

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

REVEALING THE BEAUTY

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem sends the plague of darkness upon Mitzrayim and the *passuk* tells us that while everything was thick darkness among the Egyptians, "for all of Bnei Yisrael there was light in their homes."

Commenting on these words, the holy Ruzhiner *ztz"l* says that every single Jew has a *lichtigkeit*, a special glow that comes from his *neshamah*, which is a spark of Hashem Himself. However, just like diamonds, the visible luster of each Jew depends on his setting. Beautifully polished diamonds set in gold sparkle brilliantly; rough diamonds lying in the dirt are dull and unattractive.

Someone who appreciates the value of his *neshamah* will invest the effort necessary to brush off the dirt and give prominence to the spiritual aspects of his life, over the material. It follows that if we notice a Jew who isn't sparkling, whose soul isn't shining and radiant, all it means is that he needs to be picked up, polished, and set in his rightful place. Only someone who appreciates the value of a diamond will go to the trouble of polishing and setting it in gold.

If you feel you're married to a rough diamond, while it may not be your responsibility to polish them, maybe you are partially responsible for treasuring your diamond and inspiring them to bring out all the amazing facets of their personality and capabilities. Maybe you can alter your perspective so that instead of seeing a dull piece of inert matter with no potential, you start noticing what is at least a rough diamond, as within every Jew there is a Divine sparkle.

Some marriages do appear to be dull, without any spark of life or hope, and somewhere down the line things sadly fall apart. Sometimes, people remarry and suddenly begin to glow in their new setting. This doesn't always happen, and if a person refuses to polish his *neshamah* then there's not a lot anyone else can do. Nonetheless, whenever we're faced with a situation that seems hopeless and lacking in light, it's always worth trying to restore the sparkle and provide the golden setting.

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Parshas
Bo
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Dear Rabbi Gruen,

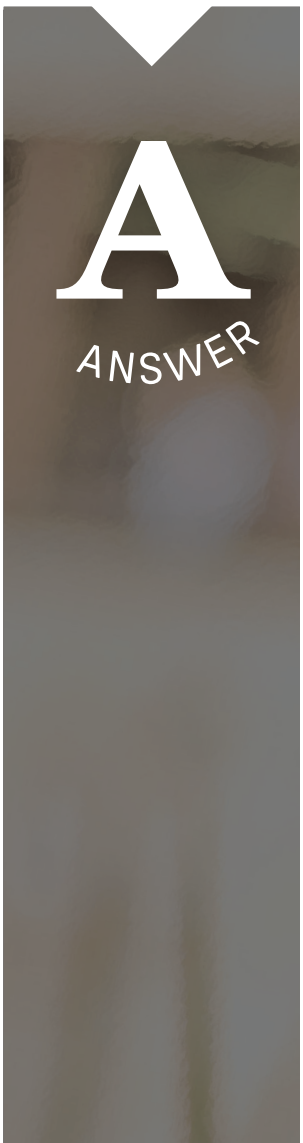
Young people are always making mistakes due to their youth, immaturity, and lack of experience, and while some mistakes are easily fixed (such as the wrong job or wrong home purchase), others are much more difficult to turn around. What I'm talking about is marrying the wrong person.

What should a person do if he is already married, with children, and it took years to realize that he's just not compatible with his spouse? I don't want to ruin my children's life, but continuing to live with my spouse is just so hard — their very essence is just so aggravating at the deepest level. The problem isn't petty things that can be worked around, such as bad *middos* or lack of consideration. I mean serious incompatibilities which were entirely overlooked before the *shidduch* was made and which are now having a terrible impact. What should a person in such a situation do?

Shouldn't parents really make sure that their children are compatible before finalizing a *shidduch*? Isn't it more important to focus on the personalities and aspirations of the *chassan* and *kallah*, and less important to ensure that the families are "suited"?

I know the chassidishe way of marrying off children who barely know each other has some merits, but too often the focus is more on externals and less on the young couple, and I think it's a real problem (and I don't buy that the low divorce rate is proof that it works).

