

On Shabbos, Parshas Va'eira, the Shovavim Series addressing issues in male female relationships was kicked off with a session led by Rabbi Ilan and Miriam Feldman on "5 Secrets of A Healthy Marriage". Following is a summary of the session (minus the jokes) as presented by Rabbi Ilan and Miriam.

It is important, before we start, to note these things:

- 1) There is a lot of wisdom in our kehilla, many people who have learned and applied much grace and wisdom as a result of dealing with life and marriage, and this session in no way claims to have all the secrets, or even that these points need to be heard by anyone in order to have a healthy marriage. Their value is that they promote a conversation about marriage and what works, and that is a major benefit of this Shovavim effort—to cause a community wide conversation about these important issues;
- 2) What we mean by a "healthy marriage" is a marriage being invested in by both partners, as opposed to a marriage where one or both merely coast along, or just survive each other or their situation without rocking the boat. The alternative to a healthy marriage is not one that ends in divorce, G-d forbid, but an OK marriage in which the partners are not creating anything.
- 3) There are seriously dysfunctional relationships, abusive relationships. We are not discussing that kind of relationship in this talk.
- 4) What happens in the privacy of your relationship actually impacts generations, community, and all of Klal Yisrael. Klal Yisrael is as healthy and alive as its families.

Five Secrets

- 1) Vision: Ideally a marriage will stand for something larger than itself. It will have a mission, a vision, something the couple says their marriage is about, like Adam and Chava, who were placed together in order to serve Hashem as a unit. The vision is verbally articulated by the couple, and it becomes the defining lifeline that keeps them tethered to the purpose of their marriage even when life's challenges threaten to derail them. The vision can also be very specific, geared to a particular period of time, like Yom

Tov, or a family simcha, or to one specific area. The important thing is that it be thought through and articulated and that the couple work as a team to make that vision a reality, to the best of their ability.

This vision may call for adjustment as the couple progresses through life or as circumstances change. What is important is that it is shared and communicated to each other.

2) Feelings: Feelings are important, but should not be allowed to drive attitude or behavior. Your behavior should not be held hostage to the way you feel. You have a responsibility to the people in your life, and how you feel, though feelings do matter, should not be allowed to undermine your commitments. This is relevant to both men and women; to women, who experience strong feelings; to men, who are sometimes unaware of the extent of their feelings and the impact they have on their behavior. Acknowledging feelings gives one access to being responsible for them and exercising appropriate choice, rather than being governed by feelings, acknowledged or unacknowledged.

3) Value the differences between genders: Wives should certainly attempt to communicate their concerns and feelings about life to their husbands, and husbands should certainly work on listening (as opposed to fixing). But women should be ready to accept that their husbands may not fully comprehend them, and maybe never will. It is OK. As a woman, you don't need him to, though it would be nice. The sky is not falling if he doesn't; he is a man.

Men, meanwhile should recognize that they are often afraid to hear what their wives have to say, and spend a lot of time avoiding them. Women are endowed with an extra dose of insight, and their observations are often bad news for their husbands but also important to pay attention to (Rabbi Ilan shared that he relates to his wife's observations about him as messages from G-d).

- 4) Marriage has ups and downs. All relationships ebb and flow, and marriage is that way. It is never always good or always bad. Don't panic or dramatize when things seem less connected. There is actually growth available from these ups and downs.

- 5) Develop a practice of proactive appreciation of your spouse. Openly recognize to yourself that he/she is the center of your life, the one that anchors you, the one that leads, or the one that provides, the one that brings forth your growth, the one you share life with. Take a few moments to experience your spouse as a separate human being. Notice his/her character traits, unique personality, style, and the goodness of their being. In other words, remind yourself that you love the person you are married to.