

Marriage: Confidence Bred by Commitment

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Often, in working with couples or with a married client, a crisis of confidence will be expressed on one of two dimensions. One is the question of whether the marriage is truly “*bashert*” (Divinely ordained). That question leaves a partner plagued by doubt and lots of thoughts of the “would have, should have, could have” nature. Second is the theme of mistrust: disappointment and resentment over the partner’s disappointing performance in some way. Perhaps professionally he/she isn’t earning up to par, or parenting effectively ... or just not impressive overall.

Every case is different and frustrations of these sorts are no doubt real and deserve validation. Work with the couple can take many directions. We can help a client understand the cause of attraction to the partner and how it was originally meant (consciously or otherwise) to be healing and hopeful. We can focus on communication styles and each partner’s ways of displaying and needing love and how, if the couple “speaks different languages,” it may leave them feeling disconnected. We may also need to help a client mourn what a marriage *isn’t*, and that can be important work, even if the marriage will be saved.

Additionally, if the marriage is healthy on the whole and the work will be about getting it on track, it can be helpful to restore belief in the marriage and reestablish trust on the two counts mentioned above. First, a sense of confidence in the partner as right and most fitting, as well as trusting and respecting each other within the framework of the relationship.

A successful marriage is built upon having that trust. In fact, the essence of a *bayit ne’eman* (trusting home) is the root of *emuna*, of faith and trust inherent in the union. Helping make that trust a reality is such a valuable process.

Appreciating the Master Plan

Under the *chupa* (bridal canopy), every couple starts out their married life hearing seven beautiful blessings, reiterated at each of their *sheva brachot* celebrations. One of those blessings bears question. We wish the couple the *simcha* of the very first of couples, Adam and Chava, the *rayim ahuvim* (beloved friends) who began their lives in Gan Eden. Let’s think about that. Here you are, starting your married life, with all of your options of marriage models open. You could

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be blessed to be like Avraham and Sarah, who so respected each other's goals and being. You could fashion yourself after Yaakov and Rachel, with a love so natural and personalities so in sync. But we prefer to wish the starry-eyed couple that they be blessed to emulate Adam and Chava, a couple who ignored G-d's command and caused our exile from the Garden of Eden; were left homeless and bearing eternal hardships; and had one son who killed another. Are we hearing the *bracha*?

We most definitely can. For in spite of all of the disappointment and turmoil they experienced, Adam and Chava were unique in experiencing a blessing that is paramount in marriage. They were blessed in the fact that they could not compare or contrast their spouse to another. It is that clarity—that *this person* is the human being most appropriate and *bashert* to me—that allows a couple serenity of the highest form; trusting in the fact that they are right and best for each other is the foundation most critical to creating a healthy, focused marriage. For it is that *ne'emanut* (faithfulness) that is at the core of a *bayit ne'eman*.

The morning after she was engaged, a young kalla's father invited her to talk. He asked her how she felt. She responded with all of the expected superlatives. Her father smiled warmly. "I just need to tell you," he said, "that you may not always feel this way. It may be tomorrow, a month from now, 20 years from now at a neighborhood barbeque... You'll wonder if he was the right one for you or if you could have chosen otherwise." The young woman was shocked and offended. Was her father implying that she made the wrong choice? Not at all. "I'm just educating you: it's a process. Often, we find that Hashem gives clarity, then withdraws, and allows for us to come to it by our own work and initiative. There are so many examples: He has an angel teaching a baby Torah in utero, then taps him and causes the learning to be forgotten, and the child has to recreate that learning on his own. He gave the Torah at Sinai, withdrew, we faltered and then had to yearn for a second set of luchot. Once we did, in spite of the second tablets being inferior to the first, they are the ones still with us today. In the same vein, He now gave you the clarity you had to choose your mate and enter this marriage. It is up to you to retain that clarity once the magic is withdrawn. Only then will it be yours in a way that is lasting. The work you put into maintaining that clarity—remembering that your choice is most fitting and right for you, even when it's not as obvious as it is now—will be the key to your marriage's success and your happiness in it."

