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CAUTION: "EXTREME GIVING" IS HAZARDOUS TO RELATIONSHIPS¹

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A central goal in developing *middos* is to value peace, to avoid hurting others, and to avoid conflict by being *mevater* (conceding) to the other person.²

Likewise, the key role that being a "giver" (אָבֵן) plays in good relationships is emphasized in all *frum* marriage guidebooks. This is very understandable since being a self-centered "taker" (אָבֵן) will most certainly destroy relationships. It is not surprising, therefore, that many people conclude that the more giving people are the better their relationships will be, without an upper limit.

In truth, however, any positive attribute taken to the extreme becomes unbalanced and destructive.³ This article will explore how "extreme giving" can undermine a relationship.

What can possibly be wrong with being an "extreme giver"!?

Many *gedolim* have been celebrated for their extreme level of giving and caring and have been extolled for being selfless. So what can be wrong if people aspire to emulate them? The basic answer is that for the vast majority of people, who are not *tzadikim*, excessive giving, especially when combined with an excessive reluctance to ever be on the receiving end, results in strong feelings of resentment. Often, they are strongly invested in seeing themselves as "super givers," so they repress their feelings of resentment and, if asked, will strenuously deny any such feelings. These repressed feelings can express themselves in passive-aggressive behavior,

¹ I thank my son, Ari Sorotzkin, LCSW, and my son-in-law, Shaya Fishman, LCSW, both accomplished therapists, for their significant contribution to this article.

² See the *sefer* **אדרבה: ותן בלבנו** by רבי יוסף אנגל for extensive documentation on the importance of these traits. " (, ") " (:)³

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Avoidance of taking

The imperative to constantly give is often accompanied by an avoidance of taking. Let us first discuss a marriage where both spouses are reasonable people. One of them, let us say the husband, has a need or desire to be exemplary in his *middos* (character traits). He goes above and beyond in doing for his wife, while hardly ever asking for anything from her. Even if she offers to make him a coffee, for example, he says "no thank you, I can do it myself."

This would seem to be a foundation for a wonderful relationship. However, experience has shown this to actually be a prescription for marital conflict. After an extended period of this self-sacrifice the husband will inevitably become resentful. Since feeling resentful conflicts strongly with his self-image, he does not allow himself to be aware of these feelings. Instead he will distance himself emotionally as a means of both feeling less upset and as a passive-aggressive expression of his anger. If his wife expresses anger at his emotional distancing he will be bewildered by her unhappiness since he is doing everything to be the perfect husband. This further inflames his resentment.

Rav Wolbe makes this same point in the context of the role of a husband in a *frum* home. A husband should not run his home with perpetual concessions to his wife, says Rav Wolbe. Likewise, he should not be excessively humble in household matters, never asking for anything from his wife. Rather, he should express his preferences regarding food and other household matters. Likewise, Rav Ezriel Erlinger also emphasizes that it is "permitted" for a husband to ask his wife to do things for him, (but, of course, it needs to be within a loving relationship). Even a gentle critical comment within a loving relationship is not an inherent conflict to *shalom bayis*.⁶

The Chazon Ish was disapproving of people who treated their spouses reverently and with excessive courteousness. This, he said, can indicate a cold relationship, lacking closeness.⁷

⁶ רבי שלמה וולבה () , (5') :
אין איפה לנהל את הבית בויתורים תמידיים לרצון האשה.
הרב עזריאל ארלנגר ...
קובץ אגרות קודש מהחזון איש () ' ' ' :[
... ' , " " " ,6' "] .

The imperative to know how to take

The importance of knowing how to take is discussed at length in a phenomenal *sefer* on marriage and intimacy, *Binyan HaBayis* (Rav Moshe Aharon Shuchatowitz) where he relates what he heard from Rav Shach on this topic. Rav Shach also emphasized the importance of giving in marriage. But he added that while being a giver is very important in a relationship, it is equally important to know how to take. He was critical of those who avoided dependency on their spouses. On the contrary! Dependency of spouses on each other is the proper Torah way.⁸

Rabbi Shuchatowitz describes a Kollel couple who were married for a few months and the husband now wants a *get*. He was very angry that his wife always made him chocolate cake even though he does not like chocolate cake. After discussing it with each of the couple it turned out that the wife was sure that her husband liked chocolate cake because when they visited her grandmother as a *chosson* and *kallah*, the grandmother served chocolate cake, and the *chosson* politely praised the cake profusely.

