

The Ultimate Connection

Developing the Necessary Tools for a True Lasting "Connection" in your Marriage¹

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"Wow! That couple seems really happy together. They seem to really **connect!**"

Connection and chemistry are amorphous words that are often used to describe a meaningful relationship that will last despite life's challenges and difficulties while the couple continues to grow together. How is that connection created? Is it magical—"you either have it or you don't"—or can it be cultivated? What does our Torah and the field of psychology have to say about this question?

Starting Early

Forging the tools for a true meaningful connection with one's spouse does not start with the first date. It starts in the classroom, basketball court, dormitory room, study halls and work place.

Ba'al Hamaor, in his introduction to Talmud Bavli writes:

In many places, the Torah refers to the soul as "kavod — honor ... because G-d took from His ultimate honor and glory and created the soul which He imbued in every person.

במקומות רבים בכתוב נקראת הנפש
החיה כבוד ... כי הבורא אצלה על
האדם מכסא כבודו ובה נתן עליו
מהודו.

In other words, the essence of man is his dignity, and when it is stripped away, he is a body without a soul.³ **The first step in creating a meaningful connection with a spouse is to cultivate the ability to connect with others by focusing on the G-dly "honor" of every person.**

¹ This article is based on the first of a series of six *shiurim* given at Yeshiva University's Gruss Kollel entitled "Starting Off Right—Shalom Bayis in the First Years." I thank my dear wife Aliza for refining and editing the raw ideas from my *shiurim* and to many of my *talmidim* for their important input (including Rafi and Rachel Glickman who read and commented on the first draft).

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³ It is for this reason that insulting someone is akin to murdering him (*Bava Metzia* 58b) since undermining and denigrating a person's honor is rejecting a person's essence. (I am indebted to Rabbi Zvi Ron for this reference.)

The Double Trap

There may be several reasons why people have trouble fully developing the ability to connect with others. Let's focus on two possible factors. First, an individual who is absorbed in his or her own world may be entirely blind to others, especially to the G-dliness in them. Second, a person may look at the world and others in a cynical way and no longer notice the positive components of others. Rather, the focus becomes the opposite—the corporeality of others with all their shortcomings. If a true connection between people is defined by the ability to notice and connect with the G-dliness of others, then the self-centered or cynical person described above has difficulty developing lasting connections. Hence, a prerequisite for a long-lasting relationship between spouses is the ability to first view others in a positive light and connect with their G-dliness, exercising these mindful skills to prepare us for the ultimate connection between spouses.

Prerequisite Tools: Notice & Focus

A simple yet profound tool, which is necessary to recognize the G-dliness in others, is the ability to notice the feelings, needs and unique qualities of the other. A person can become less self-absorbed when he or she designates a certain amount of time each day focusing on the needs of others. When approaching a relationship, our own ego (i.e. our wants and desires) should be secondary, while the needs of the other become primary. Devoting time to focus on the needs and desires of someone else creates the ability to see a person in a whole new light. Doing this can combat both parts of the dual trap mentioned above. First, we are no longer focused on seeing the world only from our perspective, and we begin considering the perspective of others as well. Furthermore, once we begin to see things from the perspectives of others, we begin to be exposed to the distinctive *neshama* of another person. Hence, the G-dly component inside of us can "connect" to the G-dly component in others, and thus we begin to respect their unique "*kavod*."⁴

Creating Mutual Respect

Rebbe Akiva (*Sotah* 17a) describes the ultimate connection between husband and wife as a connection that brings G-d into the equation. When the letter *yud* from the Hebrew word husband (יָד) combines with the letter *hey* from the word wife (אִשָּׁה), the letters create the name of G-d. When both husband and wife give of themselves to one another, it brings G-dliness into the relationship. According to Rebbe Akiva, by definition every couple has the potential to create a real connection that is affirmed by the highest possible level of spiritual manifestation—the dwelling of the *Shechinah*. The necessary prerequisite for the ultimate connection is not a high level of Torah scholarship or even spiritual piety, rather the ability to connect to the soul of a person.

⁴ It is for this reason that the title of this article, "The Ultimate Connection," has a double meaning to it. The article is ostensibly a short guide to developing tools in enhancing our relationship with our spouse. However, these same details in forging a relationship with others and ultimately our spouse are also critical in developing our relationship with *Hakadosh Baurch Hu*. Being able to see the G-dliness in G-d's world is a critical part of *Avodas Hashem*. See for example: *Derech Hashem* 1:4-4. Hence, character growth in improving our abilities to see the G-dliness in others is nothing short of increasing G-dliness in this world (*Gilui Kavod Shomayim*) enhancing the ultimate spiritual connection, our bond with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* as well.

