

*Yiddishe*

# How to Make a Marriage Work

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Based on ideas heard from Rav Yosef Heller

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## Working Out the Differences

When two people marry, each one brings to the marriage his or her own set of habits and experiences. The husband and wife may have different or conflicting expectations of how things will work in their home. In one household the men may be more involved in the *gashmius* of the home, while in another household they are less involved. In one household the men may take out the garbage, in another household the women do. When a person from one household marries a person from another, there may be tension and misunderstandings until they sit down in an open manner to discuss who will do what in this new household they have created.

In addition, men and women have intrinsic differences in how they react and relate to people, events, challenges and day-to-day life. When women are upset, they usually want and need a lot of discussion and understanding. When men are upset, they generally want to be left alone for at least a while. When a man and a woman marry, and neither understands this basic difference – among another hundred or so basic differences – misunderstandings and conflict are likely to result.

Fortunately, the *Torah* provides us with instruction and guidance in all areas of our lives. With *Torah* guidance, we can understand and respect the differences between men and women, and learn how to successfully navigate and strengthen a *Yiddishe* marriage.

## The Third Partner

In every marriage there are three partners – the husband, the wife and *Hashem*. When *Hashem* is invited in and respected, the whole marriage has an excellent chance of success and peace. When He is *chas v'sholom* ignored, or disrespected, the marriage has very little chance of long-term success.

When life is about materialism – a better vacation, a higher position in one's career – it leads to emptiness, disappointment. Chasing fun and pleasure stems from a lack of meaning and sense of purpose in life, and inevitably leads to strife between husband and wife.

We need not look far to see this phenomenon playing itself out. In the secular world, many have not found deeper meaning in their lives, and hence have no real explanation for why we exist.

Their solution is to distract themselves from contemplating the question, by aggressively pursuing work and fun as a substitute for meaning and happiness. The multi-billion dollar entertainment industry exists to distract people from the monotonous, meaningless cycle of day-to-day life. People wake up early, have a long commute to work, work long hours in the office, commute home exhausted, and do it all again the next day. With no understanding of life's true meaning, infusions of "fun" are the only way to continue to withstand the pressure and monotony.

However, every so often the question of *why* resurfaces, to be suppressed by another dose of entertainment and fun. Life quickly becomes a game of pursuit from oneself. The end result is an empty meaningless existence. How sad to see *Yidden* use

these distractions and follow this game of pursuit of happiness. We have the real happiness, the real meaning and understanding.

Of course, we do not serve *Hashem* solely because it gives us meaning in our lives. That would be serving ourselves. However, it is important to realize that *Yiddishkeit* infuses one's life with meaning, in turn leading to a healthy, successful marriage.

When life has *kedushah* and direction, when it is meaningful and spiritual, there is happiness and peace.

### **The Warmth of a Yiddishe Home**

Everyone is familiar with the unique warmth found in a *Yiddishe* home. The *Shabbos* meals filled with words of *torah* and *niggunim*, the warm relationship between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren. It is often one of the first things people notice and comment upon, when spending their first *shabbos* with a *frum* family.

True happiness in marriage comes from within the marriage, not from outside excitement. For example, one couple gets married and immediately after sheva brachos leaves on a "honeymoon." They look for thrills in exotic activities and faraway places. They come home and suddenly regular life is boring. All they can think about is getting away again to their honeymoon hotspot.

On the other hand, another couple gets married and immediately after sheva brachos settles down to the enjoyable task of establishing a *Yiddishe* home. They sit down together to a real homemade supper every night, during which they enjoy each others company. They take walks. They turn off their cell phones and give and receive a deep level of connection.

Some couples quickly exhaust the restaurant circuit and their savings too. These are all distractions from celebrating the new and exciting union between two people.

### **Yiddishkeit for a Better Marriage**

Mutual respect between husband and wife is a vital component of a healthy marriage. In addition, it is important for each spouse to notice and appreciate the other's good qualities. The way to garner the respect of ones spouse is by having and exhibiting self-respect. A husband who rises early for shul in the morning, learns torah regularly and shows enthusiasm for *Yiddishkeit*, will surely gain the respect of his wife. A woman who greets her children with a smile when they wake up, sings *Modeh Ani* and washes *negel vasser* with them and prepares a healthy breakfast for her family, will be respected by her husband. A life infused with *Torah* and *Yiddishkeit* grants a Yid self respect and, in turn, leads to the respect of one's spouse.

It is also necessary to have help from above to attain true *Shalom Bayis*. In marriage, even more than other areas, the *bracha* of *Hashem* is exceedingly important.

The husband and wife must realize that the level of *kedushah* – and therefore happiness – in their home is up to them. They control it by their actions and their words, and by the things they bring into the home. A woman who brings indecent magazines into the house, even for the alleged purpose of "shopping" from them, is lowering the level of *kedushah* in her home.

A man who learns in the home elevates it and brings *Hashem* into it in a way that only he can do. His wife and children depend on his learning in a way he might not realize. How much power and influence he holds just by sitting at the table and opening a *sefer*, or *chas v'sholom* by not doing so!

In addition, without learning, the husband's *yiras shamayim* will surely be lacking, and this too will affect the entire household.

A man also might not realize the crucial importance of his wife and children seeing how seriously he takes *tefillah b'tzibur*. When they see their father/husband going to the *shacharis minyan* even in a snowstorm, he grows in their eyes – and the

Third Partner, feeling duly respected, does His share to bring peace and harmony into the home. When they see him go out in the evening for *minchah/maariv*, as tired as he is at the end of a long day, the same happens. In fact, a man who goes to *minyan* three times a day is halfway there (as far as raising his family) already, without reading a single child-rearing book.

