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[Home](#) > Getting to Know Your Family - 04 Sensitivity and Understanding In The Home

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Using Our Good Middos And Our Bad Middos

Let us continue, with the help of Hashem, with what we have begun to discuss.

Building a Jewish home takes two people – the husband and the wife. A person has to recognize himself well, and this is the root of building the home. One cannot build upon that which he does not recognize, thus, the need for self-knowledge is the basis of building the successful Jewish home.

Let us go further with this discussion on self-awareness as it pertains to the home situation.

A person is composed of all kinds of *middos* (character traits). We each possess certain good *middos*, as well as certain bad *middos*. It is not only our good *middos* which help us reach character perfection – even our bad *middos* can aid us in reaching perfection.

In order to ascend spiritually, a person needs to ascend the “ladder of growth”, the “*sulam mutzav artzah, v’rosho magia hashomaimah*” – “the ladder which is footed on the earth, and its head reaches the heavens. Not only do we need to climb towards Heaven – which represents our good *middos* – but we must also first go through “the ladder footed on earth”, which represents our bad *middos*, our lower aspects of ourselves. So both our good *middos* and bad *middos* thus attribute to our growth.

Our worst personal *middah* is what brings us down the most from reaching our plateau. Our best *middah* is the *middah* in us that keeps us going and is the best way to reach the top of the ladder.

Our main *avodah* (mission) on this world is *tikkun hamiddos* – to perfect our character.^[1] There are actually two parts to this. The well-known part to this is the fact that we have to mainly fix our worst *middah*. But what isn’t as known is that we also have to make use of our best *middah*, and this is also part of the process of working with our *middos*.

Our Greatest Virtues Give Us Vitality

We need to each recognize what our best *middah* is and work to utilize it in our life, so that we will get the most out of our potential. Our best *middah* gives us **chiyus** (vitality) - we derive a sense of vitality from our strongest point, and it enables us to keep on going through life.

Where do we get vitality (*chiyus*) from in our life? In the general sense, we get vitality out of our Torah

learning, *davening*, and doing the *mitzvos*. This is true, and we all need this in order to get out *chiyus*. But where does each of us get vitality from on a personal level?

Although our *neshamah* (Divine soul) is the root of our existence, it is usually not revealed, so most people are not getting a sense of vitality from knowing that they are a *neshamah*.

What makes us feel more alive? Not everyone knows the answer to this vital question. There are those who are more superficial and get their vitality from what they know that society wants from them...or a person gets his vitality from what he knows his *chavrusa* wants... and even more superficial is those who get vitality from wanting certain goals in life that will give them more honor.

People are mainly getting their sense of vitality in life from any of the above factors, and are often not getting it from what they really should be getting vitality from.

Each of us receives vitality from our best *middah*. Anyone who lives an internal kind of life gets a life-giving energy from the character trait that he is best at. We all possess a certain quality that is already very refined, and one needs to discover what it is and then derive *chiyus* from it. If someone is getting *chiyus* from points in his life other than his best point, his *chiyus* will be very limited.

Many people gain vitality from the fact that they have aspirations to work on their bad *middos*, but they do not recognize the need to derive vitality from their best *middah*. When people want to feel more alive, either they gain this feeling from their general sense of motivation towards self-improvement. But this is not either enough. The person is getting vitality from his weak points, which do not give *chiyus*.

If he is working to improve himself and he is reading *sefarim* on how he can improve, he is still not getting *chiyus* from who he really is. He is getting *chiyus* from who he would like to be, not from who he is right now. This is a *chiyus* coming from a negative source, so it will not be a life-giving source of vitality.

As long as a person hasn't yet figured out his best point and his weakest point, he hasn't yet learned how to derive *chiyus* from his best point, and that means that he hasn't even started to recognize himself. He might know about the soul and he might recognize parts of it, but he doesn't recognize his own self; he has never begun. After having basic self-recognition a person can use his *daas* (mental abilities) to give inner order to his soul and improve, but without the basic self-recognition, he will never be able to start improving himself.

So every person has to figure out his best point and his worst point. Rav Chaim Vital describes the four root elements of the soul^[2]. Each person should study those words and try to discern what his most dominant element is.^[3]

Our Personal Aspirations In Our Home

In the home, we have two kinds of desires that we would like from our home. We have desires for good, and desires that are unholy. Our Sages said that "There is nothing higher than *oneg* (healthy pleasure) and there is nothing lower than *nega* (faulty pleasure)". Man yearns for *oneg*, for pleasure, but he must seek true *oneg*, not *nega*. If he searches for true *oneg*, he avoids *nega*.