Rabbi Shuchatowitz asked the husband why he did not tell his wife that he does not like chocolate cake. The husband was highly offended. "Have I stooped to such a low level that I have to discuss cake with my wife!" (The author notes ironically: He is willing to get divorced over chocolate cake, but not to discuss cake with his wife, *chas v'shalom*).⁹

Rav Dessler's comments on being a taker

Rabbi Shuchatowitz, citing the *mashgiach*, Rav Dov Yoffe, decries the common mistaken assumption that *sholom bayis* is dependent on the *midah* of *chesed*. There is no source for this in Chazal or *rishonim*, he insists. The problem with this approach is that when we deal with *chesed* the giver feels superior and the recipient feels shame and inferiority. This induces emotional separation between the couple. The husband will experience his wife as a burden, a needy *nebech* that Hashem obligated him to care for. The wife, for her part, is not likely to want to be a wife who is a recipient of her *baal chessed* husband. In truth a person should care for his wife because she's part of him. This is possible even for most people who are not such great *baalei chasodim*.¹⁰

⁸ בספר בנין הבית (175' מרן הרב שך:)

⁹ בספר אורחות הבית (173-174')

¹⁰ ספר בנין הבית (139-141') רב דב יפה

Similarly, Rabbi Shuchatowitz asserts that a mistaken belief has taken root in our community that the basis of love is the desire to give. (This plays a role in encouraging "extreme giving.") He states that there is no source for this in Chazal or in the *rishonim* or early *achronim*. This error is based on a mistaken belief that a sense of self is the root of all evil - so love must require not thinking about the self and only wanting to please the other. This idea is foreign to Yiddishkeit. There is a bad self-centeredness and there is a healthy caring for the self. In fact, our love for others is based on our love for ourselves - **כמוך** . The foundation for love is on a higher level than the foundation for *chesed*. It may be true that love induces a desire to give and giving may promote love, but love is more elevated and deeper. Love according to the Torah is the desire to connect to something that belongs to me but is currently separate from me.^{11, 12}

Rabbi Shuchatowitz cites Rav Dessler's oft quoted comment that "the day a couple starts making requests of each other, that is the beginning of the end of their happiness."

The author asserts that it is a mistake to understand this literally. It is true that great Tzadikim avoid asking favors from others. Doing for one's self, in contrast, is certainly not a problem [and his wife is like himself]. Rav Dessler's objection, explains the author, is only where one asks for unnecessary things because one enjoys taking advantage of others.¹³

The author relates an extreme example of a newly married young man who was determined to be the best husband ever. He did not let his wife do anything for him. He did allow some exceptions - e.g. he let her iron his shirts, but he would not allow her to wash his dirty laundry. He kept his laundry separate and he would wash it himself. This is a prescription for disaster.

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11 ספר בנין הבית (' 153-154): - ?

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12 רבי שמעון שקופ

13 בנין הבית (' 174) :

הערה: לדרוש דרישות

לבקש

": (39 ' ") [] ."

Besides the resentment that inevitably builds up, there is also the inability of a close relationship developing when he is keeping his wife at arm's length.

Likewise, Rav Michel Yehuda Lefkowitz was consulted by parents of a girl who was thinking of marrying a *bochur* who was a big *masmid* even though she was not so happy with his personality. He advised the parents: "If she feels she would be sacrificing her happiness by marrying this *bochur*, but is willing to do so for the sake of his Torah, she should not go ahead with it. About this, the Chazon Ish commented, "we are not looking for *korbonos!*"¹⁴

Extreme situations

There are extreme situations where one of the spouses, let us say the wife, is very emotionally needy, unreasonably demanding and critical. The husband, especially if he has an excessive need (because of his own developmental history) to be a "people pleaser", will bend over backwards to keep her happy, no matter how unreasonable her demands are. When these attempts inevitably fail to satisfy his wife, he will blame himself for her unhappiness and he will redouble his efforts. When he eventually realizes that no matter how hard he tries to please her, she will still be angry with him, he will simmer with resentment.

There is an amazing explanation from the Steipler that highlights the danger of overdoing *chesed* for someone who is extremely needy with feelings of entitlement, since it will lead to resentment.

The *gemora* in Shabbos () says in the name of R' Elazar: ...

