

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN; AND ON EARTH?

Sefer Devarim opens with Moshe Rabbeinu addressing the Yidden, stressing the importance of maintaining justice among Klal Yisrael: "You shall not favor people in judgment — you shall hear the small just as the great, you shall not fear any man, for judgment belongs to Hashem; and the case that is too difficult for you, bring to me, and I will hear it."

The holy Baal Shem Tov points out the unusual expression of *takrivun eilai,* "bring to me." It would have been more normal, he notes, to write, "Bring me the difficult case and I'll make it clear to you." What is the Torah telling us?

He explains that from Shamayim, we are often being told what we need to hear; Hashem often sends us messages full of *hisorerus* to do *teshuvah*. Why, then, don't we always hear them? The answer, he continues, is that we are often so sunk in materialism, so enthusiastic about the physical world, that we simply can't hear a message from another realm. The only way to overcome this tendency to wallow in *gashmiyus* is "*takrivun eilai*" — to become close to the *tzaddik* and enlist his help. Once we begin the process of lifting ourselves out of our material desires, we will start to hear the Heavenly voices.

In another *vort* on the *passuk*, "*Anochi omeid bein Hashem u'beineichem...*" the Baal Shem Tov reveals another reason why we often can't see what Hashem is showing us, even though it should be so obvious. Imagine, he says, holding a tiny coin, or even one's little finger, right before one's eye. Even with such a tiny object one can block out the entire world! When we allow the focus on ourselves, the "*anochi*," to occupy our entire field of vision, it separates us from Hashem and blinds us to all the blessings He has given us. Sometimes, we just need to step out of the way in order to get the Heavenly message.

This essay is kindly sponsored and dedicated in memory of an unforgettable Bobby

מרת אלטע חיה שרה
בת ר' חיים יצחק ע"ה

יאה"צ ו' אב

תהא זכרה ברוך

תנצב"ה

Parshas
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Q QUESTION

Hi and thank you Rabbi Gruen for all your wisdom, clarity, and advice.

We would like to ask a question on a topic which I don't think I ever heard you address, although I think it's a very fundamental question.

What is the relationship in a marriage supposed to be like? Is it like a typical friendship between two people, with just more time and things that you do together, or is a healthy relationship between husband and wife something that isn't even comparable to friendship as it's so much more than that?

The reason why we are asking is that we've been married for two years, we have a child, and we're both good people but we are so, so different in so many areas such as personality, way of thinking, culture, background, and values. So our question is how enhanced, warm, and consistent such a type of relationship can be if the common denominators are so few — and this means that on a basic routine day, when there is no external reason for excitement like a wedding or a trip etc., there is no connection from within, only formal greetings, doing the duties etc. This ends up being a burnt-out relationship that feels cold, uncomfortable, and distanced.

If marriage is like a friendship, we probably would never have picked each other as friends but since Hashem is the one who paired us up, how is that supposed to work? And if it's a totally different type of relationship, can you explain that and also, how we can relate with our many differences in many ways even when the differences shoot you in your eyes and wreck your brain and feelings?

And if the answer has something to do with "love," how exactly can we get to ultimate true embedded love and respect with such differences?

Please also differentiate between romance and a true loving relationship, in case I'm living in an illusion where I expect too much connection and warmth in everyday life.

Thank you very much!



A ANSWER

Thanks for your great and very fundamental questions.

I hope I won't disappoint you with my answer to your first question. No two marriages are the same, nor should they be; therefore, it's not really possible to say what "a marriage" should look like.

It's clear you have some idea of what you think it should be — you describe expecting connection and warmth, and that's in no way unusual. Most people enter marriage hoping it will be an "ideal" soul partnership and that they'll attain a feeling of oneness with their spouse, a deep and mutual emotional bond, and more. Who wouldn't?

And, believe it or not, there are those who actually have that kind of marriage. Some don't even have to work so hard to attain it. And maybe they don't even know to appreciate the fact that they have a "fantasy come true," a marriage that seems like paradise in this world.

Others struggle for years and never get anywhere near such a marriage. They're not necessarily doing anything wrong. It's just that Hashem gave them something different than what they yearned for.

Still others are trapped by the illusion that this kind of marriage will somehow materialize on its own, and when it doesn't, they become discouraged and stop investing the effort needed to build it. Instead of doing what they can to improve

things as much as possible, they give up and begrudgingly settle for less.

Just as people are different in all sorts of ways — externally, internally (their thoughts and feelings), and in circumstance (such as the kind of children they have) — so too do people differ in the sort of marriage they have. It is foolish to think that everyone should or could have the same kind of marriage.

And it is just as foolish to think that whatever marriage one can attain is expected to fall into place with little to no effort. A blissful marriage is not a birthright.

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Now to answer your next question: No, marriage is not like friendship. We get to choose our friends at whim, and we can leave them behind if we change our minds at any point. Once we're married to the person we believe was *bashert*, we remain with them regardless of the challenges the relationship presents us with. As you write, Hashem brings each husband and wife together, for many good reasons, some of which we may understand and others we don't, or can't.

Naturally, we should seek out a spouse who appears compatible in all the important areas of life such as *hashkafah* and general values. However carefully we pursued a shidduch, there will always be aspects of our spouse we cannot know before marriage, and those unknowns will inevitably reveal themselves through the challenges that arise over time. This is why feeling an element of doubt from time to time about whether we "really made the right choice" is, to a degree, natural. It's not something to get too alarmed about, as long as beneath that uncomfortable sense of doubt is an underlying certainty that however hard it feels, Hashem knows what He's doing and it's all for the best and for our benefit.