Thank you



On a similar note to my response to a previous essay, I doubt that you wrote to me in the hope that I would do nothing more than express sympathy: "Oh, how terrible. I really feel for you." You are clearly looking for answers, which is commendable. Sadly, there are people who seem to enjoy getting sympathy and having their victim status reinforced by others, and they're not usually the ones looking for solutions. While I do sympathize with the struggles of all the people who write to me, I don't think it's in their best interest for me to focus on that sympathy when only practical advice can possibly help.

I'd like to begin by noting that your question is one that I have received in the past in different forms — what it comes down to is, "Did I marry the wrong person? If yes, now what?"

The answer to all such questions starts from the same place: This is *bashert*. Both the initial *shidduch* and the difficulties that follow, including not knowing what to do about a complicated marriage, are *bashert*.

Whether or not one made a "wrong" choice in who to marry, it is all in Hashem's hands. Even feeling trapped in a "bad" marriage because you don't want your children to suffer is *bashert*.

I hope this doesn't sound unfeeling. Certainly such a situation is immensely challenging. But it is vital for you to recognize that this was all meant to be.

Before anything else I can offer, I want to stress that anyone in such a situation is in need of support. Hashem set up things in such a way that not everyone goes through a challenge at the same time, so that we can help one another. Sometimes it's you with the difficult situation needing advice and *chizuk* from others; at another time, it might be you giving advice and *chizuk* to someone else. Just because a situation is *bashert* doesn't mean that you have to continue to suffer, nor do you have to face it alone.

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You write that you don't want to seek a divorce for the sake of your children. If you've decided to stay with your spouse, it's only sensible and logical to try to improve your *shalom bayis* as far as possible. That's also true of any challenge we face in life; all we can do is our best, and it's a shame to ever do less than that.

Moving on to the practical: Advice of all kinds is everywhere to be found in today's world — in magazines, in discussion groups, in *drashos* — but a lot of what people are being told is simply not helpful at all, and can in fact be harmful. Some people think that just raising awareness is useful but unless it's accompanied by practical advice on what to do with one's newfound knowledge, just being aware of problems usually does more harm than good.

To illustrate this, I'll use the example of an article that appeared in a popular Jewish magazine some years ago. The article featured a young couple, several years into their marriage. Things presumably didn't start off so well, though the details weren't provided, and now the husband wants to make amends. The wife, however, isn't having any of it and tells her husband in no uncertain terms that her feelings of resentment now run so deep that she can't accept his apologies and doesn't believe that things can ever improve, even though she admits that he's trying his hardest.

The moral of the story — spelled out clearly by the magazine's writer — is that couples have to get it right from the start and make sure that *shanah rishonah* is all that it should be. Otherwise, it could end up being "too late" to set things right.

There are several serious problems with this presentation. Firstly, the purpose of giving advice is to be helpful. However, among all those exposed to this article, the vast majority aren't in *shanah rishonah*. How does it help them to be told that if you didn't get it right in the past, there's almost nothing you can do to make it up later?

A deeper problem with this "advice" is that it's simply wrong, and so very damaging. The article essentially validates the wife's position and places a tacit stamp of approval on her decision not to accept her husband's efforts, even though he is doing what he can to please her.

Everyone makes mistakes, and everyone deserves not just one chance but many to fix them. A spouse — husband or wife — who rejects the other spouse's apologies and heartfelt attempts to improve things, is very much in the wrong. It can be hard to accept an apology, especially if it's for a long list of "misdemeanors," but this is the Torah way.

While the intent of the article seems to have been to muster up sympathy for the "poor, wronged wife," projecting her as the victim, what it made me think was the opposite. If she is so hard to please now, perhaps she was hard to please and highly demanding from day one. Perhaps her husband tried to please her from day one and is still trying now, but she, from her superior position on her high horse, refuses to so much as listen to what he has to say.

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It's very hard to be in a marriage and feel unhappy. Please don't take my words as dismissive or judgmental when I write that, as hard as it is, you should guard against becoming like the unfortunate wife in that article. Don't wallow in self-pity and resentment to the point that you can see nothing but your victim status and are blind to all the good that is hidden beneath the surface in your spouse.

