

The Key to a Good Marriage

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Rabbi Steven Saks

A matchmaker once told me that the reason there is a lower rate of divorce in traditional Jewish communities is because men and women are taught that when choosing a spouse one should not ask oneself, “What can my potential partner do to make me happy?”, but rather, “What can I do to make my potential partner happy?”

This is a beautiful, ideal view of marriage that evokes an image from today’s parsha (Torah portion) of the two selfless, angelic-looking Cherubim, lovingly staring at each other as they rested upon the ark. But is marriage really enamored lovers endlessly staring into each other’s eyes blissfully attempting to figure out how best to make their partner happy? No, that, at best, is called a honeymoon, and honeymoons are short. Ask anyone who’s been married. We are not selfless angels who can endlessly put the needs of another before our own; rather, we are humans, individuals, with our own wants and desires. So if we cannot be expected to be selfless angels solely devoted to meeting the needs of our spouse, how can we make marriage work?

Let us first ask ourselves the question: What is marriage? Marriage is a covenant, a sacred agreement. And how do parties arrive at an agreement? Through compromise. How did

the ancients make a covenant? They would cut animals in half and walk through them, as detailed in the *Brit Bein Habetarim* (the Covenant of the Parts) between Abraham and God. This cutting symbolized the removal of conditions that could not be agreed upon, and the walking in between the animals symbolized the newly shared space formed through the compromise. Of course, this is where the expression “to cut a deal” comes from.

But let us ask another question. Why should one enter into a covenant if it requires compromise? After all, you have to make concessions. This question of compromise reminds me of a Seinfeld episode in which Jerry excitedly told his neighbor Kramer that he had just become engaged. Kramer asked Jerry, “Do you know what marriage is?” Jerry responded, “No.” Kramer explained that marriage is a man-made prison,” for when you come home at the end of the day you have to talk about your day with your spouse; no more sitting in front of the TV during dinner. Seinfeld looked mortified at the prospect of this and called the wedding off. Jerry did not want his freewheeling bachelor lifestyle to be compromised.

As Dr. John Grey, the author of “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” explains, women in general speak thousands of words a day more than men. Women often want to come home and speak about their day, while men often want to figuratively decompress in their caves. It reminds me

of a girlfriend in college. She would tell me about her day in excruciating detail, step by step accounting for each part of her day, “First I did this, then I did that” and on and on. When she finally finished and asked me how my day was, I would simply respond “good” and if something really interesting happened, I would quickly mention it.

So let’s say that you and your spouse fit the stereotype and upon arriving home one of you (likely to be the wife, but the roles can be reversed) wants to talk about your day while the other yearns for some down time. What should you do? Should you throw in the towel and break up? Before doing that, let me suggest another solution, compromise. The wife can give the husband some time to unwind, but afterwards the husband can engage his wife in conversation about the day.

While this is a sensible compromise, the question still remains: Why compromise at all if it requires making concessions? Let me ask you three questions:

1. Why did Israel enter into a covenant with God if it came with 248 responsibilities and 365 restrictions, in other words the 613 *Mitzvot* (commandments)? The answer is that by agreeing to give up certain things and make commitments Israel would be privileged to share in an intimate relationship with God and to be his partner by being his *Or HaLogyim* (Light Unto the Nations).

2. Why did the 13 colonies of America form a union? The answer is obvious, as a new combined singular entity they became stronger and more effective.

3. Why after separating Adam and Eve into two different beings did God command them to reunite? Because just as in the above two cases the benefits of a good partnership outweigh the negatives, the same applies to marriage, for a good marriage provides you with a best friend, a lifetime companion, someone to laugh and cry with, who will make those lonely nights disappear and with whom you can start a family.

May our Chatan and Kallah Andrew and Rina, be blessed with a lifetime of compromise, which will lead to a lifetime of joy and happiness. And let us say Amen.