



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHAVUOT > Two

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

May 25, 2015
Shavuot - Day Two

Marriage Secrets from Sinai



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a work zone.

Some areas we drive through, certain stretches of highway or city blocks, seem to be in perpetual construction: men in hard hats milling about; orange cones like candy corn; jackhammers, tractors, and drills pounding at the earth and our ears.

Marriage is one such work zone, a perpetual construction site that never stops working. The day the edifice of marriage stops building is the day marriage begins to get old, corrode, and crumble.

Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah and the marriage between heaven and earth. What personal marriage tips may we learn from this cosmic union?

What lessons does Shavuot teach us about the construction sites that are our marriages, how to better build them, maintain and refine them, and make them glorious?

Falling in love is glamorous; washing dishes is not.

The idea of love is romantic; suspending instant-gratification is not.

Torah is like falling in love, the idea and ideal of love; Mitzvoth are the obligations and chores that make a marriage functional, including washing dishes and suspending instant gratification.

Can you have one without the other? Can you infuse the daily chores and obligations of a relationship with passion and excitement?

Marriage is indeed a work zone.

And it also contains the secret of Yizkor.

WHAT'S YOUR MOUNTAIN?

1. Natural Life (Joke)

Rose goes to see Max, her solicitor, and says, "I want to divorce my Harry."

"Why do you want to do that?" Max asks, "I thought you said he was a man of rare gifts."

"He is," replies Rose, "he's never given me a present in twenty years of marriage."

"Very funny, Rose. Is there another reason why you want a divorce?" asks Max.

"Yes there is," replies Rose, "I want a divorce because of his appearance."

"That's an unusual reason," says Max.

"Not really," says Rose, "Harry hasn't put in an appearance at home for four years."

2. Working Relationship

You know those highways that always seem to be in constant construction, a perpetual work zone?

Some areas we drive through, some city blocks, seem to be in never-ending construction: men in hard hats milling about; orange cones like candy corn; jackhammers, tractors, and drills pounding at the earth and our ears.

Marriage is one such work zone – actually, the ultimate dynamic work zone, a perpetual construction site that never stops developing and continuously needs maintenance. The day the edifice of marriage stops building and growing, God forbid, is the day marriage begins to get old, corrode, and crumble.

3. Cosmic Wedding

In Song of Songs, King Solomon writes:

Go out, O daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, upon the crown with which his mother crowned him on his wedding day and on the day of the joy of his heart.¹

What is the King's wedding day? Explains the Talmud:² the King's wedding day is referring to the giving of the Torah – *yom chasunoso, zeh mattan Torah*. The Torah, given by the King of kings to the Jewish nation, was actually a marriage contract between God, the Divine King, and the people, a marriage between heaven and earth.

Today, Shavuot, we celebrate this marriage – the wedding day when the Torah was given and God and His people became bound in a sacred union.

It's fascinating that God's relationship with us (established at Sinai) is described as a marriage, equating and likening it to human marriage. This tells us that our marriages – the relationship between human spouses – can teach us about God's marriage and relationship with us, and vice versa: the divine marriage is a model that can teach us about our marriages and relationships, how to build the divine institution called marriage.

Indeed, many aspects of a Jewish wedding mirror and are derived from the Divine marriage that took place at Sinai. One example is the chupah – the wedding canopy – which symbolizes Mount Sinai which served as a canopy under which the Jewish people received the Torah.

What personal marriage tips may we learn from this cosmic union at Sinai called *Mattan Torah* (the giving of the Torah)?

What lessons does Shavuot teach us about the construction sites that are our marriages, how to better build them, maintain and refine them, and make them glorious?

¹ Shir Hashirim 3:11.

² Taanit 26b.

4. Torah Over Mitzvoth

Let us first clearly define the wedding day of Shavuot. The covenantal marriage between God and the Jewish people was more than just a commitment to each other in the sense that God would provide all the needs of His “spouse”, and His spouse would serve and fulfill God’s plan in this world.

The marriage was far more than that. Sinai married heaven and earth: On this day 3327 years ago we were given the power to sanctify our material lives and transform them into spiritual channels and vehicles. Before Sinai there was a fundamental dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. At Sinai spirit and matter were joined in an unprecedented fusion. It was the original $E=MC^2$. And the world would never be the same again.

