

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 9 - Initiative on the part of the wife



Today's newsletter is a summary of a shiur that I gave on parshas Vayeitzei. If you'd like to listen to the full shiur, you can find it on inspiredtorah.com.

Some people seem to have a working assumption that initiation of intimacy is strictly a man's domain. In all likelihood, this assumption is based on the pasuk in parshas Breishis that says, "*v'el isheich tesukaseich v'hu yimshal bach*, and towards your husband is your desire but he shall rule over you". Rashi even explains the pasuk to mean, "You will not have the nerve to verbally demand intimacy. Rather, he

will rule over you. It is all from him and not from you."

That certainly sounds like initiating intimacy is the sole domain of the man, doesn't it?

The truth is, though, that this assumption is actually a misconception. In many cases, it's a terrible misconception because it can lead to serious problems.

Chazal tell us that divrei Torah are "impoverished in one place and wealthy in another". Meaning, if you want to attain a complete and comprehensive grasp and understanding of any given topic, don't assume that what you learned in one particular pasuk, mishna, or gemara is all there is to the topic. You've got to make sure you know what it says about this topic in other pesukim, mishnayos, or gemaros before you form your conclusions.

And our current topic is a great example of this axiom.

"Any woman who demands of her husband," says the Gemara in Eiruvin 100b, "to engage with her in the devar mitzvah (of intimacy), will have children that even in the generation of Moshe there were none like them."

The proof that the Gemara brings for this statement is Leah imeinu. "And Leah went out to greet him, and she said to me shall you come..." The words that Leah imeinu used – *eilay tavo* – are practically identical to the words that Yaakov avinu used, when the first seven years of work were completed, to demand from Lavan the wife that he was promised. *V'avoa eileha*. Rashi there is bothered by the question, how could Yaakov avinu talk like that? As Rashi puts it: "Even the crassest boor doesn't talk like that!" Rashi explains that Yaakov was not demanding to be with his wife for the sake of personal gratification; rather, the meaning of his words was this: "I am already 84 years old and I need to bring twelve tribes into the world!"

What is clear, though, is that the words *v'avo'a eileha* are a clear reference to *biah*, intimacy. Accordingly, Leah imeinu's words ought to be understood in the same vein. *Eilay tavo*. She was apparently making a direct, explicit demand for intimacy.

Of course, the Gemara does not leave this statement unchallenged. Don't we learn, objects the Gemara, from the words *v'hu yimshal bach* that the proper mode of behavior for women is to "demand in the heart"?!

The Gemara's resolution to this apparent contradiction is *ki ka'amrinan d'artzuyei meratzei kameih*.

Now, what exactly the Gemara means by that is a *machlokes rishonim*. Some rishonim explain that Leah imeinu was *not* making an explicit reference to intimacy. Rather, the meaning of her words *eilay tavo* is "come to my tent". And what the Gemara means, according to these rishonim, is that it is considered a very positive thing for a woman to "demand" intimacy not by verbally asking for it but by doing things like dressing up in a highly attractive manner and engaging her husband in sweet talk such that his interest for intimacy will naturally be aroused.

Other rishonim, though, explain that the Gemara is not backtracking from the straightforward understanding that we are discussing a clearcut verbalization. According to these other rishonim, what the Gemara means by *artzuyei meratzei kameih* is that it all depends on how she says it. If a woman were to demand intimacy in an aggressive, assertive, dismissive, brazen manner out of a sense of entitlement that if she doesn't get her way she is going to be upset – that is the type of demand that is highly unbecoming. But if she expresses her desire to engage in intimacy in a manner of appeasement and cajoling such that her husband will naturally be aroused and happy to oblige, that is considered very positive.

In terms of the *halacha l'maaseh*, I have heard from some rabbanim who take the latter approach whereas other rabbanim did not feel comfortable with that.

Be that as it may be – and I would like to emphasize that the point of this newsletter is not to presume to provide final *psak halacha* for the readers regarding all the various and sundry details, but mainly to disabuse those of a misguided notion that they may be harboring – but, coming back, be that as it may be, the following two points are as clear as can be.

Number one – according to all opinions, not only is there no problem for a woman to take the initiative to see to it that intimacy will take place, it is specifically considered highly praiseworthy for her to do so. Yes, there is a *machlokes* regarding the specific parameters of that initiative-taking, but all are in agreement regarding the essential point that a woman taking such an initiative is a very positive thing. For a woman to do things that arouse her husband to want to engage with her in intimacy is, according to Chazal, a highly praiseworthy mode of behavior.

Number two – even according to the opinion that holds that a woman is not supposed to explicitly verbalize her desire to engage in intimacy, it is only just that which is meant to be avoided: an explicit verbalization. But a hint, even a very broad hint, is perfectly fine. After all, even according to the rishonim who explain that Leah imeinu meant "come to my tent", it was

crystal clear to Yaakov avinu for what purpose she was asking him to come to her tent. It does not seem reasonable to posit that there was room for Yaakov avinu to not get the point. So, even according to this opinion, a completely unambiguous hint is included under the rubric of the highly praiseworthy *artzuyei meratzei kameih*.