

The Wedding Sermon:
Message to My Daughter as She Begins Her Married Life

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A few weeks ago I had the extraordinary experience of officiating at the marriage of my only daughter, something I have dreamed of doing ever since she was a little girl. From the very first time I ever married a couple and just about every time since I have imagined that moment. In fact, as I was standing under the chuppah, officiating at my daughter Margalit's wedding, I thought about all the weddings I had done over the years -- and of how many more I will need to do to pay off this one!

Just as I spoke from this pulpit a few years ago to my son when he started to work, so too, I thought this would be an ideal time to share with Margalit and her husband, Jason, and thus with all of you, some advice about marriage.

The proliferation of self help books on this topic belies today's dismal statistics. Our disposable, instant-gratification oriented society tends not to take seriously the concept of lasting eternal commitment. The prophet Hosea's description, "*Ve'arasteech lee le'olam*: I will betroth you to me forever," conflicts with the perception held by many. In a "Curb Your Enthusiasm" episode Larry David and his wife were going to renew their vows, and she wanted to include a line about their being together for eternity, even in the next life. True to his character he hesitated, because he felt that this was asking a bit much, since this world was all he had signed up for.

My advice about how to make a marriage last is derived from our tradition as well as my experience as a rabbi. While there is no simple formula or easy panaceas to guarantee success, the insights from three distinct sources – the symbols and rituals of the actual wedding ceremony, the wisdom of the Jewish heritage, and my life experiences and observations as a rabbi and husband can offer helpful guidance.

Some couples find it helpful to look at their wedding album periodically to recall what they felt the day they wed. The Baal Shem Tov advises a couple to read their ketubah to each other if they are arguing, to help them remember the day of their marriage, when they were surrounded with love and good wishes.

The renewal of love may be rekindled by memories of that special day, but it could be the magic of the ceremony itself that evokes the feelings. I would suggest that the Jewish wedding ceremony holds insights into the secrets of what contributes to a successful marriage, and couples today need all the help and inspiration they can get. As Mae West once said, "The most difficult years of marriage are the ones following the wedding."

A carefully crafted work of art it is more than a mere perfunctory rite, for much wisdom is contained in the traditions and symbols of our faith. The very name of the ceremony reveals much about Judaism's perspective. It is called both *nisuin*, meaning lifting up

and *kiddushin*, meaning holiness. This is because marriage both elevates and provides the opportunity to sanctify our lives.

Variations of the word *Kedusha*, the overriding theme permeate and are woven throughout the ceremony. The blessing over the wine, the Kiddush is recited twice. When the ring is placed on the finger of the kallah, the bride, the words which officially mark the point at which the couple is married are pronounced: “*At mekudeshet lee...: You are betrothed unto me,*” once again, using the root word *kadosh*, holy.

In Hebrew, holiness implies distinguishing something by setting it apart and making it separate. A husband and wife share a unique bond, unlike what they experience with any one else in the world. But that still does not tell us how to achieve sanctity, and why it is important.

Margalit, I recall the summer you graduated high school, and had your first job, an internship on Capitol Hill. You were amazed by how tired you were when you came home, and how little time and energy you had for anything else. After several days of this routine of being so exhausted you went to sleep right after dinner, only to wake up early the next morning, and repeat the cycle all over again you asked me if this was what it was like to be an adult. You continued, “Because Dad, if being an adult means you get up, go to work, come home, go to sleep, wake up and repeat the whole thing all over again, then being a grownup is pointless.”

You are absolutely correct. If this is all there is to being an adult, then it is pointless. Where is the room for fun, free time, friends or other aspects of life?

This is why the subtle and secret message of the wedding ceremony can be so instructive.

The Kiddush wine, a symbol of joy and happiness is both bitter and sweet, as is life. In this context, we are told, *lo tov heyot adam levado*: It is not good for a person to be alone. Life is better when shared with another. As we say when we lift up the cup of wine, life’s joys are heightened, its bitterness sweetened and whatever life may hold is easier to bear because it is shared. It is as if the rabbis suggest that a married couple should cordon off their own corner of the world and dwell in it.

