

Respect in Marriage: A Two-way Street

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The Torah's approach to respect in marriage is sometimes misunderstood. Some men draw erroneous conclusions about respect in marriage based on certain statements of Chazal. Many are familiar with the statement of the Gemara (*Pesachim* 108a) that a woman who is eating at the Seder table with her husband is exempt from reclining. The Rashbam there explains that the exemption is due to the fact that a woman wouldn't feel comfortable reclining in the presence of her husband since she is in awe of him. In addition, the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 30b) states that a married woman is exempt from honoring her parents because she is responsible to be available to serve her husband.

The Rambam writes in *Hilchos Ishus* (15:19):

The Chachamim commanded that a woman should honor her husband excessively. She should revere him. She should act by the word of his mouth. He should be in her eyes like a minister or a king. She should follow the desires of his heart and distance whatever he dislikes.

וכן צוו חכמים על האשה שתהיה מכבדת את בעלה ביותר מדאי ויהיה לו עליה מורא ותעשה כל מעשיה על פיו ויהיה בעיניה כמו שר או מלך מהלכת בתאות לבו ומרחקת כל שישנא.

The impression one gets from these statements of the Gemara and the Rambam is that Chazal felt that in an ideal Jewish home, all decisions should be dictated by the whims and desires of the husband. He should be the master in control of everything, much like a feudal lord, and his wife is obligated to respect and to serve him.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Rambam writes in the previous halacha (15:18)

The Chachamim commanded that a man should honor his wife even more than himself.

וכן צוו חכמים שיהיה אדם מכבד את אשתו יתר מגופו.

Clearly, the need for respect in marriage is not a one-sided gesture. It has to be a mutual exchange. This is what is implied by the Gemara (*Yevamos* 62b), which says:

One who loves his wife as he loves himself and honors her more than himself... about him the verse says, "And you will know that your tent is in peace."

האוהב את אשתו כגופו והמכבדה יותר מגופו ... עליו הכתוב אומר וידעת כי שלום אהלך.

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Apparently, a man is just as obligated to honor and respect his wife as she is required to do so with him. What's more, from the Gemara it would appear that marital peace and harmony is dependent not on a wife's respect for her husband, but on a husband's respect for his wife.

How can respect be a mutual feeling? How can a woman respect her husband if she knows that he is also required to respect her? The answer is that honor and respect cannot be demanded; they can only be earned. As the Mishna says in *Pirkei Avos* (4:1), "Who is honored? One who honors others." Conversely, the Gemara (*Eruvin* 13b) comments, "One who searches for honor, honor will elude him."

When a person demands respect from others, he or she may get them to do their bidding, but real respect will be absent. They might listen to the commands of that person out of fear, but admiration will be missing from the relationship. People tend to respect those who act in a refined manner, those who show sensitivity to others, those who think less of themselves and more of other people. The less self-centered a person is, the more honor and respect he'll earn because his behavior will lead people to admire him. The same is true of a spouse. The more selfless and respectful a spouse is toward the other, the more likely it is for the other to reciprocate those very same values.

It is no coincidence that the Rambam writes that a woman should view her husband like a king, because if a man wants his wife to respect him, his behavior should model that of an ideal Jewish king. The Navi (Melachim I, 12:3-16) describes how after Shlomo Hamelech died, the people asked his son Rechavam to ease some of the financial burden that Shlomo had placed on them. When Rechavam sought counsel from the elders who had advised his father Shlomo, they told him to listen to the people. "If today you become a servant to this people and serve them," they said, "if you respond favorably to them and speak kind words to them, then they will be your servants forever."

But Rechavam decided to ignore the elders and instead he followed the advice of his young friends who told him to respond harshly to the people and refuse to lighten their tax burden. The result was that most of the kingdom abandoned Rechavam. He did not gain their respect by talking tough. After all, he hadn't sacrificed for them yet as a king. He hadn't given them anything yet. Making demands without giving of oneself rarely brings a person respect. Sometimes it can even spark rebellion. Rechavam failed to understand that the role of a proper Jewish king is to sacrifice for his subjects, to lead them in battle, to provide for their needs. Until he had demonstrated his willingness to give to the people selflessly, he couldn't expect to earn their respect.

The same is true in marriage. It's important for men to realize that while a wife might be obligated to honor and respect her husband, it has to start with the husband. He has to act toward his wife in a way that endears him to her, in a way that demonstrates how much he values and cherishes her. If he is selfless in his behavior toward her, then she will naturally respond with love and kindness, with honor and respect.

How can spouses show respect to each other? I believe there are three things that every spouse can do. The first is to compliment and show appreciation to one another for the efforts that each one invests on behalf of the other and the family.

The Chazon Ish once wrote to an engaged young man, “Pay attention every moment to the fact that a wife has pleasure from being attractive in her husband’s eyes ... If she hangs a picture on the wall or places a plant on the table, she does all this for him and he is obligated to see and to recognize good on every such occasion.” (Rabbi Jeff Forsythe, a noted private counselor, quotes this letter in his writings.)

