

Omission Impossible: Why Complimenting Is Vital to Relationships

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Case Studies

Case study #1 – Shani and Jeremy: Shani and Jeremy have been dating for close to nine weeks. However, Shani feels that neither of them is as emotionally involved as she would have expected after two months of dating. Her gut also tells her that Jeremy is a really nice person and great on paper, but there doesn't seem to be any chemistry. After some deliberation, she discusses it with Jeremy, and he echoes her assessment of their dating. Some of Shani's friends remind her that there are many fish in the sea. Should she follow their advice?

Case study #2 – Rachel and Jonathan: Rachel and Jonathan have been dating for approximately a month and appreciate spending time with each other. Their conversations are pleasant and they enjoy their dates. However, they both would like to know how to proceed with their dating to the next level. Some of Rachel's friends have told her that it is a matter of time. If she gives it time, their relationship will grow. Are they right?

Are You Positive?

There is an important part of relationship-building that is simple, elegant, powerful and relationship-altering. It is the bedrock of productive dating and it is fundamental to developing any relationship. However, individuals are often scared to use it, and relationships that could soar and flourish struggle and flounder instead. This technique is providing routine expressions of positive feedback to each other, also known as complimenting.

Complimenting is essential to relationship building for at least three reasons:

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1. First, it is almost impossible for two people to cultivate a relationship if one perceives that the other sees him or her as just “another guy” or “another girl.” Therefore, one of the most important steps to creating a relationship is for the woman to convey to the man that she views him as an individual, and for him to do the same. This is effectively accomplished through complimenting. When each of them communicates specific, positive aspects of one another’s behavior, actions, or thoughts, it sets a powerful emotional sequence in motion that can sow the beginnings of a successful dating experience. When a man compliments his date, he validates her and indicates that he sees qualities that make her unique. In turn, as she recognizes that he considers her more than just “another face” sitting across from him, a potential relationship can sprout. Likewise, when a woman provides brief positive feedback to the man she is dating, she begins that cycle of validating him and acknowledging his uniqueness, which should be followed by his recognition, and then a possible relationship.
2. Second, in many relationships, there are remarkable characteristics about the people involved that are readily noticeable to objective individuals. Yet their dates turn a blind eye to those same qualities. This is partially because critical eyesight is part of human nature. As Rav Shlomo Wolbe highlights,² quoting the words of the Rosh in *Orchos Chaim*, “The way of people is to hide the positive [about others] and to reveal the negatives.” In addition, a dating individual can sometimes feel as if he or she is on a tightrope, carefully balancing the desire to see if “it will work” with necessary—and sometimes culturally imposed—investigative proclivity. For example, while a woman is trying to see if the man she is conversing with is a suitable husband, she is also intent on seeing if there are negative traits or behaviors that might suggest that she should terminate the match. Such a double-faced approach often continues for much of the dating process. With these backdrops, it is often difficult for a dating individual to become aware of—and certainly to verbalize—positive traits about the other. However, thinking about a person’s positive qualities in order to develop a compliment can also enhance one’s overall ability to appreciate him or her.
3. Third, Shlomo Hamelech observes in Mishlei (27, 19) that just as water reflects one’s image, so does one person’s heart reflect the emotion expressed to him by another— כמים הפנים לאדם, לפנים כן לב האדם לאדם. In social psychology, this is sometimes termed “reciprocal attraction.”³ It is evident from the literature that one of the most powerful predictors of whether one person will like another is whether the other likes that person.⁴ Even in the very nascence of a dating relationship, where the couple might feel that the term “like” is premature, positive feelings can be generated when a man shares with his date that he has been thinking about her, or she relays that same message to him. When he compliments her on a date, he is indicating to her that she was on his mind for at least a few moments that day,

² *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 279.

³ Kenny, D. A., & Voie, L. L. (1982). Reciprocity of Interpersonal Attraction: A Confirmed Hypothesis. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 45(1), 54–58.

⁴ Spitzberg, B. H. & Dillard, J. P. (2002). Social Skills and Communication. Allen, M., Preiss, R. W., Gayle, B. M., Burrell, N. (Eds.), *Interpersonal Communication Research: Advances Through Meta-analysis* (89–108). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

while he thought of the compliments to share with her, and vice versa. The “real estate” that each takes up in the other’s mind is a powerful precursor to a possible future relationship.

Your Money’s Worth

The power of providing brief positive feedback was investigated by Dr. John Seiter of Utah State University.⁵ Seiter observed that many restaurant food servers rely on tips as a significant part of their wages. He conducted an experiment to see if he could help them increase their tip income. Seiter recruited two waitresses to serve almost a hundred different parties at restaurants. Half of the parties would receive a compliment from the food server right after they ordered, and half of them would not. Seiter found that when the waitresses complimented the customers, their tips were significantly higher. This technique, which is sometimes referred to by social psychologists as ingratiation, is a proven way to increase likeability and produce tangible results.

One might explore if the food servers’ behavior would be deemed inappropriate in the eyes of the halacha, as it might be considered to be insincerely motivated.⁶ Nonetheless, Seiter’s findings underscore the importance of compliments in human interaction. In a dating or relationship-building situation, a true and sincere compliment can help two well-meaning individuals create the beginnings of a relationship or enhance and improve an existing one

Develop It

In years of experience meeting with couples, I have seen many relationships that did not blossom because they lacked complimenting. Conversely, many relationships that were floundering took off beautifully once complimenting was introduced. I have observed that complimenting is so powerful and essential that, in instances where one member of the couple notices that the other one is not engaging in it, he can share the importance of complimenting with her. This may appear to an onlooker as if it is contrived, as if he is fishing for compliments. In truth, he is just explaining their importance and not telling her what to say. The specific compliments that each of them shares with the other are unique products of their own minds and they have the power to propel the relationship extraordinarily.