A person has a deeply rooted desire, an *oneg*, that his main weakness should not bring him down and that instead his best point should dominate and enable him to succeed.

If one isn't sure about his best point and his weakest point, he doesn't know what he wants. If we ask him what he wants and he has no personal aspirations in life, then he will say he wants a good home,

a *bayis neeman b'Yisrael* (faithful Jewish home), perhaps he wants Torah in his life along with *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven) and *middos tovos* (good character traits)...which are all very general terms that don't tell us much.

But upon reflection, one can discover that we get married with personal aspirations as well. We have an innermost desire is that we not be reminded of our weakest point. We don't want others to remind us of our weakness, because it is hurtful to us. It reminds us how weak we are. Each person has different things that bother him. This is why one thing will deeply bother one kind of person, while to another person it will be tolerable. This is because each person has something else that bothers him greatly, and it is unique with each person.

In addition, we all want our potential to be utilized, and we see marriage as a way to fulfill our potential. We reach our best through using our best point. When we don't use our best point, we suffer inside ourselves.

So there are two points involved: **(1)** We don't like to be reminded of our greatest weakness. **(2)** We want to use out best ability, which will utilize our potential.

These two factors are how we build our home and succeed in it.

Sensitivity In The Home

Let's take these ideas further.

One has to know his wife's greatest virtue and he must make sure remind her about it often; and he must also know her weakest point, the thing that bothers her the most, and that part he should make sure never to remind her of.

Obviously, if a person does not really know his wife well, he won't be able to work on this point. But if one is working to understand his wife - either on his own, or together with her - he must know these two points: to know her best point and to know her most sensitive point.

Her best point is what she always will need to hear about, while her most sensitive point is the point that she does not like to be reminded of. If he brings up a point that she is sensitive to, even if he brings it up softly, she will be deeply hurt. She might suddenly start crying. The husband will wonder, "What did I do? I'm not so sensitive like this. How was I supposed to know it would hurt you? I wasn't trying to insult you."

But it's really because he is still unclear of what her sensitive points are, and that's why he didn't think there would be anything wrong with bringing up those points.

The same is true when it comes to all others we deal with: everyone has points that they don't like to be reminded of. We can relate to this very well from the following examples. If someone is childless, don't speak to him about children. It is insensitive to him. If you're speaking with a widow, don't speak about married life. (When you don't know who you are talking to, you don't know his\her sensitive areas, you might end up finding out the hard way).

It doesn't matter if it is something that bothers you or not. As long as you see that something bothers her, don't remind her of it. When you are clear what bothers her, it is easier to avoid insulting her. As long as a person has not figured out the most sensitive point of his wife, he hasn't got to the root of what bothers her, and then he doesn't understand why she is always feeling hurt by him. He will then conclude, erroneously, that his wife is being overly sensitive and unreasonable.

Emphasize Her Positive Points

That is all one side of the coin. Now let's explain the other side of the coin.

A husband must wonder, "Do I really want my wife to have it good?"

Everyone will immediately answer, "Yes", but this can still be a superficial response. In order to really your wife to have things good, you need to give her the feeling of what she is good about.

Imagine if a person wants to bestow good upon another so he buys his friend a package of fish, because he likes fish. So too, a husband might think that being nice to his wife means to buy her favorite kind of food for every Shabbos...

He has to get to the roots of her emotional needs. He must know what her main good point is and what kinds of words will make her happier when she hears about them. The point is not to merely "compliment" her superficially. He needs to tell her words that will motivate her to utilize her potential. If you tell her to try to utilize her potential in something she is weak in, you have not accomplished anything, and you have only defeated the purpose.

So if you are clear in what her best point is, and you show her how to utilize her potential through speaking to her about her best point, you are bringing out the best in her.

How to do it, exactly, will require some thinking on your own part. Each person in his home will have different kinds of advice to carry it out. But the basic outline has been said.

Each of the spouses wants to feel that he\she is equal to his\her spouse, that he\she is important, valued, and successful. If someone compliments your wife about a quality she doesn't possess, and she knows the truth - that she really does not have that quality - what does she feel like? She doesn't feel too great about herself. But if the husband clearly recognizes her best point and he praises her for it, and not only that, but he explains to her how she can further utilize her already existing potential, he gives her the ability to actualize her talents and qualities, bringing out her best.