Shir Hashirim, the love poetry of the Bible, [Song of Songs](#) contains famous words often incorporated into the wedding ceremony. “*Anee ledodee, v’dodee lee*, I am my beloved’s as my beloved is mine.” But I prefer to translate it, “I am a friend to my beloved, as my beloved is a friend to me.” Never stop being friends. It is the foundation of any strong relationship. The *sheva brachot*, the seven benedictions speak of the importance of making each other happy, of sharing joy together, of being loving companions. Be, in the words of the *sheva brachot*, *reyim ha’ahuviim*, loving friends to one another. Enjoy being together and each other’s company and you will find the happiness and bliss described in the blessings.

You might want to forgo the advice of the late Henny Youngman who would say the key to happiness in his marriage was that he and his wife went out twice a week. As he put it, "I go out on Tuesdays and she goes out on Thursdays."

The theme of holiness is also highlighted by the climatic conclusion when the glass is broken. This is done to remind us that the *beit mikdash*, the central repository of holiness, the Temple exists no more. Holiness is no longer confined to one place, but is spread out making it the responsibility of the newlyweds to bring holiness into our world by carrying with them the *kedusha* of the *kiddushin* ceremony. The way to transform an imperfect shattered world is to create a home which will be infused with holiness, which will become a *mikdash me'at*, a mini sanctuary.

You bring holiness into the world and your lives by how you treat, relate to and speak with each other. Never forget that your mate, like all of God's creatures is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Individuals and families bring holiness into their lives and to the world when they set aside and consecrate time. In other words, by observing Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, by lighting candles and marking these special days you elevate yourselves to a higher dimension.

You make your home a place of holiness, by the kinds of activities you engage in. The home is symbolized during the ceremony by the *huppah*. I want to suggest a radical new interpretation of the wedding canopy. It is open on all sides just as the tent of Avraham aveenu, was open on all sides, so that your home should be open to others as well. This openness, inclusiveness and reaching out is a deliberate counter balance to what I said just a few moments ago, about having a unique relationship. Sanctification does not mean shutting out the rest of the world or neglecting your larger responsibilities.

As you may recall, when we discussed your wedding, we talked about the importance of giving tzedekah at this milestone. This is because Judaism teaches us to think not only of ourselves. We are taught to give tzedekah at joyous occasions to show that our joy is not complete unless it is shared with others, especially those who are less fortunate.

Torah and mitzvot are the antidote to a mundane, purposeless life, and to an overly self indulgent existence. The point of the polarity of what may appear to be contradictory advice is to strive to achieve balance between devoting yourselves exclusively to each other while not ignoring the outside world.

All of this is part of what I derive from the Jewish wedding ceremony and what it teaches me.

Turning from the actual ceremony to wisdom culled from our tradition, we need look no further than this morning's Torah reading. It is a story of the first patriarch and matriarch of our people, of Abraham and Sara. Life was not easy for them, as they wandered from place to place and dealt with external and internal challenges. The overriding image is that despite all they encountered, they shared life's travails together and remained

committed to each other and to working things out. Today's couples can learn a great deal from Abraham and Sara.

In addition to their determination and devotion to each other, we learn from Abraham and Sarah that communication is one of the most important skills necessary. It is easy for misunderstandings to arise. A simple question can be easily misconstrued and lead to an uncomfortable situation, highlighting the need for ongoing communication and clarification. Abraham is told by God, when he is uncertain what to do about Ishmael and Hagar, "*shma b'kolah*: hear her voice", meaning, heed her advice. Despite our sacred texts often being maligned for how women are treated, they actually show a great deal of sensitivity and respect for women, for protecting their rights and for requiring men to respect the wisdom and integrity of a woman's advice and counsel. One of the rabbis is quoted in the inimitable way of the Talmud with a pithy saying of few words, but profound meaning, "If your wife is short, bend down to hear what she has to say."