... - it is prohibited to have mercy for someone who has no sense (or insight)... This requires an explanation, says the Steipler. After all, we are required to show mercy even to animals, so we should certainly be required to do so for a person with limited intelligence!! To clarify this perplexing *chazal*, the Steipler explains that the *gemora* is not referring to someone with limited intelligence, such as a child or the like. Certainly, it is a great mitzvah to help such people in any way possible. Rather, it is referring to someone with an inflated ego and a sense of entitlement who doesn't have the sense to feel and show appreciation to those who help him. Rather he exhibits contempt and derision to those benefactors. He sees it as a weakness on their part and he imagines that he is doing them a great favor for allowing them to serve him. He happily adds them to his list of those obligated to be of service to him.

The Steipler notes that *chazal* do not say that one is simply not obligated () to help such a person. Rather it is prohibited () to do so! This is because of the following anticipated outcome of helping such a person. (1) It reinforces his sense of entitlement. (2) The recipient will not feel or express gratitude to his benefactor thus encouraging bad *middos*. (3) In order to justify

¹⁴ *The Heart of a Nation* p. 308

his lack of appreciation the recipient will complain that his benefactor isn't doing enough for him, he came at an inconvenient time, the benefactor offered him a job not important enough for his exalted status etc. as is familiar to those experienced in this area. This encourages terrible *middos*. (4) This behavior will cause the benefactor to feel great resentment toward the recipient. Instead of creating feelings of love that should result from acts of *chesed*, it results in resentment and hate! (5) Finally, as is usual in these cases, when the benefactor becomes reluctant to continue helping this ungrateful person, and so perhaps gives him less than before, the recipient becomes furious, as if the benefactor robbed him! So the result of showing mercy to such a person results in intense hate on both sides. This is why *chazal* say this is forbidden. And perhaps this is the torment *chazal* are referring to in the quote above.¹⁵

Some people have claimed that pleasing a wife at any cost, no matter how unreasonable her demands is the Torah way and eventually leads to a happy marriage. In fact, someone wrote a *sefer* years ago extolling this approach from what he claimed was both a Torah and a psychological perspective.¹⁶ In response, Rav Menashe Klein wrote a lengthy *teshuva* harshly criticizing this approach. He cites numerous Torah sources proving that the Torah does not want a person to permit his spouse to mistreat him with impunity. Likewise, he asserts that common sense dictates that this will not lead to a *garden of peace*.¹⁷

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¹⁶ The author of that *sefer* was subsequently charged with practicing medicine without a license.
 : " : (") רבי מנשה קליין " 17

Open communication and assertiveness

The health and well-being of a relationship is dependent on open communication. Many people find this challenging because this often causes friction in the short-term. This is especially so when the spouse is particularly sensitive and needy, but it is true in all relationships.

Buying short-term peace by avoiding unpleasant communication comes with a tremendously high long-term price. The need to avoid conflict at all costs is more common by those who grew up in high-conflict families. Conflict at any level re-traumatizes them. They often also have an unhealthy need to please others further feeding the reluctance to communicate openly. This is especially common by those who were "peace-keepers" in their families of origin.

The Alter from Kelm attributes Haman's insistence of serving everyone in Achashveros's party according to their wishes (אשר יאמרו) to his unhealthy need to please everyone. Mordechai, in contrast, accepted the fact that it is impossible to please everyone and, in fact, some members of Sanhedrin distanced themselves from him because they were critical of his involvement in politics (לרוב).¹⁸

Letting someone act abusively toward you as a means of appeasing him or her always backfires. There are numerous sources in Chazal that when you are upset at someone, it is important to discuss it openly in order to resolve the issue. Sweeping the anger under the rug is not the Torah way.

The Netziv discusses this issue in his discussion on the *posuk* in Kedoshim:

Elaborating on the Ramban, he explains that if you feel someone wronged you don't keep this hate in your heart. Rather *vikuach* - (argument, discussion, debate, dispute). [This is obviously referring to a civil argument not a fight]. This gives the other person an opportunity to explain his action, showing that it was a misunderstanding, or perhaps he will apologize. This can result in the issue being resolved rather than causing simmering anger and hate. The Netziv cites the Midrash that drives this point home by proclaiming that "any love that does not include *tochacha* is not truly love, any peace that does not include *tochacha* is not truly peace."¹⁹

