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A Beautiful and Graceful Bride

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

1st day Shavouos

A Beautiful and Graceful Bride

In Israel, when you ask someone to give you an opinion on whatever subject, he'll generally do it without any bells and whistles. For example, if you ask him if your tie is nice, he'll be happy to tell you that it doesn't really look good on you. In Israel, they're all "straight."

Here, however, if you ask the same question, you'll always get a positive reply. Everyone will say that it's a very nice tie and they'll heap praise on it—even if that same person thinks the exact opposite. He'll never make you feel bad.

The Israeli will claim that he's only speaking the truth—after all, you asked him because you wanted to know the truth, so if he does not reply with the truth he's actually misleading you with an unpleasant tie.

On the other hand, the American will argue that if you bought the tie, it's a sign that you love it—and if so, why should he be the one to destroy your spirit?

Who is right? What is the right way? Like with everything else, we need search for answers in the Torah.

We've all heard about Hillel and Shammai.

Hillel was famous mainly because of the story with the convert. The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 31a) tells us about the stranger who came to the elderly Shammai the sage and asked him, "Convert me in order to teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one leg." The man wants to be Jewish but does not have the time and energy to invest in the whole business, so he wants the entire Torah in one sentence.

Shammai threw him out.

So he went to Hillel, and Hillel converted him and told him the well-known sentence for which Hillel was made famous: "What you hate, do not do to your friend—this is the whole Torah and the rest is its commentary. Go and study it."

But this is just one case.

Another similar story happened with another convert who came to Shammai and said, "Convert me in order that I be appointed High Priest," and Shammai kicked him out. So he came to Hillel and Hillel agreed to convert him, and he eventually discovered that the Torah says, "and the stranger who comes close shall die," meaning that anyone who is not a Kohen, a priest, had better not come near the Holy of Holies area. So he immediately gave up the idea of becoming the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest.

So here we have Shammai, a strict man, and Hillel, a more easygoing person. These two leaders built houses of study: the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai.

Now the nature of people is that they are drawn to, and connect to, people who are the same type. And so meticulous and strict people, whose soul roots came from *Gevurah*, the spiritual layer of severity or "tough love," adhered to Shammai, and those who were easygoing and sociable were drawn to the study hall of Hillel.

From this was created two ideologies of strictness and leniency. In the Mishnah and Talmud, there are over 300 disputes between the Houses of Shammai and Hillel, and in almost all the cases the House of Shammai takes the strict road and Beis Hillel is lenient.

For example, in the first portion of the Shema, we recite the verse, "You shall speak in them: When you dwell in your house and when you walk on the road and when you lie down and when you get up." This verse teaches us that we are required to recite the Shema twice daily—but there is a dispute between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel. The School of Shammai says, "At night, everyone should lie down and recite and in the morning stand up, as the verse states, 'When you lie down and when you get up' "—meaning that at night one needs to recite Shema lying down and in the morning one needs to recite Shema standing up.

Along comes the School of Hillel and say that everyone should recite the Shema in whatever way most convenient (as long as it is recited). As for the words "When you lie down and when you get up," these are only there to teach us at what time one needs to recite the Shema—meaning, as the Mishnah (Tractate Brachos 1:3) puts it, "At the time people go to sleep and the time people wake up."

And here we come to the controversy between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel on the subject with which we opened our talk here.

There is a famous discussion in the Talmud on "How are we to dance before the bride?"

Now usually, when you go to a wedding, you praise the bride in the ears of the groom. You'll always hear guests, especially older guests, telling the lucky young man, "Your wife looks wonderful!" or "Your bride is a lovely young lady!"

But—don't laugh—what if it's not exactly true?

This is a potential problem that we don't just face today. Even in the times of the Talmud they discussed it. That's why there is a discussion in the Talmud whether one needs to tell the truth in such a situation.

Beis Shammai, the School of Shammai, says one is to praise "the bride as she is." They argue that one must speak the truth. Of course, you don't need to point out her faults and shortcomings and defects—but neither can you attribute qualities to her that just are not there. Why? Beis Shammai explains: "The Torah says, 'Distance yourself from something false.' It is forbidden to lie and that's it." So if the bride doesn't have certain qualities, you may not praise her for them.

For their part, Beis Hillel says one is to praise the bride as being "a beautiful and graceful bride." It doesn't matter what she really is—you always praise the bride as being "beautiful and graceful —and it's not lying. Why? As the Rebbe explains, it's because she is beautiful and graceful in the eyes of the groom who chose her and in whose eyes she is charming. Therefore, we praise her according to how the groom sees her, not how we see her—and in his eyes, she is the most beautiful woman in the world

That's why the Talmud (Tractate Kesubos 17b) also says, "This is why the Sages said, 'A person's mind should always be agreeable with others,' " to which Rashi adds, "So as to do to each individual as he desires,"—meaning that one should say to people what makes them happy and not necessarily the truth.

On the holiday of Shavuos, the time of the Giving of the Torah was the marriage of G-d and the Jewish People, with G-d as the groom and the Jews as the bride. So now we can ask the question: When one comes to praise the bride in the groom's eyes—meaning the Jewish Nation before G-d—what should one say?

According to Beis Shammai, one should describe “the bride as she is”—you can’t lie, and the Jewish Nation has sometimes not appeared particularly desirable. But Beis Hillel says that one should describe the bride as “a beautiful and graceful bride”—that one needs to praise the bride and say that she is the most beautiful in the world because, in the eyes of the groom who chose her, she is indeed the most beautiful.

And in the eyes of G-d, the groom who “chose us from all the nations,” we are indeed beautiful and graceful, and if you don’t see that, it’s your shortcoming.

And ultimately, the halachah, the Jewish law, is according to Beis Hillel.

So, as we once again celebrate the marriage anniversary of G-d and the Jewish Nation this Shavuos, we need to look at our fellow Jew, at the “bride,” with the eyes of the “groom,” with the love with which he looks at her. We must look at our fellow Jews through G-d’s eyes, and then we will discover and see that she indeed is “beautiful and graceful.

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