

By Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz

For many years, the Jewish Community indulged in the comfortable illusion that we were immune from the evils which plagued society at large. Yet we have discovered that while Jewish values can indeed create structures that support nurturing, compassionate behaviors, and discourage destructive ones, there are no guarantees. Alcoholism, drug addiction, incest and spousal abuse do, to our everlasting sorrow, exist in our families and we need to acknowledge that fact openly and honestly. For too long, victims of abuse have been ashamed to seek help, thinking that because "good" Jewish families don't have such problems, they themselves must be at fault.

Let me begin with the obvious - the teachings of Judaism unequivocally repudiate and condemn the use of violence, verbal or physical, directed towards anyone (except in the narrow context of war, self-defense or preservation of the public order). Jewish law prohibits even raising a hand to strike another: "He who lifts his hand to strike another is termed evil" (Talmud Sanhedrin 58). The Jewish tradition places great emphasis on the need to control anger, particularly where that anger can lead to violence: "He who breaks objects in his fury is as if he worshipped other gods" (Talmud). Our rabbis have always recognized that when we become angry, we lose control of our rational selves and become, at least for the moment, a wild beast incapable of controlling the rage within. And thus, the rabbis reiterated again and again the paramount virtues of self-mastery and impulse control.

All of this is true with respect to how we relate to anyone - our neighbors, colleagues, etc. With respect to our spouses and children, the obligations are ever so greater; Jewish law specifically requires that we not create an atmosphere of excessive fear in the home and that we address our families in a quiet, gentle way (Talmud Gittin 6). Husbands are under special directive "not to bring tears" to one's wife (Talmud Baba Metziah 59) and to "love her as oneself and honor her more than oneself" (Talmud Yevamot 62). Even at a time when wife beating was a common, accepted and legal practice in both Christian and Moslem Europe, it was a grievous sin for Jewish men to treat their wives in such a manner. (See Shulchan Aruch Even Ha'Ezer 154:2 [statement of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, prominent authority on Ashkenazie Jewry]).

The traditions of Judaism properly observed can undoubtedly inculcate many virtues that counter abusive behaviors:

1. Control of anger
2. Deferred gratification
3. Hakarat ha'tov - appreciation and gratitude for all of life's blessings
4. De-emphasis on competitiveness, material acquisition or control
5. Resilience and tenacity in response to setbacks
6. Emulation of G-d's ways, focusing on the positive attributes of kindness and compassion
7. Empathy with the other

Certainly, if one made a serious effort to cultivate a spiritual relationship with G-d, there could be no room for any sort of interpersonal abuse. The fact that there can be abuse in a religious community means that while the community may be ritually religious, it does not reflect the spiritual ideals of these rituals.

I do not, however, want to spend too much time belaboring the obvious. Evil is evil and must be identified as such. Life inevitably has its frustrations, disappointments and pressures; relationships have their stresses and indeed their breaking points. But even when a relationship fails, as regrettable as that

may be, it is no cause for violence or abuse.

What I would like to do is move away from the "evil" and focus on the "good" - how Judaism envisions the healthy relationship, the degree of respect and consideration that spouses must have for each other, the G-dliness and sanctity of human intimacy and love and the paramount need to escape our egotism to learn to give selflessly to another.

By becoming aware of what our responsibilities are and our expectations should be, we can learn to control the stormy and violent passions within. Perhaps by raising our gaze to the stars we can lift ourselves out of the mud. And if the following words are not likely to be effective for the hard-core abuse, at least the rest of us can learn to be a bit more patient, tolerant and forgiving in our daily lives.

Needless to say, relationship and sensitivity training should be part and parcel of the Jewish education of every boy and girl starting at the elementary school level and proceeding through adolescence. After all, driving a car requires a test of proficiency and a certain amount of training; tragically, marriage and parenthood do not, but most definitely should.

Very often, we enter marriage not being willing to commit ourselves to work at marriage. We are so preoccupied with the daily activities of our lives - our jobs, our external commitments - that we simply don't have the energy to work at a relationship.

We just want it to happen. We want it to grow and deepen and be a source of nachas to us without putting the work into it.

The idea that you enter a marriage to have your needs met is, in fact, a very serious misconception.

If you look into the kesuvah, the marriage contract between husband and wife, it says, "I will work and support and honor my wife." It does not say, "I will love my wife."

One Rosh Yeshiva explained that the idea of love is subsumed in the term "work." "Work doesn't just mean, "I will earn money." It means, "I will work to love." This love is not the love of romantic passion or gratification of physical needs.

This love is the conscious effort to try to do good and try to take care of someone; to try to give of yourself to someone else. And that is not a love that comes instinctively. It takes time and commitment. That is why, in the Jewish tradition, we always teach that the true love of marriage is the love that you have after the marriage - the love of giving and sharing and working things out together that develops into a love which is, truly, selfless love.

Far too often, we approach marriage with the notion that we want somebody exactly like us, someone who shares our likes and dislikes and who feels exactly the same way about things that we feel. In reality, the way a person grows spiritually and emotionally and the way a person develops as a human being is often through creative tension.

Sometimes it is the disagreement, the different way of viewing things, that brings partners in a marriage to a higher level. The creative interaction, the resulting type of tension, can allow you to achieve certain insights, goals, understandings and developments in your personality, as a Jew, and as a servant of Hashem that would not have been achieved had you simply been allowed to develop in your own particular way.

Let's look at the parsha about the creation of the world and why marriage came into the world. Our chachamim teach us that originally Hashem created a man and then created a woman from the man. The Gemorah explains that originally there was a bisexual creature with two heads who was called Adam. Adam was a composite of man and woman. Hashem then said, "Lo tov ai asoh Adam l'vadoh - It is not good for this unit to be one. Let us separate them."

The man was not the first and then the woman created from the man. Rather, they were both created at the same time and Hashem separated them. The question then becomes "Why did Hashem separate them?"

The posuk says, "Na'aseh lo ezer - Let us make him a helpmate - ezer k'negdoh." "Ezer" means a "help" and "k'negodh" means "in opposition, opposite to him." The ezer k'negdoh, the way that a husband and wife help each other sometimes, is precisely the point: that interaction and tension allows both husband and wife to reach their own heights.

The only way we can learn to love G-d is by cultivating in ourselves the ability to love other human beings. When we love another human, truly love, we don't love them because of the way they look or because of the way they dress. We love them because of the way they are, because there is something in them that resounds in us very deeply. What you're loving, basically, is the emergence of that person's divine spark.

If you love a person's kindness, compassion or caring, you are loving the G-dliness within that person. Schlomo Hamelech teaches us a lesson: You don't love G-d by going up to the mountain, becoming a hermit, locking yourself away from society and saying, "Oh, I love G-d." You come to G-d by the nitty gritty of working on human relationships, learning to love other human beings, interacting in an intimate manner and establishing a family.

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