¹⁸ (:) " : . אסתר רבה () : " - ") - , הסבא מקלם) :

"... (:) : . " : " : . [באבן עזרא :] : : (:) " העמק דבר ¹⁹ הרמב"ן

(, בראשית רבה) ["]

This advice is all the more necessary for the husband-wife relationship where true love and peace is so vitally necessary. In fact, Chazal have little pity for the misery suffered by someone who is so desperate to avoid conflict with his wife that he ends up with a controlling wife. Chazal considers this as a problem the person brought on himself and he has only himself to blame.²⁰

Love and assertiveness: a two-pronged approach

A husband will often emotionally detach from his harsh and overly-critical wife as a means of avoiding anger and conflict. This only induces more anger in the wife who feels emotionally abandoned. The husband may have grown up in a home where emotional needs were not recognized and/or did not play a central role in family life. The focus was on behavior and not on feelings (ōhuman doingsö rather than ōhuman beingsö). The husband, whose behavior is exemplary, will be perplexed why his wife is angry ó after all, he is **doing** everything right. His wife may be wondering the same thing since she may also find it difficult to identify the husband's emotional distancing as the source of her pain.

When working with such a husband in therapy, I find it important for the husband to understand clearly the historical reasons why this is so challenging for him and his wife.²¹ Likewise he needs to be helped to clearly see the destructive pattern of his reaction to his spouse's unreasonable behavior.

Many people perceive the issue of defending themselves in a binary fashion. They either passively accept being the target of unreasonable criticism, insult and abuse or they lash out aggressively. In fact, these two reactions often come together. First the person reacts passively for a while. While on the surface he seems passive, underneath he is boiling with resentment. When he can't take it anymore he blows up. He will speak and act aggressively rather than assertively. He will even angrily bring up complaints about issues he truly made peace with

גבעת שאול

גמרא²⁰

²¹ Some therapists feel that this step is unnecessary. The goal should be to fix the problem. Why is it important to understand what happened in the person's early years that created this challenge? But I find that without this knowledge the person's self-esteem is undermined by harsh self-criticism. "Why am I so sensitive?" "Why am I so unreasonable!" "Why can't I have reasonable reactions like everyone else?" Even worse, in order to avoid this self-flagellation, the person will stubbornly deny that he over-reacted even if he clearly did. By understanding his over-sensitivity as being the result of being constantly criticized, for example, he will more easily tolerate being honest about his reactions and thus will be more able to work on overcoming these difficulties.

previously.²² He is much worse off than he was previously, because his wife can now focus on his inappropriate reactions rather than on his legitimate grievances. This will make him all the more convinced that his only option is to intensify his passivity until the next outburst.

In order to repair the damage to the relationship and to create a new dynamic that will avoid these issues in the future, I encourage the husband to reverse course. He needs to be more loving and emotionally attentive to his wife while, at the same time, responding more assertively (not aggressively) to unreasonable demands and criticism. This will actually allow him to be kinder and nicer without feeling resentful.²³

The challenge of identifying what is reasonable

For people who were themselves subjected to unreasonable demands and criticism growing up, reasonableness was never a prerequisite for criticism. If both spouses have this type of early history then it is particularly challenging. The criticizer won't feel bound by reasonableness while the criticized won't be able to distinguish between reasonable expectations that need to be seriously addressed and unreasonable demands or criticism that need to be challenged. He will react to both with passive acquiescence, hostile outburst, or passive aggressiveness.

An example of giving credence to unreasonable demands

Dovid told his wife when he left the house that he'd be home at 6 pm. He came home at 6:10. His wife starts berating him for being unreliable, untruthful etc. He tries to excuse himself: he got stuck behind a school bus etc. She rejects his excuses and continues berating him. By giving excuses he gives credence to the criticism. Rather, he should make clear that he doesn't need to explain why he's 10 minutes late.²⁴

... (107 ' ") מכתב מאליהו ²²

²³ In marriages with these issues, marriage counseling is usually indicated, often in conjunction with individual psychotherapy. Using the approach suggested here will enhance the work of the marriage counseling. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the more critical spouse to refuse to go to marriage counseling claiming that "it's all my spouse's fault" so he or she should go to therapy. In those situations the approach I recommend is the next best option and can be quite effective. [See Dr. David Allen's book (1988), *A family systems approach to individual psychotherapy*.]

