

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# TORAH LESSONS for the HOME

{ VAYIKRA 5780 }

## SOMEONE ELSE'S EXPENSE

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### WHEN A MITZVAH ISN'T A MITZVAH

In the fourth chapter of this week's Parsha, Moshe is instructed to tell the Yidden that in the event they unwittingly do a *mitzvah* that they weren't supposed to do, they should bring a Korban. The wording is a bit confusing, though. Normally, one would not be allowed to do an *aveirah*, but a *mitzvah*??

Perhaps we can learn an important lesson from the wording here. If doing a *mitzvah* causes inconvenience or aggravation to those close to us, it is not much of a *mitzvah*. We might be very noble in our intentions and really believe that we're doing the right thing - a *mitzvah*! - but if we are hurting someone else in the process, it is anything but.

When your self-righteous actions hurt other people, it might actually be worse than someone who hurts them intentionally. Because when you know you're doing something wrong, there's a chance you'll feel bad and make amends. But if you are convinced

that what you're doing is a big *mitzvah*, there is no hope for you to repent. One of the previous Rebbes very aptly put it: "I prefer a villain who knows he's a villain, to a Tzaddik who knows he's a Tzaddik." The latter will consider himself above reproach, and will never realize he is doing something very wrong.

Years might pass before you realize that you were in the wrong. An older gentleman once told me that there was a certain practice he adhered to, which he thought was highly commendable. He was aware that it was bothersome to his wife, but he surmised that because he was doing what was so obviously right - it wasn't important to heed his wife's concerns. On the contrary, he considered this an additional sacrifice that will only intensify the merit of his big *mitzvah*. Only many years later, when he noticed his children making the same mistake, he finally realized how wrong he had been. After all, it is so much easier to notice someone else's flaws than our own.

### ONE DIMENSIONAL JUSTIFICATION

When we do something wrong, knowingly or unknowingly, we tend to justify our actions. We might even pick out one thing that is undoubtedly right, and then assume that because of that, everything we did was also okay.

Reb Yankele Galinsky helps us understand this phenomenon by examining the story of Reish Lakish in Gemara (Gittin 47a): Reish Lakish had given himself over to a band of cannibals, but he was not scared. He knew that they would not kill him before they gave him his final wish. So, he hatched a plan to execute them as part of his final wish. His plan worked and he killed them all.

But the question begs to be asked. He was at the mercy of ruthless murderers. How was he so sure that they would actually grant him his request? If they were liable to kill, what would prevent them from doing so from one minute to the next, simply because they fancied it? How could he be so calm relying on such a flimsy promise?

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His reasoning, which turned out to be correct, was that everyone – even coldblooded killers – has an innate desire to feel virtuous. Nobody wants to think of themselves as completely depraved and beyond hope. This group of gangsters justified their behavior by asking their victims for their final wish and then granting it to them. That way, as they committed their disgusting crimes, they felt serene knowing that his final wish came true, thanks to them!

If such heartless individuals were able to convince themselves of their piety, then it's certainly believable that regular people, who are for the most part righteous, might justify their behavior by telling themselves that they're doing something right.

That is why, when we are not sure if the mitzvah we want to do is actually required, especially if it causes aggravation or discomfort to our spouse or family members, we need to discuss it with an objective outsider. When we are entwined in the situation, it is very hard to see past our own desires and preconceived notions to really take someone else's opinions into consideration.

### **STRINGENCIES... ON WHOSE EXPENSE?**

When we follow the Torah, it should make us happy and give us pleasure. It should bring peace into our home. A marriage that is built on Torah principles is a happy, comfortable one. When we use the Torah as an excuse to wreck the peaceful atmosphere in our homes, it can be considered *mishtamesh b'sharvito shel Melech* (like the king's servant who used

the king's scepter to hurt him), similar to a *mitzvah habo be'veira*.

Yes, we need to spend time learning. But is Erev Yom Tov, when your wife is falling apart from all the hard work, really the time to do it? Yes, we need to help out the poor and needy by cooking for them, but if we're completely exhausted by the time our husband gets home from a long day at work, was it really the appropriate thing to do?

There's a famous story of the Satmar Rav Zt"l. One of his *chassidim* came to see him in the days leading up to Pesach, and he proudly told the Rebbe that in his home only "*heimishe*" food is eaten for the duration of Pesach. They don't buy things like potato starch or cakes and cookies in the stores. "That's very nice!" The Rebbe told him. "And how do you make the wine?"

"Well, wine is the one thing that I do buy." The *chassid* admitted.

"Ah! Because that would be something that *you* would have to prepare, right?" The Rebbe subtly chastised him.

When both husband and wife want a specific stringency, then by all means go ahead and do it. But if your holiness comes entirely at the expense of someone else, then perhaps it is not so holy after all.

