Vayetze

Love and Marriage

BY

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Not long ago, I was walking along a street and I noticed a sign in a storefront window, “College Prep.” Beneath the sign was another sign that read, “A must for success!” Hmm, I thought to myself, that’s interesting. We offer preparation classes for all sorts of things, except the things that we *really* need preparation for!

I thought back to a conversation I’d had with a young man only a couple of weeks earlier. He had met a young woman and he was smitten with her. “She’s the one,” he confided to me.

“One what?” I asked.

“The one I’m going to marry,” he proclaimed.

“And are you ready for marriage?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “What’s to be ready for? It’s easy to get married.”

I sighed. Yes, it *is* easy to get married. But it is not so easy to have a good marriage, a successful marriage, a wonderful marriage. To have those things requires a bit more than simply finding “the one.”

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Being good at anything demands discipline, attention, and work. Even a naturally gifted athlete must practice so that he or she is to become great. A brilliant musician spends hours each day, perfecting his or her skills. And yet we somehow believe that we can simply “get married” and that will be that!

It might be true that we cannot *make* ourselves love someone, that true love happens *to* us. We are smitten and we “fall” in love. To fall in love is a wonderful thing, but only a fool would think that even the greatest love is enough to sustain a marriage.

If we want marriages to be successful, we need to be vigilant in teaching people *how* to have a successful marriage. After all, we are committed to teaching our children the fundamentals of Jewish life and experience – we teach them the laws and practices of Shabbos and holidays, the way to keep *kashruth*, how to lay *tefillin*. Certainly we can understand that being able to participate in a successful marriage demands at least as much attention and preparation!

For many observant people, there is almost no interaction between males and females. That might be right and good, but how then can we expect a man and a woman to engage in the most intimate of relationships if they’ve never learned how to interact at all!

More importantly, we need to understand that in order to be successful in marriage, we need to be successful *within ourselves*. Too many of us suffer from poor self-esteem and assume – no, *demand* – that our marriage partner provide what we find lacking in ourselves. Too many of us dream of a husband or wife who will magically attend to our wants and needs, ensuring that we are never scared, lonely or sad again.

We objectify our potential mate, looking for mere physical beauty rather than inner and spiritual beauty.

The truth is, more often than not, we enter a marriage with expectations and behaviors and misunderstandings that can only make marriage *more* difficult, not less.

Too many times, having fallen in love, people rush into marriage. Perhaps they would be wiser to consider the experience of Yaakov when approaching the decision to wed.

Having fallen in love with Rachel, his Uncle Lavan gives permission for him to marry her, *but only on the condition* that he work for him for seven years. Seven years! An eternity! How could Lavan make such an unreasonable demand? Surely, Yaakov would rebel. Quite the opposite. For him, the years flew by. For Yaakov, those years “seemed ... a few days because of his love for her.”

How could Yaakov not have chafed each and every day of his servitude? How could each moment not seem to be interminable to him? Simple, Love.

The Torah is clear that Yaakov was not working *for* Lavan but rather for Rachel. He was working *be’Rachel*. Not only did Yaakov *feel* that his time and effort was invested in his love for Rachel but he wanted it understood by everyone else that whatever labors he endured, he endured for one reason and one reason only, so he could marry the woman he loved; so he could wed Rachel.

Lavan, slippery and devious in his way, would not be able to deny this fact later. *Mizrachi* focuses on the words, *be’ahavaso osa* – because of his love for her. A moment of love is like an eternity. And so, Yaakov’s intense love for Rachel made the seven, long, hard years of labor under the hand of the despicable Lavan as the blink of an eye.

So many of us react with anger or anxiety when something we want is denied us for even a short period of time. But seven years? The Tur adds perspective to the years of Yaakov’s labors. Most of us might focus on the actual passage of time and how those long hours, days, weeks, months and years felt to Yaakov. The Tur focuses instead on Yaakov’s deep and abiding appreciation for Rachel’s worth.

