's nothing wrong with making idealistic plans for married life, as long as one remembers that they don't usually survive the clash with reality. Virtually no one has a Shabbos tish that looks just like the families portrayed in coloring books, even if they do everything "perfectly."

This is not only because, as you write, no one is perfect. There simply isn't a universally right way of doing anything—it all depends on the time, the place, the personalities, and more. There are many aspects of our lives that we can't control, and even when we truly have the best intentions, the results aren't in our hands.

The same applies to shalom bayis—even if you follow the rulebook on how to communicate down to the last detail, you still might not get picture-perfect results. Even if you have the "right" tone of voice and right choice of words, you still can't control how someone will react.

You're also disappointed at finding faults in your husband that you didn't expect. Sometimes disappointed spouses see only the faults and don't notice all the good points, which I commend you for not doing. It's important to keep noticing all the things you enjoy and appreciate in your husband, and to acknowledge that as hard as things feel at times, they would probably feel much harder if not for the many ma'alos he has.

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Your response to your disappointment has been to address the issues that seem to need fixing head-on, by "sharing" what bothers you, but "it became too much for both of us." I tend to believe that virtually anything can be communicated if one knows how to do so. But perhaps I should add a caveat and amend that to, "Everything that needs to be said can be, if done the right way."

There are things that shouldn't be said, no matter how nicely we say them. (Is there a "right" way to say, "I think you're really stupid"?) No one likes being criticized, and calling it "sharing" doesn't do much to soften the blow. Even those who tell their spouse, "Please, do tell me anything that bothers you because I really want to hear," often discover that they weren't as ready as they thought and would much prefer that the other person focus on their good points.

This is most definitely the case for sensitive people who often react emotionally to even the slightest hint of criticism. You're looking for validation and reassurance, but you're very unlikely to get it when the conversation starts with a complaint, especially if your husband doesn't know what you were hoping to hear.

Fortunately, the simple tactic of asking for precisely what you want can help a great deal. You can try saying something like, "I just want to vent a bit about this, and I might be wrong entirely. If you could just listen to me and let me know that you heard me out, that would mean a lot to me. You don't have to agree with me! Thank you."

Letting someone know they don't have to justify themselves is already a good start. If you express your issue without personalizing the message, that would be even better. For instance, instead of telling him how upset you were that he didn't help you when you were counting on him, you could describe the hard day you had and how alone you felt. If you share your feelings without blaming him for them, you have a much better chance of being heard and understood.

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Being able to step back from the way you see things and acknowledge that your husband may disagree and may even be right is vital. Each time you transmit the unspoken message, "I'm right and you're wrong," even if you are careful with how you phrase things and speak gently and respectfully, your husband may feel undermined, even if that isn't your intention.

You may be discussing an isolated issue, but he could be hearing a simple "You're no good" message, and his emotional reaction could be what blocks him from

responding the way you want him to. You can start to defuse this reaction by presenting your feelings as nothing more than feelings, and by ensuring that the vast majority of your communications with your husband focus on his good points.

This is one area where an objective observer can help you implement this advice. At present, you're feeling overwhelmed by "all the things" that bother you, and it may help to see things from an outsider's perspective.

Let's take the example you give of the time when your husband rushed off just before Shabbos to help his brother. You were hurt and interpreted his response as meaning that he cares more about his brother than he does about you.

The question is: Did your husband see it that way too? Did he rush off thinking, "Of course my brother comes first," or, "Oh no... what terrible timing! Just when my wife needs me! I hope she'll understand—it really is an emergency"? Could it be that he felt you didn't understand or credit him for wanting to help his brother out of a sticky situation? Perhaps he was hurt that you concluded he acted as he did because he doesn't care about you. This is not to suggest that his feelings are any more authentic or correct than yours. It's a question of perspective.

"You don't put me first" is such a common refrain in shalom bayis problems. This isn't because so many husbands and wives don't care about their spouse. It's because so many husbands and wives want to come first and forget that their spouse is also a person who might have the right to put himself first. He may choose to help his brother because it makes him feel good. "Shouldn't he feel good helping his wife?" Yes. But he feels good helping his brother too.

You may be able to list many times when you put your husband first and yourself second. But even if you can, I'm sure you can also list times when you put yourself first and your husband second. And that's not all that bad. Trying to nullify yourself usually doesn't last or make anyone happy.



Additionally, different things mean more to different people. You may think that having the dishes washed right after supper is really important, but your husband might think it's perfectly legitimate to leave them for an hour or two. And so he won't understand why going out to Ma'ariv before washing the dishes means that he "didn't put you first."

You could explain, on a case-by-case basis, what really matters to you and why you'll feel hurt if he doesn't prioritize your needs—but he, too, has things he feels strongly about. He could respond by telling you about all the areas in which he wants you to prioritize how he feels over how you feel. Get it?

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An approach that has a better chance of working is one that involves both spouses respecting each other's perspectives as valid. In your letter, you describe how your husband dismisses your ideas and feelings, especially in areas where he feels that as head of the home, he is the one who makes the decisions.

The concept of "mine, yours, and ours" is something I often stress, as respecting boundaries is key to harmonious relationships. That said, this does not imply that the Torah doesn't grant a husband a different status in the home. Rabbi Avigdor Miller ztz"l would often compare husband and wife to a pilot and co-pilot. The pilot is in the senior position even though both know how to fly a plane, but one can't have two pilots, each trying to wrest control from the other. Rather, the pilot needs the input of the co-pilot, and he should never ignore or intimidate the person who's there to help him be his best. As for the co-pilot, he should feel unafraid to express his opinions and provide essential information if it's lacking—but he also needs to be able to defer to the pilot's seniority.

If the co-pilot instead tries to undermine the pilot and highlight all his mistakes, the pilot may react by asserting his authority even when it would be more appropriate not to.

This concept applies in many areas of life where two equally competent people nonetheless settle into a pattern of one taking the lead and the other following, as any other arrangement is simply impractical.

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