



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Shemot

January 21, 2017
Shemot

**The Secret to a
Great Marriage**



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

Exodus > Shemot > The Secret to a Great Marriage

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ABSTRACT

Is marriage based on human logic? Every marriage has its challenges. How do you deal with hardships in marriage? How far should we go in keeping our marriages intact? What is the secret to a successful and sustainable marriage?

We find the surprising answers to these questions in a puzzling episode in this week's Torah portion.

In it we also learn how a young woman was wiser than the sages of her time in appreciating the foundations necessary for a transcendent marriage. How she prevailed in preserving marriages even when there were grounds for divorce. And how the entire Jewish people would not exist if not for women.

The Egyptian exile represents all forms of constraints (as explained by the Alter Rebbe, whose 204th *yahrzeit* is this evening, on the 24th of Tevet). And the ultimate antidote to its oppression is to strengthen marriages, not to avoid them.

With high divorce rates and so much confusion around the dating process and what constitutes successful relationships, these lessons could not be coming at a better time.

The Secret to a Great Marriage

1. Should We Get Married? (Joke)

Socrates was once asked by his students whether they should get married.

He replied: "Certainly. If you have a good marriage you'll learn about love. If not, you'll become philosophers."

2. The Smart Wife (Joke)

A father was taking a long walk with his young son; one of those walks where fathers convey deeper truths to their sons. The father tells his son:

"One of the wisest men in history was a man named Plato."

Peering intently at his son, the father continued: "One of the wisest things Plato ever said was: 'I know nothing.'"

The son looks up at his father, and inquisitively asks: "How did Plato come to know that he knew nothing?"

Without missing a beat, and with a straight face his father answered: "His wife told him so" ...

3. Divorce Rate

Today I would like to speak about a fundamental issue, the foundation upon which rests the welfare of our lives. And that is: the state of marriage in our day and age.

Our marriages define our homes. And our homes define the type of family we will bring up – what our children will be like, whether they will be secure and confident people, which in turn will define their futures, and the families they will build.

So building strong and happy marriages is the key to building happy lives – the key to success in all our endeavors.

Sadly, marriage today is not in the best shape. According to the American Psychological Association, some 40-50 percent of all couples in the United States end up getting divorced.¹ And that's not counting the couples who are legally married but emotionally divorced or detached.

What is the secret to a successful and sustainable marriage?

Every marriage has its challenges. There may even be times when there are grounds for divorce. How are we to deal with these situations? Is marriage based on human logic? How do you deal with hardships in marriage? How far should we go in keeping our marriages intact?

We find the surprising answers to these questions in a puzzling episode in this week's Torah portion.

In it we also learn how a young woman was wiser than the sages of her time in appreciating the foundations necessary for a transcendent marriage. How she prevailed in preserving marriages even when there were grounds for divorce. And how the entire Jewish people would not exist if not for women.

With high divorce rates and so much confusion around the dating process and what constitutes successful relationships these lessons could not be coming at a better time.

4. Torah, Marriage and Women

The Torah, from the word *hora'ah*, is a book of practical instruction, teaching us how to fulfill our mission in this world – to live righteous, sublime, optimum lives, making the most of the gifts and precious moments we have been given. Perhaps nowhere is this more important than in our personal relationships, especially our intimate ones, our marriages and our spousal relations.

Torah sees marriage – the sacred union of husband and wife – as the bedrock of civilization. In the early verses of the Book of Genesis, it

¹ <http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>

states: “A man shall leave his father and his mother, and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.² But the actual mitzvah of marriage is derived by the rabbis³ from a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy that begins: When a man takes (*yikach*) a wife and is intimate with her...⁴”

The Talmud elaborates extensively on this word *yikach*, “takes” – what does it mean to “take”? To acquire? That would seem misogynistic. You don’t take a wife, you don’t acquire a spouse; you get married.

So how are we to understand this word *yikach*?

Before I answer that question, let me forever put to rest the misnomer, misinterpretation, misinformation, misunderstanding, and all other misses regarding Judaism’s and Torah’s relationship with women and women’s relationship with Judaism and Torah.

The Torah is very clear – it is the women, not the men, who maintained then and maintain still our faith. Period. Any claim that Torah observance and the Jewish religion favors men over women is, at best, ignorance, or, at worst, libelous.

