What’s Love Got to Do With It?

Is Marriage Just Another Transactional Relationship?

by

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“I’m getting married!”

“Mazal tov!”

Our young people are getting married! This is a thing to be celebrated. With marriage comes the continuity of Jewish tradition and culture. Jewish families. Jewish life. Mazal tov! Mazal tov! *L’chaim* to us all!

But wait! Not all is well in the land of love and marriage. For far too many of our young men, getting married is less about love and emotion and more about “doing what you’re supposed to do”. That is, for many young men their relationship with marriage – and their brides – is transactional at heart. For far too many of our young men, marriage isn’t “personal”. It’s more like business. And that is a very real problem.

Marriage is not like any other relationship we enter into. The Torah is both clear and mysterious when it suggests that, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall be one flesh.” (Bereishit 2:24-25)

For a marriage to be successful there must be not only physical intimacy but also an emotional “nakedness”, a trust and embrace of the wholeness of the other. But too many of our young men have little or no grasp of the need for this emotional component. They do not embrace their obligation to “gladden” their brides’ heart.

“If a man marries a new wife, he shall not go to the army …he shall be free for his home for one year, and he ***shall gladden his wife whom he has married.***”(Devarim 24:5)

What a “chore”! What a “task”!

This charge, which demands a full year, is so important that a man is relieved of his duty to defend the country in order to fulfill it. What is going on here? What is the lesson the Torah is teaching us?

Simply put, that man cannot experience true meaning and joy unless he brings joy to others. He is not exempt from military service *simply because he is newlywed* but in order to bring happiness to his new bride. That is, bringing happiness cannot be done in abstensia, you have to be present to play, you’ve got to have skin in the game.

Why then, do so many young men seem to turn away from their young wives during this very delicate time, the first year of marriage? And the beginning of a marriage *is* a delicate time. If we were “sensible” we would recognize the “foolishness” of two people from two different families, “strangers” to one another in the deepest sense, coming together to live as one! Two individuals coming together to create a union. What a challenge! Sensible, rational thought would tell us that such an endeavor is doomed. Only our hearts and emotions betray that sensible conclusion. Still, hearts and emotion are not enough to make a marriage successful and happy.

It is work. Hard work. And like any other task that demands work – thoughtful presence is a prerequisite to success. If you’re a surgeon and expect a delicate surgery to go well, you’d better be “all in” in the operating room. If you’re a lawyer arguing a case, you’d best have done the hard work of preparing your case if you hope to win in court. If you’re an investor, you had best do your research lest you end up a pauper. So too marriage! The Torah tells us that a man *must* stay put, to focus on making his marriage work. He should not let anything stand in the way of the task of becoming one with his new wife, not even defending the country!

Your priority that first year, new husband, is to “gladden” your wife. You are to forge the closest, most trusting and caring bond possible with her.

The *Sefer Hachinuch* elaborates on what it means to “gladden” a wife; it is to get to know her ways, habits, likes and dislikes, sensitivities, way of thinking… what makes her *tick*! For a solid year after which her needs, her wants, her essence will be carved in his heart and mind so that he can maintain a home of joy and harmony necessary for true happiness, for genuine *shalom bayis*.

In our society some believe that money is the way to accomplish this; that a sparkling ring, a beautiful car or house will do the trick. But the “trick” is on the poor soul who thinks that way. Happiness comes from understanding, from “knowing” the other, just as Adam “*vayeda*” Chava. And, as we know from the Torah and from experience, such knowledge does not come about immediately, it is not gained from a text or from the whispered advice of others; it is gained through a *shana rishona*, a full year of time invested in gladdening.

Maybe, for our time, a single year will not be enough. Some rabbis suggest that in our time, rife with material wealth and commercialism, with the Internet’s lure and the misinformation about personal relationships in the mass media it takes *three* years of gladdening your wife, and even those three years require the guidance of teachers, of supportive family and friends, *rabbaim*. Our modern rabbis are telling us that the “instant gratification” of our times might very well be mimicked in marriages in which twenty-year old couples gift diamonds and pearls to each other, menorahs, esrog boxes and so much more. From the moment they are wed, they *appear* to be secure and deeply bonded but it is only a façade. It cannot help but be only a façade.

To be glad and rejoice is a wonderful thing. We are taught the obligation, v’samachta b’chagecha - to be joyful, happy throughout the Yom tov. An obligation to be joyful? Is being joyful a burden to be carried? It might seem not but none other than the Gaon of Vilna said that this is the most difficult part of yom tov, to *sustain* this feeling for the seven or eight days of the *chag*, to not get frustrated and annoyed with the family, the guests, the wife… oye!

If seven or eight days are hard, how to “gladden” for a full year? The Torah provides another example of this in the mitzvah of shemitah – letting the land rest for a full year every seventh year in the land of Israel. Imagine the faith and discipline such a full year’s “rest” demands on a man whose life and livelihood revolves around working the land! I once met a Jew in Israel several months before the onset of the last *shemitah* and he told me that, “…it takes me a full year to adjust emotionally to the coming of *shemitah*.”  A full year just to prepare for the year!

How much more so should it be for those who prepare for the greatest challenge and joy, the most fundamental bond they will ever engage in, marriage?

*V’simach et ishto*! Gladden your wife during that first year and you build a foundation of a lifetime. Fall short, and your marriage rests on a foundation of sand.

Note that the responsibility of “gladdening” is on the husband. In our time of “me, me, me”, when new husbands might very well take the position, “Hey, what am I, chopped liver?” the Torah is clear. While *both* partners in a marriage must be loving, caring, and sensitive, the onus for gladdening is on the husband. It on his *cheshbon*. The Torah does not mince words or sugar coat life. Marriage is not “give and take” as some self-help books might suggest. It is “give and give.”

The verse, as Rashi teaches us, is *not*, “he shall be glad with his wife…” it is “he shall gladden his wife.”

The man who mistranslates the command is a man who is destined for unhappiness himself! Mindful of this, the Rebbe of Kotzk once nearly pushed a newly married young man out his door from a visit, urging him to get back to his new wife! “You belong home,” he said.

We are, in so many ways, creatures of habit. We drive home along the same route. We take the same train, day after day, sitting in the same seat. We take the same place in shul. From the trivial to the holy, we follow paths that are familiar to us. We teach our children the right way so that they will know the path to follow in life.

This same is true in marriage. Establish a frame of gladdening that first year and that is the pattern that you will follow the rest of your married life. Don’t… and it is so much more difficult to “make up for lost ground.”

I recently read a column by a prominent therapist who discussed the frustrations many wives feel, jealous of the many “freedoms” their husbands enjoy that they do not. They go off on business trips, enjoy the evening camaraderie with their friends, socialize and relax, come home and they are “too tired” to deal with the household and the kids; that’s all on the wives.

The men come home late from a dinner meeting, go out to learn, have a shul meeting… on and on, leaving the wives with the burden of managing the house and the children.

The therapist, much like the Rebbe of Kotzk, was hoping to “educate” the busy husband that his wife is no less a “full-time” worker than he is. She is busy, overwhelmed and needs his *presence* to help. The husband who spent the first year gladdening his bride, getting to know her and understand her, will hear the voice of the therapist and of the rebbe much more clearly, “Go, go home. *That’s* where you need to be.

“That’s where you will find joy if that is where you planted its seed early in your marriage.”