

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

MARRIAGE: PLEASURE OR DELIGHT?

When Eisav discovered that he had lost the *bechorah* to Yaakov, he was devastated — and yet, he had previously relinquished it so easily, as this week's *parshah* tells us: "'I am going to die so why do I need this *bechorah*?' ... and he ate and drank and got up and left, and Eisav despised the *bechorah*." How can we understand this?

Many people believe that the question of the *bechorah* was one of "this world" versus "the world to come" and that Yaakov was originally intended to benefit only from the world to come. The Chasam Sofer stresses that this is a mistaken interpretation. Hashem most definitely intended both this world and the next to be sources of delight (as the *brachah* we recite over fruit trees in the month of Nisan illustrates). He explains that Eisav was ready to give up the delights of both worlds in return for some lentil soup — and why? Because he was a *ksil* — a fool. Fools are only interested in the here-and-now.

On a simple level, Eisav thought that due to his lifestyle that was centered around hunting, he risked dying even before his father passed away. Therefore, what use was an inheritance to him? Better to grab what he could in the moment.

But beyond that, it seems that Eisav was so immersed in the material pleasures of the moment that he blinded himself entirely to all sense of tomorrow. Not only did he discount long-term spiritual benefits, he also discounted long-term material benefits. This is what happens when people focus only on physical pleasure; they behave so foolishly that they end up losing everything.

This idea is relevant more often than we think. In our everyday interactions, we are frequently faced with a choice between something that "feels good" in the here-and-now, and something else that challenges us in the here-and-now but will pay rich and eternal dividends.

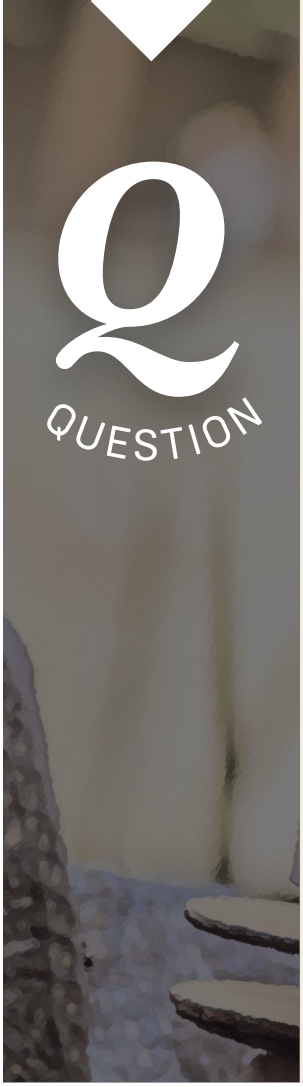
To give an example: During an argument between spouses, one of them may feel certain that, "I just have to tell him what I think — I need to get this off my chest," and the result will be a shattered relationship due to words spoken that can never be retracted. When we focus on "what's in it for me, right now?" we risk losing everything that in saner moments we know to be the really important things in life.

This week's essay is dedicated

לזכות רפואה שלימה
לדוד בן אלטע פעריל

שנשמע ונתבשר
בשורות טובות

Parshas
Toldos
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Q QUESTION

Hi Rabbi Gruen,

Thanks in advance for reading this letter!

I'm a twenty-year-old *bachur* who comes from a chassidish background, and I'm currently getting back my footing so to speak after a rough patch that lasted over two years (though, interestingly, to most people I'm a really *chashuver* and *heiliger chassidisher bachur*...)

Now, I was not actually religious for those two years although I looked it, and I was still learning full (ok, most of the) time. It was partially my parents' fault for driving me over the edge with various things, but that's not the point.

The problem is that now, they think it's time for me to get married but... where do I look and what am I looking for? I'm worried that I won't get some of the things I value in a relationship (since I'm an emotional and sensitive person) if I marry a chassidish girl from a similar background to mine. I'm what people call a romantic (yes, I know that's considered goyish), and I need to know what the reality of a chassidish marriage is like.

Is it like it's portrayed in the show "Unorthodox," which presents Jewish marriage as a very technical relationship? That's the only peek I've had into what it's like — is that what I'd be letting myself in for?

I'd also like to ask you about some of the bad stuff I've seen going on within what seem like frum marriages. If it's so widespread, perhaps there should be more awareness and discussion of these issues? Maybe people need to know more about finding happiness in married life?

Thank you very much and *hatzlachah*!!



A ANSWER

Your letter relates to three very important issues and I will address each in turn, starting with the "rough patch" you have been through.

First of all, it's wonderful that you are finding your "feet" again. Although most people who drift away eventually find their way back, you're still so lucky to be doing so, starting afresh before slipping even further away, and after no longer than two years of difficulty. I know it's not easy, and *b'chasdei Hashem* that's what you're doing and you have my admiration.

You describe yourself as being "not actually religious" during this time and I'd like to take issue with that. You are and always will be a Yid, and any Yid, at any time and stage, is never too far gone *chas v'shalom*, and can always do better. The identity of a Yid is the only one you should ever adopt, regardless of where you're holding. Even when you face challenges, they remain external to you; if you find intrusive thoughts pulling you down, they are problems that demand a solution rather than define who you are. The *Sefer HaTanya* gives the example of someone standing in shul *davening* when a *goy* comes in and starts shouting and disturbing his concentration. While he must strengthen himself to overcome the disturbance and fight its influence, he certainly sees it as an external force and does not identify with it. So too with all struggles and inner-disturbances. One must view them as external, and not an indication of who he "really" is.

You mention your parents' part in causing your challenges. If they happen to be human I'd assume that your parents, like most parents, have made their share of mistakes. I also imagine that you have made mistakes of your own, and that when you become a parent you'll make some more. And maybe one day, your children will notice them too. It's mostly irrelevant. You remain responsible for your choices in life, and blaming others is never helpful and often downright wrong.

