

Marriage: The Litmus Test

The *Shulchan Aruch*, the most famous Code of Jewish Law written by Rabbi Yosef Caro in the 16th century is divided into four parts, with each part dedicated to a different area of law. The first part, known as *Orach Chaim* (literally, Way of Life), focuses on the laws pertaining to daily conduct (prayers, the yearly cycle of holidays, Shabbat, etc.). The second part, called *Yoreh Dei'ah* (Instruct in Knowledge), covers the laws regarding slaughter, food, and other areas in life where we have a connection with something outside ourselves). The third part of the *Shulchan Aruch* is named *Even Ha'ezer* (meaning, the Helper Stone) and it deals with the laws governing the marital relationship between a man and a woman.

The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak once explained that the fact that the third part, *Even Ha'ezer*, comes after the basic laws governing the basic Torah laws teaches us that our conduct in our marriage is the litmus test by which we can know how committed we are to *Orach Chaim*—the Jewish Way of Life—and to *Yoreh Dei'ah*—the Instructions of Knowledge. The state of our marriage reflects our psychological balance and health.

Why these two? As we know from the teachings of many *tzaddikim*, true progress in serving God, in all aspects of our life (prayer, learning, etc.) results in an increased love of the Jewish people and a more caring attitude toward others. Metaphysical and spiritual pursuits can lead a person to fall into the self-deception of imagined progress. However, when one is married and has children, these real-world individuals provide us with a true and accurate reflection of our own condition. The first arena for fulfillment of the *mitzvah* to “love your neighbor as yourself” is found between husband and wife (from there, the love radiates outward to additional circles). Clearly, family life is the most significant litmus test for the level of a person’s service of God. It is difficult to deceive one’s spouse or children. Family dynamics serve as a testing ground that can validate the work we think we have done on our character.

Mental well-being in Kabbalah

In Kabbalah and Chassidut, mental health is associated and linked to what is known as “the World of Rectification” (עולם התקון) which is characterized by diversification, balance, and stability. Unhealthy mental states and crises belong to the so-called “World of Chaos” (עולם התהו) that precedes Rectification. Existence in the World of Chaos is characterized by uniformity and extremism that ultimately end in crisis and collapse. The World of Chaos is alluded to, according to Kabbalah, in the Torah portion describing the eight kings of Edom (Genesis 36:31ff.)—representatives of existence in a state of Chaos—who ruled before there was a Jewish king, i.e., Moses—representing the World of Rectification. The first seven kings are described there as having reigned and died. However, the eighth king, Hadar’s, death is not mentioned, suggesting that his reign did not collapse. He is also the only king whose wife’s name is recounted.

Another connection between marriage as a remedy to chaos can be found in the sages' teaching that the universal obligation to marry—including non-Jews as well as Jews, males and females—is learnt from the verse in Isaiah 45:18, “He did not create it [i.e., the earth] to be chaotic, He formed it to be inhabited.” Being unmarried is a chaotic state, while marriage is a rectified state. Mental health and rectification go hand-in-hand with a healthy marriage.

A person who lives alone gives an accounting only to himself. He can sink into his imagination, create a false self-image, and nurture personal character flaws justifying them with the belief that he is simply, “a unique character,” that they are normal for one who leads, “a rich inner life,” and together with other whitewashed expressions of destructive pride. In marriage, our spouse reflects our real condition, saving us from self-deception, and helps us truly make progress in developing our character and correcting our behavior.

The flip side of pride is sadness and despondency. The primary remedy for these maladies too is marriage: “Two are better than one...For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falls, and has not another to lift him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

Primarily, the foundation of the world of rectification is a trait known as inter-inclusion (התְּכַלְלִיּוֹת). Inter-inclusion can be defined as the ability to understand and embrace an additional opinion, to give the other a true place, to give in when needed, to accept the virtues of the other, and to influence or complete him or her with our own unique gifts. Inter-inclusion is the foundation of marriage. It manifests in the process of forging a covenant with a spouse and the on-going necessity of achieving the correct balance with him or her, throughout married life. Thus, inter-inclusion represents the true and most precise development of a rectified personality, which, with God's help, will function properly in all areas of life. Clearly, in order to start out in the right direction together, the couple has to internalize the basis of rectification whose initial expression is found in conducting the search for one's second half in the proper way.

Thus, there is a certain depth in marriage counseling that is lacking in individual counseling similar to the depth in laws of monetary transactions in relation to laws of *kashrut*. This is the result of the necessity of finding the golden path that truly balances between the will and needs of two different souls and bringing them to a true state of complementing one another—the true rectification of each.

As we conclude this short thought, a tip: According to the Zohar, the litmus test of our character traits is our ability to accept criticism and opposition. Does *bitush* (harsh but loving criticism) from outside cause us to close up within ourselves and blame everyone but ourselves? Or does it remove our impure husks, make us shine and motivating us to illuminate the world even more? A person's choice of how to accept the reflection-rectification-balance dynamic with his spouse, whether he chooses to see her as a “helpmate” aiding his development or to see her as “fighting against him” is



lies at the basis of marital harmony. Choosing the former option transforms the litmus test of marriage into a blissful state of rectification.