We are taught (Chavakuk 2:4) that "*Tzaddik b'emunato yichyeh*"—and typically define that to mean that a righteous person lives by the dictates of his belief. It goes much deeper than that, says Rav Rephael Menachem Schlanger in his *Ohel Rachel*. It is only by having *emuna*, true belief that there is a Power governing our lives and that the lives we are living are the ones lovingly and expertly fashioned by Him for us, that one can truly *live*. Without that belief, we are constantly plagued by doubt and insecurity. Without a base of belief in a Power beyond our own, we are limited to our own limited perceptions and abilities. And that would not allow for real living.

Under normal circumstances, within the context of a marriage with potential (for there are marriages that need to be dissolved, and that is a topic beyond the scope of this article), that belief has to extend to our life's partner being part of our life's prescription. Without that basis, it is hard to really breathe and live comfortably in the marriage. With lack of confidence in the marriage being *bashert*, there is a lot less motivation to put in the effort to see it work and thrive.

The root of the word *emuna* and its meaning can be gleaned from two sources in Tanach. In Yeshaya (22:23), we find reference to a peg affixed in a *makom ne'eman*, a secure place. In Bamidbar (11:12) we learn of an “*omaim*,” caring for and nursing an infant. The two obviously different meanings offer a composite in understanding the type of belief that allows for ideal living: that it needs to be secure and permanent, and that possessing that belief allows for a sense of being cared for and nurtured.

Our goal in accessing the life-giving force of a *bayit ne'eman* hinges on believing that it is a partnership designed by Hashem and one that is part of a plan meant, out of His constant love and concern for our best, to help each spouse grow most effectively toward his or her greatest potential.

Defining Our Commitment

There are two relationships in life that fall under the category of “*brit*” (a covenant). One is our relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, concretized at Sinai when we received the commandments. The second is marriage. No other relationship is similar in its expectations or the level of commitment it demands. Friendships and partnerships of other sorts are not covenants. Let’s understand the difference.

In the Navi Yirmiyahu (3:20) Hashem bemoans the fact that we have betrayed Him. He characterizes us a woman who “*bagda meirei’ah*”—rebelled against her acquaintance/friend. The *Ohel Rachel* questions why we don’t find it said that she rebelled against her *husband*? Wouldn’t that be a more accurate analogy of our relationship with Hashem and describe His frustration with us more realistically? Chazal (*Shmot Raba* 32:5) explain: the fact that she strays in her loyalty is proof that she never saw her relationship as a marriage. Her attitude proves that this was nothing more than a casual connection. Were it a marriage, it would go without saying that loyalty and acknowledgment of the other would be unconditional and consistent:

When a man takes a wife and is with her many days, even if he becomes impoverished—his wife wouldn’t rebel against/abandon him. Rather, she would say: “When he was wealthy he fed me and clothed me. Now that he cannot, I can’t abandon him! But if it isn’t a relationship of marriage, she acknowledges him when he gives her, but doesn’t recognize him when he doesn’t. Therefore it says, ‘a woman rebelled against her acquaintance.’”

אדם שהוא נוטל אשה ועושה עמה ימים הרבה אפילו העני אשתו אינה כופרת בו אלא אומרת בשעה שהיה עשיר האכילני והלבישני ועכשיו שהעני איני כופרת בו ובשעה שהיא זונה אם נתן לה הרי היא מודה לו ואם לא נתן לה אינה מכרת אותו לכך נאמר אכן בגדה אשה מרעה.

What is the difference between the commitment inherent in a *brit* as opposed to that of a mere friendship?

A friendship can be one of many, it can be temporal and it can be conditional, dependent on filling mutually satisfying needs. For instance, I may have a friend who likes the activities that I do, or enjoys similar discussions, or who is devoted to the same causes I participate in. Our friendship can be the means toward shared end goals. If goals are not achieved, dissatisfaction can result in dissolving the friendship.