### **THE SOURCE OF THE ZEAL**

Sometimes, when we feel overly enthusiastic to do a mitzvah, it might be driven by the wrong intentions. Reb Hershele from Ziditchov once felt a strong desire to don his Tefillin in the afternoon. As he was about to do so, he stopped himself and thought, "Wait! Normally, a *mitzvah* doesn't

come so easily to me. The Yetzer Hara makes sure that I find a million excuses as to why I can't do it just then. Why is he suddenly not interfering?" And that helped realize that it may not be like it seemed.

When we have an urge to do something that we perceive as a *mitzvah* that inconveniences or disturbs others, and yet we're still full of idealism and zeal – perhaps this enthusiasm is not coming from the right source.

When we do what's right, it should not only make us feel accomplished, it should also be pleasant for others. When instead of making them proud of us it makes them resentful, then it's highly unlikely that it is indeed a *mitzvah*.

Even if it actually is a wonderful thing you want to do – in fact, you've verified by asking others – but if it might cost you the peace in your home, maybe the ends do not justify the means. *Shalom Bayis* itself is also a big *mitzvah*.

### **PASS UP THE GOOD DEED – INVITE HASHEM IN**

*Chumros* in and of themselves are not a problem. It is only an issue when it's done at the expense of other people. When your stringencies require the sacrifice of "others", then it becomes the opposite of a *mitzvah*.

The *Toldos Yakov Yosef* quotes his Rebbe the *Baal Shem Tov zy"l*, as saying: *Chazal* teach us that that hosting guests is a greater mitzvah than greeting the *Shechina*. That is to imply that even if you feel that certain guests don't belong at your table because they speak ill of others, and *Lashon Hara* prevents Hashem from entering your home,

you should still invite them and forgo having the *Shechina* at your table! How much more so should we consider passing up on self-made “*mitzvos*” that stand in the way of our *Shalom Bayis*, when by doing so we not only don’t shoo the *Shechina* out – we are actually inviting him in. Because what is a greater source of Hashem’s presence in our home than peace between husband and wife?

### USING TORAH AS A COVER-UP

We need to be very careful not to do things supposedly for the sake of Hashem and His Torah, when in fact we’re just thinking about ourselves or our image.

People are allowed to have different tastes, preferences, and even standards. You don’t have to agree to everything your husband or wife asks you to do. But when, instead of telling them that this is a

personal preference of yours, you tell them that it’s a *mitzvah* in the Torah – or in the opposite case, an *aveirah*, then you’re simply being deceitful. Let’s say your wife wants you to go or do with her something that is not *Assur*, yet you don’t feel is appropriate for you to do, and that’s okay! Don’t tell her that it’s prohibited, if it most certainly isn’t. Instead, tell her the honest truth, that it’s a standard you have, or a personal thing of yours.

It can be very tricky to figure out when our intentions are really noble, and when we are just being selfish and inconsiderate. That is why it is important to have an ongoing relationship with a Rav or Rabbi, even before any issues arise. When your Rav knows you well, he can properly advise you whenever a question comes up.

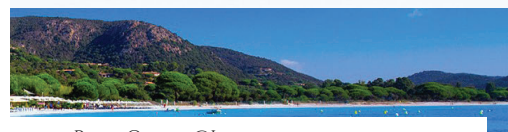
Having the right guidance will prevent so many situations from ever becoming problematic.

### CHINUCH: THE RIGHT REASONS

In chinuch, we need to keep the end goal in mind. It is indeed our job to raise our children with the proper values and teach them right from wrong. However, when we want to tell them off, it’s important to honestly ask ourselves if we are really doing it for the sake of their *chinuch*, or because their actions might damage “our” image.

Even in a case where you do need to tell him he’s doing something wrong; does it have to be right then? Maybe you should wait until you’re in private, or maybe you just have to give it a little time and he’ll mature on his own.

We need to remember that making sure your child does not get disenchanted by Yiddishkeit is also a very big *mitzvah*.



PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND ANY QUESTIONS, ON THIS TOPIC OR ANY TOPIC TO [RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG](mailto:RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG)

### QUESTION:

How do I make Bein Hazmanim less tense and more productive? How can I get my son to get up on time and help around the house instead of lazing about from morning till night?

### ANSWER:

“Who is wise?” the Mishna in Pirkei Avos asks, “Someone who sees what’s about to happen.” But, wouldn’t that be a prophet? Not necessarily. A wise person can take stock of what happened in the past, and even if he can’t know for sure what he should do, at the very least he can know what not to do. When you are proactive instead of reactive, you have a much higher likelihood of succeeding.

Try to see things from your son’s perspective. Perhaps he is stressed out from his tight schedule in Yeshiva and needs some downtime when he’s home. Maybe he feels constantly judged by you, which drains his emotional resources. Maybe all he hears when he’s home are your negative comments?

Aside from trying your best to remain positive and constantly praising him, try to throw the ball into his court. Ask him, “What time do you want to get up tomorrow? What chore would you like to help me with?” When he continuously hears you praise him, he will feel much better about himself. And when he feels good about himself, it is much more likely that he will agree to get up on time and help you.

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