We often consider any amount of time we expend “wasted” if it is expended for something we do not deem worthwhile. Certainly the opposite must also be true – if we value our endeavor then the time devoted to it is time well spent.

Seven years is a long time *but not when you know the value of what the investment of that time brings to you*! So it was that those seven years were to him “but a few days.” In his mind, there was no price too high to pay for Rachel. *Sforno* is explicit in this regard, “he thought that it was indeed appropriate to pay such an excessive price.”

Rachel, was well worth it.

Rav Aharon Kotler, *z’l*, asked a perceptive question about Yaakov’s years of labor for Rachel. Whose idea was it for Yaakov to work for seven years? Lavan’s? Or Yaakov’s? The text suggests that it was Yaakov’s. “Yaakov loved Rachel, so he said, ‘I will work for you for seven years, for Rachel your younger daughter.’”(29:19)

Why would Yaakov suggest such a price without even waiting to hear what Lavan’s fee might be? Whatever Lavan’s demands, Yaakov had certainly proved himself resourceful enough to meet whatever was expected of him! So why seven years?

From this, Rav Aharon takes a life lesson that is more relevant in our modern times than even a generation or two ago. We live at a time when too many marriages fall apart. Not for lack of love. Indeed, our generation often seems awash in love. So why do these marriages falter and fail?

Not lack of love but rather for lack of preparation. Rav Aharon suggested that Yaakov was quick to offer the seven year term because *he knew* he was not ready to get married, establish a family and produce the twelve *shevatim* that would become *Klal Yisrael*.

Yaakov was wise enough to understand that he had to invest time, thought, sentiment, and reflection in order to prepare for marriage. As Lisa Aiken makes clear in her essay, *Preparing Yourself for Marriage*, (Aish.com) “People often have the erroneous idea that good marriages just happen”. She suggests that the truth is otherwise; that it takes a lifetime to develop the ideal marriage.

What? A marriage doesn’t start out “ideal”? What about romance and love?

The notions of romance and love that fail to recognize not only that a marriage requires time to age but also that it cannot start except with sound preparation and awareness.

For Yaakov, those seven years allowed him to accomplish all that she suggests in her essay, that marriage should not be our sole source of meaning or self-worth, that rather than trying to find a mate to fit our image of who we *should* marry, we can learn about and appreciate a partner for who he or she is and that love results from committing ourselves to caring for a spouse.

Perhaps most importantly, and the point that Yaakov intuited, marriage demands hard work! Which is why fourteen years in Ever’s Yeshiva *prior* to arriving to Lavan’s house, while more than enough time for reflection and learning, were not enough time for a successful marriage.

Torah learning alone is not sufficient to make a marriage successful!

This truth astonishes many young men. Their idea seems to be that they need only be immersed in the Beis Midrash and then, on the day of their wedding, don a suit and go to the Chupah! I recall a young scholar who bragged that he was looking for a chavrusa “who should also double as a wife”!

Oye! Was he in for a shock.

It is true that the Beis Midrash can teach all the Torah one needs, but where will one attain the *shimush*, the practicum, the *sechel* for a full life – where all the knowledge has to be transformed into practical use?

Yaakov knew that to be a loving and sensitive husband, a model father and the progenitor of the *shevatim*, he had to be the epitome of honesty and sensitivity. The classroom for such lessons was not Ever’s Yeshiva or even his father’s house, but the world itself. Learning how to respond as a Yaakov to the evil in the world required the Lavan laboratory for a seven year term!

With such a life purpose and mission before him, Yaakov considered the seven long years he labored to marry Rachel but a few days. Had he pursued one of life’s many senseless *narishkeiten*, then those seven years would have definitely been as an eternity. But tending Lavan’s sheep in order to prepare for a meaningful life and marriage to Rachel was no hard labor or excessive price.

It could very well have been the greatest bargain ever made!