If you truly care about your children, which I'm sure you do, and want to keep your family intact for their sake, do what you can to provide them with a happy, harmonious home where each person seeks out the good in others and does their best to enable others to shine.

There are so many ways of achieving this. But you can certainly start with a very simple and direct approach — by asking your spouse for what you would like, telling them how much it would mean to you if they could give it to you, and being happy when you get any amount of it.

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You write that your problems are not "petty things that can be worked around, such as bad *middos* or lack of consideration." I believe that bad *middos* are not at all petty — living with someone with bad *middos* is extremely difficult. But, if what you mean is that your spouse doesn't have bad *middos*, then that's a huge point in their favor.

Much of the time, when people talk about "basic incompatibility," what they mean is having different interests, goals, ideals, or standards. While it seems only logical that when two people with similar goals and levels of *frumkeit* marry, things will go smoothly, that certainly isn't always the case. I've seen so many seemingly incompatible couples make a success of their marriage, as well as the opposite. That's not to say that when looking for a *shidduch* (as you correctly mention) one shouldn't seek out someone with similar life goals, but these things aren't always clear when we're young. People change as they grow older. We can learn not only to get along with, but actually value and admire

people, who have different but equally valid ways of seeing things.

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The question then becomes: How does one bridge a gap in goals, *middos*, level of awareness, and so forth?

Much of this has to do with seeing the other person as different but equal. All too often, unfortunately, an aggrieved spouse who sees him or herself as a victim appears determined to remain a victim and refuses to open up to the possibility of change. Being willing to try changing one's perspective doesn't mean that everything is automatically forgiven and you no longer want anything from your spouse. All it means is that you're ready to try something new and to recognize that as much as there are aspects of your spouse's character that you find difficult to deal with, there are other aspects that are positive which can be used to build bridges toward the future.

Once a person is prepared to see things differently, they can start to notice the many built-in aspects of marriage that draw a couple together, as long as both spouses are willing to let that happen. All the binding and unifying factors in married life are important and can be beneficial when properly taken advantage of; in your case, it might be particularly helpful to focus on your children. When both parents unite for the good of their children, that in itself can go a long way to them seeing each other as caring, devoted people who are trying their best, despite their differences and challenges.

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You may be right in thinking that if you (or your parents) had been more aware of the issues you are struggling with now; you would have made a different decision on who to marry. I certainly don't mean to imply that anyone can be matched up with anyone and it can all work out fine. I have a lot to say on this topic and have given classes on helping parents to be reasonable and responsible when looking for a *shidduch* for their child. With that said, let's remember the flip side, now that you're on the other side of the equation.



There are never any guarantees, and it's quite obvious from just a fleeting glance at the outside world that even "knowing a person" for years doesn't equate to living with them happily ever after once they're married. Trying to find a spouse who seems compatible is only sensible, but looking for someone from a similar type of family background isn't as ridiculous as some people believe.

Although many parents are certainly overly concerned with "superficial" matters such as *yichus*, basic compatibility does depend to a degree on having a similar outlook on life, and, like it or not, our outlooks are very much shaped by our families. Furthermore, very often, parents really are taking their children's needs into consideration when they make certain kinds of decisions on *shidduchim*, even though this might not be obvious to the *chassan* and *kallah*.

So again, parents need to remember that the last thing they want is for their child's marriage to break up and for them to say, "I never wanted to marry them in the first place, but you pushed me into it." When a child is old enough to express an opinion, it must be respected.

But once you're married, you have to accept the situation as one that Hashem placed you in. Marriage is always a challenge, and while it seems to be a greater challenge for some people, it is always tailor-made to bring out the best in us.

To return to the diamond analogy that we began with, as most people know, diamonds can only be polished with other diamonds as no other material is durable enough to withstand the pressure. The process of polishing and being polished can be painful and demanding, but when we start to see ourselves and our spouses sparkle, then our efforts are more than repaid.

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