In the relationship of a *brit*, on the other hand, the relationship itself is the goal.

True, if conditions are met that are satisfying it is no doubt a bonus. But even if that isn't the case, the commitment of a *brit* remains a constant.

It was during the real estate market crash that I was exposed to this scene. It taught me just how scary conditional love can be. My young son and I were waiting in a jewelry store for my watch battery to be replaced. I walked a woman with her little boy. She was known to have been a woman of means, and the jeweler promptly put aside my watch to attend to her; no doubt she held the promise of a far bigger sale. The woman was admiring a fabulous diamond necklace. The jeweler complimented her with "Oh! You always have the finest taste!" To which she replied, "I still have the taste... but he can't bring it in!"

The woman obviously didn't value the *brit* dimension of her relationship.

In *Shirat Chana* (Shmuel I 2:1-10), the song Chana sang after struggling with infertility for about two decades, she reacts to her success. Interestingly, there is no mention of "baby" in her song. Instead, she sings of G-d's greatness, of His involvement in her life. It is not that Chana ignored the obvious blessing of having a baby; she rejoiced most, though, over the proof of G-d's presence and ability that it brought to light and the joy she had in being connected to Him. The greatest joy was in a newfound clarity and depth of her relationship with Hashem. By not emphasizing "baby," Chana proves that, while her relationship with Hashem was enhanced by the success and the *simcha* of her prayers answered and a desired condition met, it was not defined by it.

A *brit* weathers ups and downs. In the low times, the devotion does not falter. And in the good times, highlights are special in that they are special times to share. They aren't seen as proof of the relationship's worth. To appreciate the value of a 24/7 commitment, look up Shmos 24:7. There you will find the words of *na'aseh v'nishma*—acceptance of our *brit*! A covenant is forever.

In the *brit* of marriage, our belief in each other means that success or lack thereof isn't indicative of the marriage being "right." Each partner takes his or her piece of being responsible to expend effort to acquire success on any level. Assuming we do our fair part in the process, we cannot judge each other by the outcome. That is out of our hands. In a *bayit ne'eman*, each partner does his or her parallel job with *ne'emanut*, not shirking responsibility, and each has belief in the other that his or her job will be done, too. Judging the other unfavorably, looking over his shoulder, or comparing his success to another's means that we don't believe that our collective efforts bear us our just and fitting rewards. Deeming a spouse as "unsuccessful" is missing the point. As a unit, we will earn what our *team* is meant to yield, assuming hard work was done responsibly. The outcome, positive or negative, will not determine the viability of our union. It will just become what the union has to live with and through.

It is the respect and trust we give another that helps allow him/her to live up to the image of being respected and trustworthy. If the *emuna* in the other is lacking, the degradation it causes will assure a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Heaven and earth are referred to (by Maharal, *Netivot Olam, Netiv HaEmunah* no. 1) as “having faith one with the other.” The fact that each does its job with the assumption of the other doing its job in tandem (e.g.: the heaven sends forth rain, confident of the earth absorbing it) shows their sense of faithfulness and serenity. That is the goal of a solid union. In our ideal state, we live in a similar state of being to the *shamayim al ha’aretz*, where the heaven is comfortably over the earth. In marriage, each spouse plays a parallel role toward a shared end-goal, much like the heaven and earth. Each focuses on his/her role and tasks with *ne’emanut* and trusts in the other to be doing the same.

So many marriages are plagued by couples being preoccupied with second-guessing the choice of partner, evaluating him or her constantly, and feeling shortchanged in some way. Many are affected by resentment of the other “not living up to his/her end” of the partnership. That mentality is exhausting at best and damaging at worst. By restoring a sense of *emuna* on these two fronts—satisfaction with the other and being loyal and trusting in our constant commitment—we allow for the relationship to thrive.

Only once we regain the clarity of the relationship we have as being the one that offers us *shleimut* (wholeness) will we experience the inner peace and peaceful coexistence—the *shalom*—that we all seek.