Our sources talk about how important it is for a husband and wife to respect each other and suggest that it is achieved by extending simple kindness and consideration. The sages teach to never take anything for granted, to always show appreciation and be quick to compliment and say something positive to your partner.

There is a story about a husband and wife who have been married many years. The wife laments, "You know, dear, I look in the mirror, and I see an old woman. My face is wrinkled, my hair is grey, my shoulders are hunched over, I've got fat legs, and my arms are all flabby." She turns to her husband and says, "Tell me something positive to make me feel better about myself."

He thinks for a moment, and then says in a soft voice, "Well, dear, there's nothing wrong with your eyesight."

I guess the point of this story is: Search for the good in your spouse, but know that some things are better left unsaid.

The ketubah, the wedding contract dating back to the Talmud, recognizes that a marriage entails obligations and commitment. It states in the language of its day that the husband has an obligation to provide and care for his wife and her needs. There is a cute joke about a young man who comes to meet the parents of the girl he intends to marry. He has no visible means of support or income, as he is a yeshivah bachur, a yeshivah student. He responds when the father asks, how he intends to provide for his daughter, that he is not worried, "God will provide." Later the wife asks about their future son-in-law and how things went. The father said, "Good news and bad news. The bad news is he has no visible means of support. The good news is he thinks I'm God."

It is easy to get caught up in the "busyness" of your individual lives, and this may cause people to grow apart. Our sages advise that husbands and wives recognize the need to provide each other with space – space to grow, space to do your own thing, as well as to

be together. This is why the Talmud recognizes that true lovers are those who have one heart, but two bodies.

But perhaps the greatest remedy to insure we take time from our busy schedules for each other is to observe Shabbat. By setting aside time, and sanctifying it, by designating this, not as time to go out, or do errands, or to work, but to devote time to yourselves, as well as to God, your heritage and community, you bring holiness and spirituality into your lives. You also ensure that you will have time together. Shabbat has numerous parallels designed to evoke and reenact the wedding ceremony. The seventh day is reminiscent of the seven blessings and the wine of Shabbat evokes the wine of the chuppah. Showing a commitment to things beyond yourselves is the greatest gift you can give each other.

Speaking of gifts, one of the two Hebrew words for love *ahava* comes from the word *yehav*, meaning to give. The other word *hibbah* comes from the word *hovah*, meaning obligation or commitment. Needless to say, any quality relationship entails giving: giving freely, willingly, and unselfishly. The Hebrew etymology shows that love involves commitment, responsibility and caring. This is how we define devotion.

Judaism teaches us that the ideal relationship is one of mutual respect and perceived partnership. It is not just an association, but a covenantal relationship, paralleling God's bond with the people of Israel, which brings me to my personal experience as a rabbi.

One of the pitfalls I have noticed in couples I meet with and counsel is the problem of unrealistic expectations. As someone once put it, a man goes into a marriage hoping his wife will never change, whereas a woman is certain she will change him. It is better to try to accept the other as they are, and instead work on changing yourself. Rabbi Abraham Twerski brilliantly observes that we cannot change others, only ourselves. He says that altering our responses or actions will have a positive impact and may result in bringing about the desired change in the partner anyway.

This next piece of advice might not be just my observation as a rabbi, but a bit personal and even autobiographical. I will try to stay objective and say that it is best to overlook those annoying characteristics or habits you wish your spouse would change, (such as not turning off the light in the garage when no one is there.)

Letting go of frustrations, anger and resentments can play a crucial role in facilitating and creating a positive relationship. This is why forgiveness: asking for it and granting it is so much a central theme of these holy days. Digging in and getting self righteous accomplishes nothing.