We see this prominently demonstrated in this week’s Torah portion.

5. The Book of Exodus

Today we began reading the second book of the Torah, the Book of Exodus. In brief, this book covers the Egyptian Exile, the birth of Moses, the first and greatest Jewish leader, the birth of the Nation of Israel, their exodus from Egyptian slavery, their encounter with G-d at Mount Sinai, the building of the Sanctuary and the beginning of their trek toward the Promised Land.

² Genesis 2:24.

³ See Kiddushin 9b. Rambam Sefer Hamitzvot, positive #213. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ishut 1:2.

⁴ Deuteronomy 24:1. This verse teaches us that marriage is ratified through intimacy; the next verse teaches that a contract document (*ketubah*) may also ratify a marriage. From Exodus 21:11 we derive that a monetary transaction (i.e. the wedding ring) may be used as well. The rabbis instituted that all three methods of marriage, intimacy, contract, and money/ring (*kesef, shtar, biyah*) are necessary to validate the marriage (see at length beginning of Kiddushin, Ketubot 3a).

Basically this dramatic story is told in two parts:

The first part is a painful story. It describes a cruel Egyptian nation that enslaved the Jewish people. A king, Pharaoh, who reveled in bathing in the blood of Jewish children, and an Egypt whose masons used Jewish bodies as sheetrock and wall filler. It describes slavery so painful that many gave up hope.

The second part is the story of redemption – of the Jewish people’s flight to freedom, of receiving the Torah, of building the Tabernacle, of a journey to the Promised Land.

The second part could not have happened were it not for the hand of G-d and the indestructible Jewish spirit. And this may come as a surprise to none of you, but the spirit that enabled the Jewish people to withstand, indeed, transcend and transform Egyptian slavery, came from the Jewish women.

And therein lies the secret to a successful marriage.

6. Parshat Shemot

What do we know?

As today’s Torah reading – Parshat Shemot – begins, we learn that when a new Pharaoh came to power, he saw that the Jewish people were flourishing and he felt threatened. Perhaps they would arise against him, perhaps they would link up with his enemies. So he began raising taxes and work quotas, and generally making their lives bitter in an effort to subjugate them.

Along the way, he summoned the midwives and instructed them to kill all newborn baby boys. But the midwives didn’t do it, and for this they were rewarded by G-d.

Meanwhile, the Jewish people continued to multiply and became very strong. And now the Pharaoh’s orders became more strident – he ordered every newborn baby boy cast into the Nile.⁵

⁵Exodus 1:18:22.

And then the Torah states:

“A man of the house of Levi went and took (*va'yikach*) a daughter of Levi.”⁶

This is a cryptically worded verse. Firstly, it is anonymous, stating merely that a mysterious “man” from the tribe of Levi went and took a “daughter” of the same tribe. Except for the mention of the tribe, the verse could not be more vague – the man and daughter are unnamed; it does not say to or from where the man went; nor what it means that he “took.” It also uses the adult “man” for the male and the more adolescent “daughter” for the woman.

As mentioned countless times, every verse is intentionally constructed down to its finest detail, so that we may scrutinize it and thus learn from it.

So here goes...

7. The Talmud

The Talmud,⁷ cited by Rashi on the verse, explains that the “man” in question was Amram, and the “daughter” was Yocheved.

Amram and Yocheved were already married and had two children, Aaron and Miriam. Then, the verse states, the man “went” – that is, he went away from her, meaning he divorced her.

After Amram divorced Yocheved, he then “took” her again – that is, he remarried her.

From the next verse we learn what happened in their second marriage:

“The woman conceived and bore a son, and she saw that he was good, she hid him for three months.”⁸

⁶ Exodus 2:1.

⁷ See Sotah 12a.

⁸ Exodus 2:2.

This boy was Moses, son of Amram and Yocheved, brother to Aaron and Miriam. The man who would be chosen by G-d to be the leader and redeemer of the Jewish people.

The question is: Why this whole elaborate back-story, marriage, divorce, second marriage, birth of Moses?

The Talmud fills in the blanks:

Amram was the great leader of his generation.⁹ When he saw that Pharaoh said, Every boy who is born you shall cast into the Nile,¹⁰ he said, “Why am I bothering with all this?” So he went and divorced his wife. All the men followed suit and divorced their wives.