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A realistic expectation that difficulties will arise is both healthy and protective. Expecting married life to be bliss is perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to attaining that bliss. People sometimes think that simply because they married their *bashert* they can expect bliss to miraculously appear. When it doesn't, they aren't always emotionally prepared to invest the hard work to attain the level of bliss possible for them. Why? Because hard work is hard.

Investing the effort required to build a strong marriage is hard. Living with an unhappy and disappointing marriage is harder. In this area, we get to choose between the types of hardship we face. As one wise person said, earning a living is hard, but being broke is harder. And yet some people choose to be broke as it allows them to stay on the couch and blame "fate." Some people subconsciously choose to be miserable in marriage, sometimes for similar reasons, and sometimes without realizing that they have other options. In almost all cases, working hard to improve a marriage is an easier type of "hard" than moaning and complaining about how terrible things are.

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You describe what to you feels like a very incompatible marriage. It's certainly very challenging to be so different in what seems like "every area" in life.

It's important not to lose sight of the bigger picture or to appreciate what you do have. You don't mention some of the unexpected challenges that couples face, such as infertility, health, or finances. It seems that you're both healthy and functional. You have a child. You presumably have a roof over your heads and food on the table. These aren't small things either.

While emotions are important, there are other factors that contribute to, or detract from, a happy marriage. Furthermore, being constantly stressed (due to financial pressures, for example), causes emotional strain in even the best relationship. Loving couples who experience difficulties having children face their own forms of challenge which can upset the emotional balance. It's not having the challenge that determines the quality of the relationship — it's what we do with the challenge.

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What we do when things are tough depends on many things. Comparing marriage to other key relationships in our lives can reveal a lot about why we often react as we do.

Let's look first at the parent-child relationship. Few people expect smooth sailing with all of their children all the time. It's extremely rare for parents to have a perfectly harmonious relationship with each of their children, from childhood onward. That's despite the fact that the "coloring-book" idealized image of the happy family around the Shabbos table is one that we all vaguely aspire for.

When it doesn't transpire, what do we do? Do we give up? Imagine what would happen if there was an option to divorce children, if and when they prove "incompatible" with us! Luckily it isn't an option and instead, healthy parents simply try harder and gradually accept that children aren't clones of their parents, and they try to love them regardless.

How about another pivotal relationship in our lives: the relationship each and every one of us has with Hashem. Here, too, we vaguely aspire to an ideal relationship, intense *avodas Hashem*, perfecting our *middos* to reach a level of *dveikus*, and more. But vaguely aspiring doesn't usually take us all the way to becoming *tzaddikim*, and what then? Do we give up entirely? No matter how hard a Yid tries (*chalilah*) to divorce himself from Hashem, it's impossible to break off the *neshamah* connection. And deep down,

we know that if there's a deficiency in the relationship, it's because we aren't trying hard enough.

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Maybe it's the option of divorce that can make contentment in marriage feel so elusive. Lingering at the back of our minds is the worry that if it's so hard, perhaps something is fundamentally wrong and we should start over. Looking at these other types of relationships can help us face the real source of difficulty. It's not the challenges per se; rather, it's confusion over what marriage should look like.

This is where your reference to the difference between "romance and a true loving relationship" becomes so relevant. One difference may be that romance is generally looking for "what I feel, how exciting things are to me," whereas love is looking for "how can I make my spouse happy and help them to grow."

Believing that the absence of the "right" feelings means something is wrong, is a tremendous obstacle to building *shalom bayis*. Some couples get married with what they think are the right feelings only to see them dissipate either with the first challenge, or simply over time. Others wait and wait for feelings to appear and don't realize that instead of waiting, they could be working to create them.

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There's no need to "fix" our feelings in order to build a strong marriage. Even when doubt creeps in or we wish with all our hearts that things weren't so hard, we can continue investing the effort needed to make them better. It's a question of which we follow, heart or mind. If the mind leads, guiding us to follow the Torah's instructions on how to relate to a spouse regardless of how we feel, the heart will eventually follow. If the heart leads, it will always be in conflict with what we, deep down, know we should be doing.



There are methods of working through difficulties which can be highly effective in such situations. A person experiencing anxiety, for instance, can adapt to a new way of being which involves accepting that since logically there is nothing to be afraid of, he can behave accordingly, regardless of how he feels. Gradually, chances are that his feelings will adapt to the way in which he acts. While this can feel very unnatural at first, over time it starts to feel easier to live according to what we know to be true rather than blowing in the wind according to each new emotional storm.

Beyond that, there are many other things spouses can do to bring about immense positive change. There are ways of talking and behaving that bring people closer, long before they feel the emotions that make such behaviors natural. Of course it's easier when you feel it, but the question is what to do when you don't. Most often, resolving to do what it takes to slowly acquire these feelings helps so much more than digging deeper into the lack of feeling and convincing yourself that it says something terrible about your fate and future.

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Emotional storms are nothing new. They have existed since the dawn of time and people have been grappling with them ever since. It's perhaps only relatively recently that there has been such intense focus on using feelings rather than facts to gauge whether something is right or wrong. Rather than promising effortless happiness, the Torah presents a different path—one of steadfast commitment and devoted effort, leading to genuine tranquility in the home.

The connection and love and warmth you seek is there if you are prepared to work hard to attain it. While, as mentioned, there are those who have easier and more natural marriages that require less effort, for the most part the "romantic" ideal of an instant "happily-ever-after marriage" simply doesn't exist. Be prepared to give generously without continually measuring what you receive in return. Commit to looking at your blessings rather than focusing on your challenges.

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