How To React To Insults

Now let's return to discussing oneself. Each person has his greatest virtue as well as his greatest weakness. Until now we dealt with noticing your wife's greatest virtue and weakness, and now we will deal with how this can be used with oneself.

One kind of person is aware of his weaknesses, but he knows that if he were to be reminded of it by others, he would not be that insulted. But another kind of person is sensitive, and he will feel pained if his weaknesses are brought up. What will happen when his wife unintentionally insults him in that area? We are not speaking of intentional antagonizing. We are speaking of a case where the wife accidentally insults him. What should he do to deal with this?

He might voice his anger at her, and she will not know why he got so angry; in the best situation, she will realize ten minutes later what she did wrong, and she will make sure never to repeat what she did again, but deep down, she thinks that her husband is overly sensitive. She has no idea what he wants from her, so she concludes that her husband is overly sensitive, and she will lose respect for him. So it's immature and unwise to get angry with her when she wrongs you.

What does a more mature person do? He will have a calm conversation with her and explain to her that he does not like to be reminded of certain things. He can ask of her, gently, not to bring up certain topics or say certain words to him, because he is sensitive to those areas. He should not

demand it of her, but he can explain to her calmly that he is sensitive to a particular area, and that he knows that she wants the best for him, and that that is why he is asking of her to be careful in this area. She will then understand that she needs to be careful not to slight him in those areas, in a way that doesn't cause her to lose respect for her husband.

Voicing Your Annoyance: What Is The Proper Way?

Once a newlywed husband told me that his marriage is difficult. He said to me that he made a deal with his wife that each of them will tell each other at the end of the day what bothers them about the other. In this way, they were planning to improve on what needed to be fixed, by finding out from the other exactly what bothers the other.

Any sensible person can all understand that such a method of communication is destructive to marriage.

He said to me, "Believe me, I want my wife to have it good. That's why I tell her all the things she's doing that bothers me, and she says back to me all the things I'm doing that bother her, and that's how we can get along and run our marriage smoothly."

A wonderful idea, no? [Not quite.] We must understand one thing. There are many things we can request of our spouse and family, but the question is, if they will acquiesce. We have to choose what we will be picky about, and we cannot be picky about everything. When a person makes a request from his spouse, it should only be about something that he will be deeply bothered by if his request isn't honored. The wife, too, can make requests that her sensitivities not be stepped on.

But what happens often? Many people don't know what they are particular to and what they aren't particular to, so they make requests of their spouse in the form of demands: "You must do this." The spouse gets the impression that she must do so because she is being told, and not because the husband is sensitive to those areas.

Since every person is bothered by certain things, it is those areas which he is allowed to request that his requests be honored. But it is usually only one thing. If a person gets upset over every little thing that bothers him, it means he does not know what really bothers him the most, and he will make many requests and demands of his home.

So a person has to find out what bothers him the most and ask of his spouse to be careful in that area, and it should not be expressed as a demand. If each of them would make sure not to step on each other's main sensitive areas, most of the difficulties between them would not materialize in the first place. Each person has to find out what mainly bothers him, and it should be one thing alone; and then request from the spouse to be careful in that area.

To illustrate the idea, if a person is sick and he is laid up to rest in bed, it is reasonable of him to request that the family be kept quiet so he can sleep better. But it would be unreasonable of him to ask his family to be quiet every day, especially if he has many children. It is unrealistic. If he is sick, though, they will all understand that his request is reasonable, because they know that a sick person he needs some peace and rest.

So when it is clear that a certain area bothers him very much, he can request of his spouse to be careful in that area. The spouse will understand that she must be careful in that area, because he has made it clear that it bothers him. But if it hasn't been made clear to the spouse that a certain area is very bothersome and hurtful to the other, then there is will be lots of clashes and misunderstandings between them.

What usually happens, though? A person is usually not clear about what bothers him the most, and then when his spouse hurts him in that area, she has no idea what she did, and the husband who was hurt feels that he has been deeply wounded, and he feels that his wife does not understand him at all if she could hurt him in that area. The wife will not know what her husband wants from her and why is he so upset at her, so she fights back to defend herself, and then the husband gets enraged at her lack of sensitivity, and then a fight ensues. It will become a vicious cycle back and forth between them, and the results will be disastrous.

Requests Should Emanate From Love

Let's go back to the root of the matter. We have said that each of the spouses needs to be clear in their strongest area and weakest area, both towards themselves and towards the other. But we must emphasize the following point as well.