It is inevitable that there will be disagreements and differences of opinion between a husband and a wife. Too often couples assume that they are the only ones to argue or have disputes. They might look at their friends who appear to be perfectly content and incorrectly think they are the only ones with seemingly insurmountable issues not worth trying to fix. But if there is any one thing I have learned, it is that there is no couple that does not fight and no such thing as a union which has no disagreements.

While having a companion who always agrees with you may initially be great for your ego, in the long run it can become stagnant, monotonous and boring. There is even some research to suggest that as long as you are open-minded and it does not overtake every interaction, a bit of bickering can even be good for relationships. The Talmud tells of Rabbi Yochanan who mourned the loss of his long-time learning partner, Resh Lakish. In an effort to cheer him up, his students found a new partner for him, who agreed with everything he said. Rabbi Yochanan is not comforted and laments, "How I miss Resh Lakish. He would always challenge me."

The secret is not whether you fight, but how you fight. Let go easily and quickly of your anger. There will be times when it will be necessary to put aside anger and to reconcile, even if you think you are right, and especially when you know you are right. Try to understand the position of the other. Be willing to admit mistakes and when you are wrong. The key is how the differences and disagreements are dealt with and resolved, and not to let ill will fester or linger, for then it grows, and can become problematic.

We can learn a great deal about how to achieve peace from the position of the mezuzah which adorns the doorpost of a Jewish home. It is there to remind you to bring the principles of Judaism into your home, as well as to take them with you when you enter the world. It is slanted, intentionally, not because Jews don't make good carpenters. Hillel and Shammai debated if it should be placed vertically, in accordance with the injunction to recite the shema while standing up, or horizontally, out of deference to the part which says it should be said while lying down. Although each believed the other wrong, by placing it diagonally, we are left with an enduring lesson about the importance of compromising to achieve shalom bayit, domestic tranquility, peace in the home.

If there is any one thing I have learned it is to be wary of envying what you do not have. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Just about everyone has a lament or regret and feels something is lacking in their spouse which they see in others, or which they assume exists between other couples. However, we have no idea what goes on behind closed doors, or what people's private lives are really like. It is tempting to assume that others may have the perfect family, the idyllic marriage. I am here to tell you – there is no such thing. I say this not to shatter any illusions, but because I have seen it lead to disastrous consequences when people give up what they have for an elusive unattainable dream which does not exist.

Working to fix the problem is almost always preferable to a hasty decision with disastrous, lasting consequences that may be regretted later. It is no wonder that so many say that marriage is hard work. In one article I read, the writer responded, why would I want to work when I get home? How sad that this is his attitude. The things we work for are the ones we appreciate and value the most.

It does take work and effort, but trust me, it is worth it. If you keep at it, over time, new dimensions of love can be revealed and discovered. Marriage is seen in our faith as one

of the highest attainments in life. The relationship between a husband and wife is compared to the love between the Almighty and Israel.

After almost 32 years of marriage, I know I still have much to learn and work on. But as I do, I can truly say that I am still discovering wonderful new things to appreciate and love about my wife and about how much of a treasure it is to share life together. Just when I thought we had reached a new plateau, I am pleasantly surprised to find like the unfolding of a flower with hidden, unknown layers that things still continue to get even better.

The most emotional part of the ceremony for me is always before the wedding ceremony, when the veil is lowered by the groom. It is often hard for me to say the words *Ahotenu aht. Hayee l'alfei rivvava.* without choking up, because I am so moved by the concept. This happened as I said the blessing for my daughter. The thought that came flooding into my mind and overcame my soul was the realization that you now took your place as a bride in that chain of tradition which goes beyond your mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and others I did not know, reaching all the way back across the generations to the matriarchs of our people. As we pray, "*Yesemeach Elohim k'Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, v'Leah:* May God make you as blessed as the matriarchs of our people, as blessed as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah." May you know the blessing of being a descendant of these noble women and the blessing of *kedusha*, of the holiness and sanctity of the sacred bond of marriage.

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