The Chazon Ish understood that a woman wants to feel appreciated by her husband. She wants to feel that he values her contribution to the home and family. It’s not enough for the husband to simply feel gratitude in his heart. He has to express those feelings verbally to his wife. Similarly, a wife should express appreciation to her husband for everything he does for the home and family. She should never take his efforts for granted.

A person should be very careful not to speak negatively to their spouse, not to offend or insult. As the Gemara (*Bava Metzia* 59a) says in the name of Rav:

<i>A man should always be wary not to wrong his wife verbally, for since she cries easily (when she is offended), the punishment for the one who wronged her comes quickly as well.</i>	<p>לעולם יהא אדם זהיר באונאת אשתו שמתוך שדמעתי מצויה אונאתה קרובה.</p>
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Even subtle criticism or lack of praise can be interpreted by a wife as a sign of disapproval. Whether the food is delicious or not, often stretching the truth just a bit can go a long way toward strengthening the bond between husband and wife.

Sometimes people become impatient with their spouse, especially after a long day at work. They may feel stressed or exhausted. They may lapse and speak to their spouse with disrespect if they feel their needs are not being met. Rav Yitzchak Blazer, one of the famous *talmidim* of Rav Yisrael Salanter, used to say that a person should treat his wife with the same respect and patience that he would treat a stranger (*Kochvei Or*, Biographical Sketch, p. 16). No matter how tired a person feels, he always tries to act politely with a stranger. A spouse deserves no less.

In addition, one should make every effort to avoid arguing with their spouse. Even if a person does have an argument with his spouse, he should never be afraid to apologize and move on. Dr. Meir Wikler, a noted psychotherapist, is fond of saying that when he lectures on the topic of marital harmony, he often asks the audience, “What are the three most important words in marriage?” And he quickly adds, “The first word is ‘I,’ but the third word is not ‘you.’” After the audience looks at him quizzically for a few moments, he tells them the answer. “The three most important words in marriage are ‘I was wrong.’”

That simple statement says it all—that the person realizes that marriage is not about winning. It’s about sharing. It’s about building a life together. Sometimes people are afraid to apologize because they think it makes them look meek to their spouse. In fact, the opposite is true. A person is more likely to admire a spouse who is willing to apologize. Why? Because when a

person is able to admit his or her faults, it demonstrates that they're not afraid to be selfless. They respect the opinion of their spouse. They see their spouse as an equal, not as an adversary.

This is one way that spouses can show honor and respect to one another, by showering each other with only positive words. But there is another way as well, and that is by helping with the household responsibilities, whether it is paying the bills, cleaning/maintaining the home or driving carpool, because by doing so, they demonstrate that they are equal partners in these responsibilities.

What's more, when it comes to running the household, a man should take care of his wife's needs even before his own. This is evident from the actions of Avraham Avinu. The *posuk* says at the beginning of *Parshas Lech Lecha* (12:8) "וַיִּטְּ אֹהֶלֶּה"—And he pitched his tent." But the word "tent" is written with a *hey*, not a *vav*. If the word were to be read as it is written, it would mean "her tent," not "his tent." Why would the Torah change the spelling of the word? The *Midrash Rabba* there explains that it teaches us that Avraham set up his wife's tent before his own. Pitching the tents was clearly Avraham Avinu's job; it wasn't expected that Sarah should help him with such strenuous labor. And yet, even while discharging his own responsibilities, Avraham Avinu was able to show his respect for Sarah by taking care of her needs before his own.

This is the second way that spouses can honor each other, by sharing the responsibilities of the household. But there is a third avenue as well, and that is by simply spending quality time with one another—talking, discussing, sharing the events of the day. A woman enjoys being a part of her husband's life. When a man involves his wife in his life decisions, when he shares his successes with her, and maybe even some of his challenges, she feels like a partner, like an equal.

After his first wife passed away, Rabbi Akiva Eiger wrote a letter (*Michtivei Rabbi Akiva Eiger*, no. 149) in which he bemoans his terrible loss. "With whom will I share my worries?" he writes. "Who will care for me? Who will give me their attention? ... Few know the extent of her righteousness and modesty. Many times we had discussions about *yiras Shamayim* until midnight."

The tone of the letter is quite remarkable. After all, Rabbi Akiva Eiger was quite a busy man. As a leader of the Jewish community, a renowned *talmid chacham* and posek, he was sought after by numerous people. And yet, not only did he make time to speak with his wife when he came home at night, apparently he cherished those discussions. Rabbi Akiva Eiger should serve as a model for the importance of spending quality time with one's wife.

These are just a few ways that spouses can show respect for each other and earn trust and love in return. The important thing to keep in mind is that respect in a relationship is counterintuitive. Sometimes people think that the more assertive they are, the more they will be respected. But the reality is that when a person thinks less of him or herself, they become even more endeared to their spouse, and ultimately the more cherished and admired they will be.