And this marriage and fusion is actualized through Torah and mitzvot, which constitute the two categories that define Jewish life and experience:

- 1) Torah is divine wisdom – the divine mandate and blueprint how to live our lives and transform the world into a divine home. Torah is the instruction manual and guide, and the knowledge and scholarship behind the divine plan.
- 2) Mitzvot are the obligations and actions that we are responsible for to actualize the divine plan of transforming this world.

Our sages debate which is greater: Torah or Mitzvot, study (*talmud*) or action (*maaseh*), and conclude that study is greater than deed because study leads to action.³ Torah study is greater than performing Mitzvot because Torah study will lead to performing Mitzvot.

The Jerusalem Talmud documents an opinion that states that all the Mitzvah actions in the Torah do not equal even one word of Torah study.⁴

³ Kidushin 40b.

⁴ Peah 1:1.

This is underscored by a verse in Proverbs:

For wisdom is better than pearls; all desirable things cannot be compared to it.⁵

The Talmud in Moed Katan explains that this also refers to all the desirable things of heaven: even Mitzvoth, the desirable things of heaven, heaven's pearls, are presumably incomparable to Divine wisdom.⁶

We see from this that Torah, study, wisdom, way surpasses any action and Mitzvah.

This seems to be a bit strange: the entire Torah is seemingly an exploration of and elucidation of the Divine Will. Mitzvoth implement that will. Why should the study of the Divine be greater than the Divine action?⁷ All the study and scholarship in the world cannot change anything until you act on it. So why do the sages see study being greater than deed?

5. Mitzvoth Over Torah

Yet, if you look closely at the Talmud's statement, it seems to be saying that study is greater only because it leads to action. This seems to imply that Torah is but a means to an actionable end. Just as a computer programmer writes code for the iPhone so that the consumer may use the iPhone, the Torah of Divine wisdom is the code that allows and guides us to perform Mitzvoth in this world.

Indeed, the Mishne states in Ethics of our Fathers:⁸ *The essential thing is not study, but deed.* Furthermore, this idea that Torah itself cannot be divorced from action is accentuated by another Talmud:

⁵ Mishlei 8:11.

⁶ Moed Katan 9b.

⁷ See Likkutei Torah, Bamidbar (Shavuot) 16dff.

⁸ Avot 1:17.

All who say, 'I only have Torah,' even Torah they don't have.⁹ Whoever only has Torah without any Mitzvoth doesn't have Torah either. How could one have Torah, Divine wisdom, without it leading to action?

6. Two Aspects to Sinai: The Central Nervous System and the Body

Torah and mitzvoth, in the human organism (created in the divine image), can be compared to the mind and central nervous system (the Torah which is the divine mind), and the body and its limbs and organs (which correspond to the 248 positive mitzvoth and 365 negative ones).

A healthy and intact organism is one entity comprised of many details, all working in complete unison as one. The mind and central nervous system guide and control the workings of the entire body and all its limbs and organs, both internal and external, as well as the bones, skin, hair, down to every one of your some 75 trillion cells. It also drives your senses (sight, sound, taste, touch and smell) and your thoughts, speech, and actions.

Despite the importance of every body part, large or small, even a neophyte knows that all of the body's diverse functions trace back to the neurological faculty and mainframe that is the brain and mind. When an arm moves to pour a drink and a mouth puckers to drink it, those actions are a result of neurons firing in the brain sending a signal to the designated limb to do its job.

Whether we are aware of the process or not, everyone understands that any action of the body is being guided and directed by the central "mind."

When, heaven forefend, a living organism is ill, comatose or paralyzed, all the limbs may be externally intact, but there is a disconnect between the mainframe and the individual limb.

⁸ Yevamot 109b.

At Sinai, when heaven and earth were married, we were given the entire “cosmic structure,” which comprised of two things: 1) The cosmic central nervous system – the celestial mainframe, the divine brain and mind in the form of the Torah’s divine wisdom. 2) The Torah also included all the mitzvot – the many body parts, 248 limbs that represent the positive mitzvot and the 365 sinews, ligaments that represent the negative mitzvot.

The mainframe mind is greater than the limbs because it directs all of them into action; but if one only has a mainframe and the rest of the organism is not functioning or is paralyzed, does one really have a mainframe?