It is important for every couple to remember the *Rebbe's brachah* to *chassanim* and *kallos* before their wedding, "You should build a *binyan adei ad al yesodei haTorah v'hamitzvos.*" The most long-lasting home is one that is built upon the strong foundations of Torah and mitzvos.

### **Build the Home; Pay the Bills**

In today's secular society, everyone is concerned with their rights. According to the *Torah*, however, the focus should not be on holding onto one's rights (which leads to a victim mentality), but on fulfilling one's obligations and responsibilities.

Holiness is achieved through selflessness, not selfishness.

If husband and wife are both selfish – each seeking their own pleasure – then it is impossible for them to have a true and eternal union. If each one is concerned with what they can do for the home, the marriage and the other, this helps create the most beautiful and enjoyable life.

Additionally, in secular society marriage is an equal partnership: all responsibilities including making money, childcare, housework, etc, are divided equally, or at least lip service is paid to this "ideal." But according to *Torah*, the roles of men and women are very different.

Man's obligation is to provide financially for his family, and to bring *Torah* learning into the home.

Woman's primary obligation is to build the home - to educate the children and take care of the needs of the

home and her husband, and to make the home a warm, inviting and nurturing place.

Therefore, it is inappropriate for a husband to expect his wife to spend hours davening or learning, or to be gone for hours in order to support the family, as this is not her G-d-given job. The husband should also not mix in unnecessarily in the gashmius of the home - what color to paint, what the *Shabbos* menu should be, how many guests she can handle or how often she needs cleaning help, etc. He should leave it to his wife and trust her that she knows best in what is primarily her domain.

Similarly, the wife should not expect her husband to busy himself with many hours of housework and childcare at the expense of his davening and learning - which could harm the entire *ruchnius* of the home.

### **Learning with the Children**

One way a wise husband can accomplish both his job (learning *Torah*) and helping his wife with childcare is if he learns with his children every single day.

The value and importance of this practice cannot be overstated. In particular boys have a strong need to learn with their father, daily if possible, weekly at the very least.

Recently, a family gathering was held for a man who had reached a milestone birthday. In honor of the event, his children, now grown, all wrote him letters. In letter after letter, they thanked him for learning with them when they were children. The men said it had made them into learners themselves.

Their fondest memories were of their father learning – and they all showed how they had incorporated that value into their own lives.

One son wrote that he recalled going with his father on a business trip and realizing that even when his father was away on business, he would call his *chavrusa* on the phone and learn with him every day, just like at home.

A daughter wrote that her father always had a *chassidische vort* to share with whoever he met – that he made sure of it by learning *chassidus* each morning.

They treasured the chinuch they had been given by a man who worked hard in his profession for many hours per day, but made Torah-learning - alone, with a *chavrusa* and with his children – a strict and inviolable priority.

For the success of the marriage and the family, each one must do their part and not do the other's job. Many problems result from people doing someone else's job. When a teacher acts as a friend to the students, and not as a teacher, he is not doing the child a favor. The child already has friends, but needs a real teacher.

Similarly, it is important for the husband to focus on fulfilling his role as a husband and father, and for the wife to do her job as a wife and mother. Then the family will have a solid foundation. No child needs two mothers or two fathers.

Of course, the wife will need help, and the husband must help her, yet one cannot say that this is his "job." Similarly, women may help bring in *parnassah*, but it should be in a way of a "side job" and not in a way that she has no time or strength left to build a home and raise her children.

### **Marriage is Priority**

Secular marriages often get into trouble due to confusion about priorities. Mothers in particular, due to the strength of their love for their children, which is biologically built-in for the sake of their child's survival, may sometimes make the mistake of thinking, or telling their husbands, "I can't talk with you now – the kids need me."

Over and over again, she puts the children first. Her mistake is that she doesn't realize that the children's number one need is to be raised in a home where the parents love and respect and find time for each other. Put your spouse first – before your children – and you are only HELPING your children. (Obviously, a

*mentsch* of a husband does not expect a woman to leave an infant screaming in hunger while she tends to him. Older children, not infants, can be asked to wait. We are talking about an attitude more than any one specific example.)

### **The Yiddische Way**

Although we live in the secular world, it is imperative that we base our marriages and family model around the *Torah* values and guidelines, in order to achieve happiness and success in our homes.

Secular strategies for a better marriage are solutions only for people who haven't yet found meaning in their lives and are using marriage as another form of fun and pleasure. Once the marriage fails to gratify and excite, they need solutions how to bring fun and excitement back into the marriage. A *Yid* has the real solution.

A well-meaning but rather ignorant man once bought an expensive train ticket in Russia. He entered the train and took a seat among the other travelers. As the conductor approached the carriage, the man observed some people quickly hiding under the bench. Not realizing these were thieves, the man too tried to hide. The conductor pulled him out and demanded his ticket. When the traveler showed the conductor his ticket, he was told, "This is a first class ticket! You do not need to hide under the bench. In fact, you may go to the first class carriage and find a seat there."

Similarly, we have a first class ticket to a successful marriage. *Yiddishkeit* includes all the ingredients for a strong marriage based on *Torah* and holiness. One who has not seen a healthy, proper *Yiddische* home may not think so, but there is no need for a normal, healthy couple to turn to secular systems. Get out from the filth under the train seats!

We have the *Torah*, we have the first class ticket. "*Ish v'ishah zachu, Shechinah beineihem*" – when a man and woman merit, the *Shechinah* rests between them. By including and welcoming *Hashem*, the Third Partner, into the marriage, a couple will merit to have a happy, holy home and G-d-fearing children.