⁵ Seiter, J. S. (2007). Ingratiation and Gratitude: The Effect of Complimenting Customers on Tipping Behavior in Restaurants. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 37(3), 478–485.

⁶ The Talmud, *Maseches Chullin* 94a, discusses the concept of *geneivas daas* (providing a false impression). Also see their codification in Rambam *Hilchos Deos* 2: 6 and *Hilchos Mechira* 18: 1. It is interesting to note that the Rambam’s dual placement of these laws seems to indicate that they have both a religious-ethical component as well as a legal, monetary aspect. One might consider that even if a specific practice would be permitted on the business axis, the Rambam might view it as an ethical violation. See also *Shulchan Aruch*, *Choshen Mishpat* 228: 6 and *Drisha* 228: 7, where the *Drisha* rules that a behavior that is customary is not considered *geneivas daas*. This is in possible contrast to his words in *SeM”A* 228: 6, where he seems to rule that it is permissible only in order to avoid embarrassment.

This is similar to evidence suggested by a seminal experiment conducted by Dr. Neil Minkin and his team at the University of Kansas.⁷ The researchers videotaped junior high school and college-aged women and had judges rate their conversational ability. They discovered that individuals who provided positive feedback to the individual with whom they were conversing were rated by the judges as better conversationalists. However, more important, Minkin and his team found that those who were rated lower by the judges could be trained to use compliments and would be rated significantly higher when they conversed again.

Meeting on the A Train

In some instances, a couple includes an intermediary's involvement in some initial aspects of their courtship. They move into direct communication once both parties agree that there is some level of interest in exploring their relationship further. Colloquially, this change is termed "dropping the *shadchan* (matchmaker)." Many dating individuals think that this shift alone—of removing the intermediary and communicating directly—is a milestone in the relationship. However, this process itself is largely insignificant, as evident from the fact that many individuals relay that they do not sense measurable progress after dismissing the intermediary.

Instead, moving to direct communication should be an outgrowth of a conversation sharing positive feedback with the other party. In this way, the move concretizes and capitalizes on the positive sentiments expressed. One example of such a conversation might be: "Shira, we have gone out on several dates. During this brief time, I have noticed that you are a considerate person, you are thoughtful and you are happy. These are important things to me and I would like to continue to see how things progress. Would it be OK if I call you?" Yet many dating individuals are reluctant to have a conversation similar to the one above. A primary reason that is reported for the hesitation is that he is concerned that "Shira" might reply back in the negative. He feels that he went out on a limb to compliment her and will feel even more awkward if she rejects him.

This insecurity might be addressed with "The A Train Parable." Suppose that I meet someone for the first time on the A Train (an express subway line in New York City) as we embark together at the uptown stop at 181st Street. As we talk, I notice that he is a fascinating person and I enjoy a stimulating conversation until he needs to exit the train at 59th Street in midtown. As the train comes to a halt, I tell him that he is an extremely interesting conversationalist and that I am so glad that I met him. He thanks me for the compliment, reciprocates, and leaves the train. Should I feel awkward because he does not want to become my friend? After all, I complimented him—and he left.

It is evident from this illustration that a compliment does not necessarily mean that one wants to jump to having an everlasting relationship. It merely means that he sees positive attributes to the other person and that he is not too shy to share them with him. Although there are many

⁷Minkin, N., Braukmann, C. J., Minkin, B. L., Timbers, G. D., Timbers, B. J., Fixsen, D. L., Phillips, E. L., et al. (1976). The Social Validation and Training of Conversational Skills. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 9(2), 127–139.

differences between my fictitious A Train encounter and that of dating individuals, the common denominator between them is that compliments do not mean that one is certain that he or she should continue the relationship. Compliments are simply statements of fact. This applies in a dating interaction as well. Even if “Shira” were to turn around and explain that she does not want to continue, the objective positive feedback that he gave her is something that he thought is true. Of course, it is often unpleasant to be on the receiving end of a “no.” However, the compliments themselves should not add embarrassment to the uncomfortable situation of being declined another date.

Complimenting is Key

With this background, we can glean greater insight into the case studies that we discussed earlier. In case study No. 1, although Shani and Jeremy are dating for almost nine weeks on the calendar, they are really in the infancy of their relationship. They think that they have been dating for a long time, yet they have been mostly sitting parallel to each other, but hardly dating. If their relationship did not have a steady flow of compliments after the first few dates, it is expected for them not to feel the often sought after “chemistry.” In case study No. 2, Rachel’s friends might be correct that time will help them feel closer together. However, in order for them to proceed, it is usually necessary for them to compliment each other as well.

Compliments are essential in forming and enhancing dating relationships. Relationships that are lacking compliments are often like gliders without the wind to propel them, which will fall to the ground in a matter of time. Yet by harnessing the power of compliments and introducing them into a relationship, that relationship can soar. Compliments have the power to be the cement that holds the bricks of the *bayis neeman* (faithful home) that the couple will build together, to the pride and joy of *klal yisrael*.