When making requests of each other, such as "Do this," and "Do that" (and some say this in a nicer tone of voice), often the requests just remain as nothing but superficial requests. But there is a whole different mindset one can have as he makes a request of his family members.

Let's say a father is trying to put his kids to sleep. The older children are coming home from school at about 10 P.M., while the younger kids are running around and laughing and playing, and they need to be put to sleep. How does the father put them to bed? One way he does it is by roaring at them like a fearsome lion, which will surely scare them all into bed. Or, he tells his child, "If you go to sleep on time for three days, I will give you a treat." There are all kinds of advice that exist. Let's get to the root of this, though.

When a father asks his children to go to sleep, what does the child think? The child is aware that his parents want him to go to bed, but he doesn't feel like doing that. He would rather play, listen to music, read, etc. He feels, "My parents want me to go to bed, but I don't want to."

But if the father would tell the child something like this: "I love you, and I want the best for you. It will be good for you if you go to sleep on time. You know it's good for you because if you don't, you will be tired tomorrow morning when you wake up. So it is for your good that I want you to go to sleep. I want you to go to sleep because I love you and I want you to have it good" - then everything would look different. The child gets the message and he does not see the requests being made of him as just requests, but as expressions of love towards him.

In other words, the child should not be hearing, "I want you to go to bed." The message the child needs to hear is, "I want you to have it good." And when he hears that message, he will understand on his own that his father's desire that he go to sleep is being done for his own good, and out of the father's love and concern for him.

Of course, we do not do everything for our children out of love. There are many motivations included in what we do for them, and love can be in the equation. However, our main motivation is that we always want the best for our children. But the child has to get the right message in requests that are made of him. If he hears that his father loves him and wants what is best for him, he feels the words of what his father is saying, and then everything will look different.

Now let's return to discussing how we make requests from a spouse. When you ask a request of a spouse, how are you asking it? "Do this", "do that", "bring this", "buy this"? It can look totally different than just superficial requests. You can make sure to lace your requests with love. You can say something like, "Please do this for me, because I know you love me and you want what is best for me." It's a whole different request, and it becomes an expression of your love.

The point is that all the requests you make of your family members needs to be about increasing the love. When there is something that is hard for you to do, and you need your wife to do it or a child to do it, and you make the request from them that it be done, the request can either be made superficially and with just getting your needs fulfilled...or it can be laced with love. You can say something like, "Do this for me because I love you, and if you do this I will love you even more."

Here is another example. When a wife asks her husband for money, like if she needs to go shopping in the supermarket, what is the reason that he should give her money?

Is it because he wrote in the *Kesubah* that he will support and feed her? Is it so that if her husband will refuse, she will take him to *Beis Din* and make sure she gets the money (after the *get*)? What does she want money from? It is because she wants it to be good for both of them, or for the children, if she would have the money to go shopping with. So the husband should give her the money with that realization, that the request being made of him is to further the love between them, so that the entire household will ultimately have it better.

Thus, the idea is that all requests you make in your home should be laced with a desire to increase your love. That should be the underlying motivation in all of your requests from the household.

If a father asks his child to help him take down the *sukkah*, what is his motivation? Is it because if not, then the father will punish him? If that is his mainly his motivation, I pity that child. His father happens to be bigger and stronger than his child, so the father thinks that he can therefore control this little person that happens to be his child, and make him do whatever he wants.

What is the reason that the father should request anything of his child? What message does he need to make sure that his child is aware of when his child helps him?

Imagine if our child would come here and ask us, "Why should I do something for you when you request something from me?" what would we answer him? We might wish to spank him and call him a *mechutzaf*, a brazen child, for asking such a question. Or, we might think he is obligated to help us because of the *mitzvah* of honoring parents. Another father would say, "Because he will get rewarded if he respects his father."

After all is said and done and we finish complaining that this child is being brazen, in the end of the day, what is the reason that our child should honor his requests? There can be many reasons, but what should be our main underlying motivation?

It should really be, "Do as I am asking, because you love your father, or your mother, or your brother, or your sister." When a child does what we ask of him, he should be getting the message that he is doing so out of love for his parents or siblings. Although he must certainly do it because there is a *mitzvah* of honoring parents, the motivation we need to develop in him is to carry out our requests out of love for us, or for love of our spouse, or for love of his\her siblings. (A child will understand how to do things out of love.)

Let's say I come home and bring home donuts for Chanukah. What do I need to tell my children? "Come, take and make a *beracha*?" That is not nearly enough. They won't be able to feel that I love them yet. I must tell them, "I love you. I bought this because I love you."