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With regard to your suggestion of increasing awareness of serious problems that may plague frum marriages: I'm not convinced that there is anything to be gained from exposing people to unpleasant facts that they wouldn't otherwise be aware of, especially as they only affect a very small minority of people. Certainly the beauty of Torah marriage needs to be something we stress. While there are some topics where more awareness would be beneficial, for the most part, emphasizing the faults one can find in Torah communities isn't going to help anyone.

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Certainly "Torah marriage" is nothing like what you saw in the show you describe. It's not "technical" or lacking in feeling. While the secular world may like to project a truly Jewish lifestyle as restrictive and therefore limiting and stifling, this is far from being the truth. A *chassan* and *kallah* at their engagement should feel an attraction to one another, an attraction that they should sustain throughout their marriage. This is clear from Chazal and many Torah sources. But as much as that is a guideline, it is also a responsibility, as someone who is immature and craves unsuitable or harmful things can feel drawn to the kind of marriage that will only harm his *neshamah*.

Clearly, the Torah and our *Gedolim* will take many different things into account when it comes to a *shidduch* and marriage that a secular person would never think of. Given that the outside world is totally immersed in a hedonistic culture, it's no wonder that anything that involves rules or restrictions when it comes to marriage is seen as a pleasure-killer.

It's really not very different from someone addicted to eating who sees a diet as something that curtails his enjoyment in life — and this applies even when he or she realizes that over-indulgence has led to serious illness.

Cutting back on food in the here-and-now is experienced as painful; it's only the wise person who looks at things long-term and can inject the pleasure of the ultimate goal into the present moment. Over time, once things are back in their correct proportion, the occasional candy or slice of cake becomes something one looks forward to and then savors in a way that was impossible when it was an everyday food. And the same applies in the area of marriage. Interestingly (not that this is something we need to take *chizuk* from), non-Jewish counselors often advise couples to introduce periods of abstinence in order to rekindle the feeling in their marriage, an idea that obviously comes from the Torah.

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Fundamentally, physical attraction and connection does not necessarily lead to emotional connection. If it did, we would see secular marriages succeeding like never before, but we know that the opposite is true. People are willing to sell their bodies to others, but almost never willing to sell their emotions. It's absolutely possible to keep the two apart.

Furthermore, much of the "romance" you may have been exposed to is nothing more than the thrill and pursuit of attraction and pleasure, which somehow turns not long after into something very *un*romantic. One might even say that in the majority of cases, something that began as so connecting turns into something that's far more likely to be portrayed as drudgery, even misery and frustration.

Even within a happy marriage, spouses must take great care not to fall into the trap of using each other to fulfill their own needs and never stopping to consider what the other person might want. It's very hard to avoid this trap when a person is sunk in physical pleasure and only lives for the next "hit." People only get addicted to their own pleasure, never to someone else's.

What can help us to guard against this happening? Only the Torah.

Only one who accepts Hashem's supernatural rules for bringing the divine into our homes can remain above the challenges. If there was another method that worked, we would have heard about it by now.

Doubtless you were expecting me to answer in this vein; naturally I am going to defend the Torah way of doing things. Nonetheless, I can add that from my experience of helping people with their marriages, it's clear that people who had previously been advised to "ease up" on what they saw as unnecessary restrictions don't end up happier. Fewer restrictions do not equal greater joy and contentment. The opposite is true.

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The Torah's laws pertaining to married life are there to enhance our delight in the marital bond, not diminish it. Chazal teach that the laws of *niddah* are designed to recreate the feeling of having just been married. Simultaneously, they protect the dignity of both husband and wife and help them to avoid seeing each other as objects.

If a particular couple doesn't merit to experience this, then they should certainly seek out help from trustworthy sources, but that in no way means that the Torah's guidelines are wrong. Similarly, if a particular person doesn't experience Shabbos as something delightful, that in no way implies anything about Shabbos — only about the individual concerned.

At the end of the day, the only real question is whether we trust Hashem to have our best interests at heart.

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You may feel that trusting Hashem is one thing; trusting your parents, who (it seems from your letter) are unaware of your recent struggles, is another. Yes, you may very well need a different approach than someone who has never stepped as far beyond the confines of your community as you have. In fact, I would advise all parents to genuinely consider their children's needs when looking for a *shidduch* for them, and that means knowing your children well and seeing them as unique individuals.

Since you don't have that kind of relationship with your parents, you should certainly seek out a mentor of some kind who can help you to figure yourself out, someone who has been happily married for many years and who has a deeply rooted perspective on what Torah marriage is all about. You should certainly not just trust your own subjective feelings to know what's right for you.



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Does this mean that you will end up in a "chassidish marriage"? What does that even mean? The answer will likely be up to you.

Your reality, and your experience of marriage as a chassidisher Yid, will depend on how you approach it. It doesn't depend on anything other than the priorities you have, and whether and to what extent you focus on building an emotional connection and fulfilling your wife's needs, as opposed to just your own.

If you had, during your two years "out," discovered some secret recipe for romantic love, I suspect you would not have troubled to write to me. To anyone willing to face the truth, it's obvious that the non-Jewish world has failed dismally at fostering happy marriages. In fact, things have probably never been worse. And the reason is similarly obvious; for the most part people are in it for themselves. Torah marriage is for Hashem — that's the primary difference.

That doesn't mean that a Torah marriage leaves no room for your own needs and delight. There is no greater delight than uniting body and soul, *guf* and *neshamah*, and building a home where the Shechinah rests. There's no greater delight than to give pleasure to others and experience appreciation and know that one has overcome one's animal instincts to build something eternal.

Hashem should help you find a *shidduch* that will allow you the ultimate pleasures, and the true good in both worlds.

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