But his daughter said to him: “Father, your decree is worse than the Pharaoh’s, for the Pharaoh condemned only the males, while you [by not having any more children] condemn both the males and females.¹¹ The Pharaoh decreed only in this world,¹² while you decree in both this world and the next world. The Pharaoh is evil and perhaps his decree will be fulfilled, perhaps not. But you are righteous – surely your decree will be fulfilled.”

Hearing this Amram arose and went back to his wife. All of the people arose and went back to their wives. Why does it then state, “and they took” (*va’yikach*)? Should it not say, “and they took back” (*va’y-achziru*)? [Because] ... he behaved toward her as if it were their first marriage...¹³

8. Miriam’s Wisdom

Miriam reminded Amram that the Pharaoh does not run the world – G-d does. And because she did, because a woman did this, Moses was born and the rest is history.

⁹ And all listened to his guidance – Rashi.

¹⁰ Exodus 1:22.

¹¹ For you will birth neither males nor females – Rashi.

¹² For they will be born and die and will go to the World to Come. But, you condemn both this world and the next, for the children will never be born and thus never go to the World to Come – Rashi.

¹³ Sotah 12a. Exodus Rabbah 1:19.

Why did Amram and the men initially react differently to Pharaoh's decree than Miriam, the woman?

The men approached the challenge with their logic first. They looked at their marriages from a rational point of view. When they saw that Pharaoh decreed that every newborn baby boy be cast into the Nile, they reasoned and calculated that it's simply not worth the risk to remain married and have children, with the males being killed. And thus they separated from and divorced their wives.

Resultantly, as Miriam pointed out, they basically chose to forsake the family structure (and the continuing growth of the family) – which is the basis of Jewish life – due to their rational calculations. Sure, logically it was justified, but since when do the Jewish people allow logic to hamper their faith or damper their dreams?

In Miriam's pointed words: "Father, your decree is worse than the Pharaoh's, for the Pharaoh condemned only the males, while you condemn both the males and females"!

The women's first reaction, on the other hand, was faith, and logic based on and following that faith.

The woman remembers – and reminds the man – G-d promised us that we will leave this G-d forsaken land, and we will return to our Promised Land. If we surrender and resign ourselves by dissolving our marriages and not building our families, there will be no one left to leave Egypt.

G-d put us on this earth for a purpose – whether in Egypt or in America or in Israel. We are meant to build Jewish families. This is nonnegotiable.

The modus operandi of materialism, as manifested by Pharaoh, is to try to undermine this in anyway it can. Rationalism responds to this challenge by avoiding the risks involved, and succumbing to the decree.

But the modus operandi of holiness and G-dliness is to rise above the obstacles of materialism and build a Jewish family anyway.

And this is what Miriam, Amram's daughter, told her father: Pharaoh is evil personified, he will do everything he can to undermine who we are. But you, you are a righteous man, you have to do everything you can to counter that darkness.

Pharaoh's decree may affect all the newborn males; but your decision affects every single Jew. If Pharaoh decrees, it may have an affect in this world, but you, you can affect this world and all worlds. The evil Pharaoh's decrees have a chance to succeed, but also have a chance to fail (and he did ultimately fail, as history testifies and the present testifies even more). But if you decide that we must abolish the Jewish marriage and family, then you will certainly undermine everything we believe in.

Harsh words. But those were harsh times in Egypt. It was literally a question of life and death. A question of the future destiny of the Jewish people.

In honor of Miriam, Yocheved and all the women, the Jewish people survived, their identity thrived – and here we are today to tell the story for all to see.

Imagine if Miriam had not intervened...

And today, look around: The mighty Egyptian Empire is long gone, leaving no remnant (beyond some pyramids and sphinxes). The Jewish people are standing strong, in every corner of the world!

9. New Way of Thinking

And then an unintended (or maybe intended consequence) was born of this way of believing and this way of thinking: you don't get re-married, you get married; you don't take back your marriage, you take your marriage.

The reason that the Torah describes Yocheved as a "daughter" of Levi, when in fact Yocheved was an adult (130 year old) woman who had already given birth to two children, is because when Amram married her for the second time, after his daughter Miriam reminded him of G-d's will, it was as if it was the first time, and Yocheved looked like a young maiden in his eyes.