If you don't express the love, there will be no love felt in the home. The children might know intellectually that their parents love them, but they won't feel it. When children don't feel their parents' love, when they get older, they claim that their parents don't love them. This is very common nowadays. Why does this happen? It is because although the parents loved the children, they did not openly reveal it. The love was not revealed and expressed, so it was not felt in the home.

Why doesn't the child get the message that their father obviously loves them, since he gives them so much? It is because without hearing a verbal expression of love from their father, the children do not see it as their father giving them what they want. They don't register that the "father" is giving them something – instead, they will look at what they get from their father as rather something that fell from Heaven. This is what happens when the father does not verbally express his love to them when he gives them things.

The words here must become the "*neshamah*" (Divine essence) of the home – not a concealed *neshamah*, but a revealed *neshamah*!

Chores and Responsibilities In The Home

The chores that are done in the house are partially done because it is our responsibility, and partially from our love. Many chores that the children do in the home feel forced upon them. In many homes, there is a "forced" atmosphere going on, and it becomes the backbone in the home.

The mother might be doing laundry not out of love for the children, but because she has no choice. She puts the clothing to dry because she has no choice. She cooks because she has no choice. She gets up in the morning and does her various chores because she feels like she has no choice! When does she feel ever get to feel any revelation of love from her husband? When the husband sometimes buys her something she likes in the store. Then, she feels loved.

Why does all of this happen?? How does the situation in the home become like this?

It is really a sign of the deeper problem on the husband's part. The husband does not know how to express love properly to his family, because he really has the same problem in his relationship with Hashem and towards other people. When a person doesn't try to infuse love into his actions for other people, he acts kind to others only out of a sense of obligation, or because he doesn't want to get punished in the Next World, or because it will be unpleasant for him if he doesn't act nice to others, etc. He is not being motivated by love.

When he goes on to make requests of his family members, the requests are met with a bit of disgust. The family feels like saying to him, "Ah, now you are requesting things from us too?" They don't feel his love in the first place, and then they hear that he is making requests of them, and they don't feel like doing it for him. If they fulfill his requests, they do so out of a sense of being forced, and not from love.

'Ahavah' In The 'Chessed'

In the same vein, there is a lot of *chessed* (acts of kindness) in the world today, but how much *ahavah* (love) is in the world? It is rare to find any *ahavah* in all the *chessed* that is going on.

It's scary. The whole essence of *chessed* is *ahavah*, but even though there is so much *chessed*, there is little *ahavah* to be found, even though that is the whole point of *chessed*. How much *chessed* do all of us do every day, with our neighbors, with our spouse, with our children, with our *chavrusa*? We do countless acts of *chessed*, but often the *ahavah* is missing from it, and we miss the boat of it all. A person can even have a big *gemach* (a *chessed* organization), but how much *ahavah* to others does he have...?

Putting Love Into Your Requests From Your Spouse and Children

Let's get back to the point. What is the message that your family members need to hear? What is it that they must hear in your requests? If they hear love in your requests, if they know you are

requesting things of them because they hear your love for them, they hear a whole different kind of request from you.

If I make a request of someone who doesn't love me, there would have to be a very good reason if he does me the favor. Either he will fulfill my request so that he can get rewarded, or for some other motive that will involve some gain for him. But there would have to be a very good reason, because if he doesn't love me, there is no natural reason why he would do it for me.

But even when you make a request from someone who loves you, the one whom you love has to hear the love in your request. He has to hear that you are asking it to increase your love towards him, and not because you simply need to get your needs fulfilled.

Surely a wife can love her husband even if her husband never makes requests of her; if so, why should he ask her for anything? It is because she needs to hear the love in his requests. If she just hears him making a request of her and she does not sense that he's asking it out of a desire to increase the love between them, she will feel forced to do it, and she will not do it for him out of love.

In Conclusion

To summarize the idea: when you give things to your wife or your children, **do it because** this will bring more love into the home, and **express it verbally** as you do it for them. That should become your underlying motive in all that goes on in the home. And when you make requests of them as well, do it with the same intention. This is the perspective with which one should view his home with, and it enables the home to be successful.

May we merit from the Creator that our homes should attain *ahavah*, *achvah*, *shalom* and *reyus* (love, brotherliness, peace, and friendship).

[1] As the Vilna Gaon writes in Mishlei, "If a person doesn't break his middos, what is the point of his life?"

[2] In the beginning of sefer *Shaarei Kedushah*

[3] Refer to "*Getting To Know Your Soul*"

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