How can we cultivate mutual respect between spouses and foster that ultimate connection? The answer lies in our ability to focus on and emphasize the positive qualities and strengths that we admire and love in our spouse. This, in turn, leads us to the appreciation of his/her essence, and generates a lasting respect for one another.

Many years ago, during a Purim shpiel at the home of one of my great rabbeim, HaRav Avigdor Nebenzahl, one of the students did a perfectly hilarious imitation of Rav Nebenzahl. Afterward, the Rebbetzin shared that while the imitation may have been accurate, the talmid did not capture the essence of Rav Nebenzahl, which includes the kavod that he accords his wife.

Turning Mutual Respect into Connection: Three Levels of Communication

Armed with the above-mentioned sensitivities, an individual is ready to begin forging the ultimate connection with his/her spouse. *Ba'al Hamaor*, mentioned above, uses the word *hod*, best translated as glory, as a description the G-dly component of the *neshama*. It is not a coincidence that the word for "thankfulness," "*hodaah*," is a derivative of the word *hod*. Recognizing and thanking G-d, *hodaah*, is the way in which we connect to G-d's *hod*, His Glory. Similarly, the secret to connecting to one's spouse lies in the ability to relate to the *hod* of one's spouse through *hodaah*. A true connection, despite excellent conditions of respect, cannot fully exist if that respect is not expressed with the connecting glue of *hodaah*—*hakaras hatov* (gratitude).

Hodaah as a form of Communication

In order for a person to project thankfulness, one must take time out during his daily routine to notice the special things that his/her spouse regularly does. Only when the recognition is in place can gratitude be communicated so as to create the "connection".

Life in the 21st century is extremely hectic. When there may not be enough time for regular walks or quiet meals together, a heart-felt thank you to your husband or wife can be expressed at any time. A one-minute thank you can go a long way. When expressing gratitude, no matter how big or small the favor, avoid interruptions and distractions. Furthermore, when saying "thank you," be specific for the kindness performed. A general statement of thanks may sound hollow if the reason for the thank you is not explicitly shared.

Although it is not the only time to communicate such feelings, vacations, Shabbos and Yom Tov are wonderful opportunities to expound on one's *hakaras hatov*. Stepping out of the routine of everyday life can create a relaxed freedom of thought and special moments to verbally recognize and express gratitude for all that a spouse does for you.

Communicating Compliments: Another form of *Hodaah*

There is another component of connection that also qualifies as *hodaah*. Complimenting one's spouse about all parts of their life (their food, appearance, ideas, actions, speech, etc.) is another way of connecting through *hodaah*. The root of the word *hodaah* is also the same as *modeh*, an

admission.⁵ *Hodaah* is not only thanks but also a joyous concession to the unique qualities of someone else. A man who notices the unique talents of his wife and conveys his admiration through compliments will strengthen the bond between them. A woman who recognizes her husband's special qualities and verbalizes her esteem and affection will intensify the ties that unite them as one.

A Lesson in Communication from the Rogerian Model

There is another form of communication that is crucial in producing an even deeper level of connection. Let us introduce the idea with a humorous reality.

In Reader's Digest's book titled, Laughter, The Best Medicine II (pg. 174), they record an interesting statistic. The average bride spends 150 hours preparing for her wedding. They whimsically concluded, "That means that the average groom spends 150 hours saying, 'it sounds good.'" When our spouse speaks we can either nod along and say, "it sounds good," or we can really listen.

While I was a graduate student at Teachers College, Columbia University, my professor encouraged the class to watch a video recording of the famous therapist Carl Rogers, as he sat in therapy with one of his clients. The class was struck by the fact that during the highly effective therapy session, Rogers merely repeated, albeit in clearer and more coherent terms, the thoughts and feelings of the client. This important skill became so popular it evolved into "Rogerian Therapy" or "Person-Centered Therapy."

A highly productive way of connecting with one's spouse is to encourage him or her to express their thoughts and feelings, and for the "listening spouse" to truly pay attention, as Rogers did. Giving your spouse your undivided attention broadcasts a loud and clear message that says, "I care about you and your feelings are important to me." This nonverbal message conveyed is just as important as, if not more than, verbal communication.

On a deeper level, this form of listening is also the actualization of *Ba'al Hamoar's* idea that true *kavod* is the ability to show sensitivity to the internal feelings and dignity of another, thereby connecting to their internal *kavod*. The ultimate connection with one's spouse is fulfilled when we communicate not only by expressing *hakaras hatov* through verbal communication, but also showing that we respect the internal thoughts and feelings of the other. In this manner, the necessary gratitude and compliments join together with a more sublime form of communication, which will bring the couple closer to the ultimate connection, the union of their souls.

⁵ See *Pachad Yitzchak*, Chanukah Ch. 2 which elaborates on this point based on Maharal, (*Nesiv Ha'Avodah* 18:1).