²⁴ In this case there was no specific need for the husband to be home exactly 6 pm (i.e. his wife wasn't waiting for him to come home in order to take the baby to the doctor or the like). This also happened before the days of cell phones so he couldn't call from the car that he'd be late.

An example of an assertive response

Chaim struggled with *parnasa* for many years. Recently he finally landed a job that pays well and the financial pressure receded. His wife, Miriam, always spent more than he earned racking up credit card debt. He felt too intimidated to do more than meekly plead with her to restrain her spending. Now that he was earning more her spending became even more extreme. She would mention that her friend Dina's husband bought her an expensive piece of jewelry for *yom tov* and how would it make her look if she didn't get something similar. I asked Chaim what Dina did. It turns out she runs a very successful business. Miriam, in contrast, always made it clear that she has no interest in working so she is a housewife with full-time help. It didn't dawn on Chaim that his wife's comparing herself to her friend was unreasonable since Dina's family enjoyed a dual income. Even when he did realize this point he felt that it would be very wrong (and his wife would be very upset) if he mentioned it.

There is a *gemarah* where we can see how to respond to an unreasonable request. The *gemarah* (Kesuvos 62b) relates that during the time that Rav Akiva and his wife Rochel were living in dire poverty he promised her that one day when he gets rich, he'll buy her an expensive piece of jewelry. Rav Akiva did eventually become rich and bought her this piece (). The Yerushalmi (,) relates that when Rav Gamliel's wife saw this piece she insisted that her husband get one for her also. He told her that when she will exhibit the same *mesiras nefesh* for Torah as Rav Akiva's wife he will get one for her too. Perhaps Chaim could also tell his wife in a very calm manner that if she would also bring substantial income to the family budget, he would be able to afford expensive jewelry for her.

Advantages of responding assertively

Responding assertively to unfair accusations and demands has many advantages. Being the target of chronic attack undermines the person's self-esteem. This is especially true if he grew up with too much criticism, so that he is likely to assume that he deserves the onslaught ó no matter how unreasonable it is. His wife's unhappiness in and of itself makes him guilty just like he felt it was his responsibility to keep his parents happy.

An added benefit of assertiveness is that it dramatically reduces the frequency and intensity of the critical assaults (The rate of reduction depends on the original level of unreasonableness and on how long the vicious cycle of attack and emotional withdrawal/angry outbursts has been allowed to fester). This will allow the husband to focus on improving the relationship and reverse the vicious cycle. He will also be able to be more agreeable to his wife's occasional less-than-reasonable requests.

for a good marriage. True *sholom bayis* is when couples successfully learn to bridge and resolve the inevitable differences.²⁸

A *talmid* of Rav Wolbe describes how a husband who is upset at his wife avoids saying anything when they are getting along well. Why ruin the pleasant mood? Instead he waits until he is in a tense and grouchy mood and then all his resentment comes pouring out in a manner totally not conducive to a peaceful resolution.²⁹

A University of Washington study of newlywed couples showed that couples who argued relatively little were happier than combative ones. When the same couples were checked three years later, however, those with an early history of bickering were more likely to have found stability in their marriages, whereas couples who prided themselves on their equanimity were in troubled relationships or already divorced.³⁰

Peace at the price of the children

One can argue that a spouse has the right to try to keep the peace at any price - even at the cost of being subjected to relentless, unreasonable criticism. While I have tried to show in this article that this is a short-sighted approach that will inevitably fail, nonetheless a spouse can decide that this is what he or she wants to do. However, "peace at any price" becomes particularly troublesome when it is the children who are paying the price. It is clear that when children witness this type of behavior between their parents it causes the children significant emotional damage with long lasting negative consequences.³¹ What is more, the abusive spouse almost always also targets the children which amplifies the emotional carnage.

Some parents justify passively allowing this situation by quoting authoritative sources that emphasize the importance of *sholom bayis* for children's healthy development. However, it seems clear that such an argument would only make sense regarding dealing with relatively minor differences between spouses, not to permitting a spouse to verbally abuse a child. Certainly, if someone's husband wanted to send their child to public school they wouldn't claim that the supreme value of *sholom bayis* obligates them to passively accept this! Is causing severe emotional damage to a child any different?!

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³⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/21/science/want-a-happy-marriage-learn-to-fight-a-good-fight.html>

³¹ See my article: "The impact of marital disharmony on children" for documentation.