With this the Torah teaches us a beautiful lesson about the key to a happy and enduring marriage:

The core foundation of marriage is the commitment and the supra-rational faith in the enduring power of the union. The belief in and the connection with the third Divine partner in the marriage – G-d. And with that connection the union is blessed to be an eternal edifice, a *binyan adai ad*.

When you focus on the bedrock of marriage, then you will forever see your spouse as young and spirited, just as she was the day you first met her!

Popular magazines and best-selling books continuously promise you secret tips for keeping your marriage and love life fresh and new. We all know where those promises lead to. If this advice actually worked new articles and books wouldn't keep becoming best-sellers... [Optional: Some 63-year-old thrice divorced editor of a magazine giving you relationship tips is about as productive as taking tennis lessons from a rabbi].

By contrast, the Torah – the inventor of love and sanctity of marriage – offers us time-tested and proven relationship advice on how to keep a marriage fresh and new.

The reason Yocheved seemed like a young maiden in the eyes of Amram, and the reason it seemed as if they were getting married now for the very first time even though they had been married for many years, is because he was reminded of the purpose and essence of their marriage (and all marriage) – to build a home of light that would be a beacon in the world, an illuminating ray of light and hope even in the hell of Egyptian darkness. A union that would indeed create Moses himself.

When you are in touch with the fundamental why you are getting married, or are already married, then the marriage remains new and fresh as if it were your wedding day perpetually!

10. Perpetual Mazal Tov

The Rogatchover Gaon, Reb Yosef Rosen, was once having a discussion with his colleague, Reb Chaim Brisker. He shared with Reb Chaim his innovative insight about marriage, that since it's the coming together of two opposites – man and woman – it requires a perpetual power (*a peulah nimsheches*) to keep them together. Marriage is thus not a one-time event, but one that is continuous and perpetually renewed.

Upon hearing this, Reb Chaim exclaimed to the Rogatchover: “Mazal tov on your marriage!” “Why are you wishing me mazal tov?” wondered the Rogtachover. “Simple,” replied Reb Chaim. “Since marriage is perpetually being renewed, then it is as if you just got married anew!”

Some say that the Rogtachover rejoined: “Well, just as the marriage is perpetually renewed, so are the mazal tov wishes given at the initial wedding perpetually renewed.”

I wish this upon each one of us: May your marriage be as new today as it was on the day you got married!

May you see your spouse as young and fresh as it was the first day you met.

This is not fantasy. Connect your marriage to its core purpose and it will indeed be transformed to a new marriage each day.

11. Two Personal Lessons

From all this we can draw two additional lessons:

Lesson one:

Never avoid marriage because of your fears of the risks involved. Life has risks. Marriage has risks. But it also brings tremendous blessings. Have faith and trust in G-d and it will empower you to transcend your fears. Focus on the primary objective of marriage – a sacred union to transform your corner of the world into a divine home – and it will energize you to rise to the occasion.

The greatest risk of all is not taking risk.

Lesson two:

Treat your spouse always as new. That's why it says "married" and not "remarried," took and not took back. Every moment of marriage is like the first time.

Egypt is the prototype for all exile; its Hebrew name, *Mitzrayim*, literally means "restriction/limitation," as explained by the Alter Rebbe,¹⁴ whose 204th yahrzeit is this evening, on the 24th of Tevet. Pharaoh, the leader and archetype of literal and figurative Egypt, tried to undermine the Jewish marriage and family by decreeing that all newborn male children be put to death. The men, using logic, succumbed to the decree.

There is logic there, but a flawed logic, because it's a logic that plays by Egypt's and Pharaoh's rules.

The women reminded the men that we Jews play by different, higher rules – G-d's rules.

We all know that women are the heart and soul of life. This is the proof.

May each of you be blessed with a dynamic marriage that is as new as day one. And may that infuse your life with vitality and vigor in everything you do.

Until we finally arrive to the complete marriage between G-d and the Jewish people, between heaven and earth, with the coming of the Geulah.

Shabbat Shalom!

¹⁴ Torah Ohr Shemot (this week's chapter) 49d-50a. Vaeirah 57b-c. Yisro 71c-d.