In human terms: Torah is God’s “brain” at work directing all our behavior and actions; the Divine Mitzvot are how those neurological transmissions implement in all facets of life: when you eat kosher, it is God’s ideal manifested in food; when you love your fellow, it is a Divine ideal manifested in relationships; when you help another in need, it is the manifested realization of the Divine plan for symbiosis – and all these are called Mitzvot.

7. Two Aspects To Marriage

We learn from this an extraordinary lesson in our own marriages:

A successful marriage is dependent on these two elements:

- 1) The mind and central nervous system – the “Torah” – of the relationship: a shared vision, that guides every detail, every move and action. A common and mutual love that transcends and permeates every aspect of the union.
- 2) The actualization of the relationship: the detailed chores and responsibilities – the “mitzvot” – of the union, from the big to the small and trivial, even taking out the garbage, cleaning the dishes, changing the lightbulbs and not leaving your dirty laundry all over the house.

One may ask: who cares if I never take out the garbage or wash dishes? I love my spouse with all my heart and all my soul. Garbage and dishes are inconsequential.

This would be like Torah without Mitzvoth – ideals without actions. A brain without a body. Loving your spouse without bringing down into actions, indicates a problem with the love.

Then there is the other extreme in marriage – like Mitzvoth without Torah. Here, the relationship consists of a “grocery list” of chores, without vitality and passion driven by a common vision and mutual love and respect. Actions alone can become static, robotic, mechanical. Can any marriage survive, let alone thrive, if it is only in auto-pilot?

Sure, one can resort to dutifully fulfilling all their obligations, including becoming a human dishwasher and garbage collector. (Sure the house may be clean, but so are laboratories and hotel rooms). Actions without the love and passion – and the overriding vision – is like doing Mitzvoth without studying Torah.

8. Yizkor: Eternal Connection

On this wedding day we also remember the souls of our beloved parents who have passed on. And there’s no surprise why.

The Chassidic masters tell us something very moving: Several generations of departed ancestors of the newly wedded couple descend from the "world of truth" to attend the wedding chupah of their progeny. The greatest joy of a parent and grandparent is to see their children get married and begin building their own families. Thus, if for any reason a parent or grandparent cannot physically be at their child’s chupah, God will not deprive them of the great nachas of participating in their child’s wedding, and their souls descend and are present at this momentous occasion...

So too, on this collective wedding day, when we entered a marriage with God, the souls of our departed parents and grandparents are here with us (even if their bodies are not), to partake in the great joy and simcha of this marriage.

And we acknowledge and remember them in the Yizkor prayer which we recite today. And they take pride in seeing us – their children – perpetuate the marriage with the Divine in our lives today, which in turn imbues our individual marriages with renewed energy.

What greater pride is there than seeing your children thriving in loving relationships?

9. Religious Worship (joke)

Hymie is telling his friends about his recent divorce. “Yes, it’s true. Sylvie divorced me for religious reasons. She worshipped money and I didn't have any.”

10. Happily Ever After (Conclusion)

There is indeed an intrinsic connection between religion and marriage. As we learn from Sinai, religion is marriage, a marriage between heaven and earth, between man and God, between matter and spirit, and between body and soul.

There are two prongs to this marriage: 1) the idea and ideal of this marriage, the goals and beliefs upon which its edifice is built, and this is represented by Torah; 2) the actions and deeds, the processes and implements, the rituals that make the marriage real and tangible in this empirical universe, and this is represented by Mitzvoth.

There are two ways we may be in a relationship with God. Just as there are two ways we may be in a relationship with our spouses.

Balance does not mean mathematically calculating every step you take and every decision you make. Balance means turning your weaknesses into strengths. If you love your spouse unconditionally, yet simple chores like taking out the garbage seem meaningless, turn that deficiency into strength – it will simply highlight your love.

If you “love” taking out the garbage, but don’t know about the ideals of marriage, then study, question, inspect your overall foundational love. As an added benefit, that will make taking out the garbage so much more dynamic.

May this marriage day of Shavuot infuse each of us with the desire and the courage – yes, the courage – to renew our vows; to revisit our marriage and reinvigorate it with a fresh vitality and vigor, not just a mechanical machine.

And conversely, may the soul of our marriages translate into actions – in which the simple chores don’t seem so tedious, since they are driven by a powerful vision and love.

Mazal tov to you all on this wedding of ours – both collectively and individually. Mazal tov!

Chag Sameach and a Good Yom Tov!