



***Shalom Bayit:*¹ Family Conflict & Harmony**

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Peace is an important, at times the most important value in our lives. No blessing can truly be enjoyed without it. For this reason, all of our blessings end with a prayer for peace.² It gives us the wherewithal and the framework to express, cultivate and enjoy the riches, opportunities, talents and gifts that we have. Without it, strife, stresses, problems, challenges, and obstacles may prevent us from benefiting from and taking advantage of those blessings.

But peace is hard to attain and even harder to maintain. The focus of this discussion is the family and peaceful relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, and brothers and sisters. No family is without its challenges; some more burdened than others. In some households, the lament of the prophet, “Peace, peace; there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11) might perfectly capture the atmosphere. In others, matters of health, economics, children, or professions, among many other concerns, may test the strongest of commitments and most tolerant and understanding of characters.

Husbands and Wives

The relationship between husbands and wives is the oldest one in human history:

“And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmeet opposite him’... And the Lord God made Adam fall into a deep sleep, and he slept; and He took one from his ribs, and closed up the flesh. And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her to the man. And Adam said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his

¹ While the proper grammatical construct of this phrase is *shelom bayit*, rather than *shalom bayit*, the incorrect usage is so common that the correct form appears awkward and unusual. Hence, I have decided to use the common form of this phrase in this chapter.

² *Yalkut Shimoni, Parashat Naso, remez 511.*

wife; and they shall be one flesh.” (Gen. 2:18, 21-24)

God Himself is credited with arranging and officiating at the wedding of Adam and Eve³ and it is the happiness of that marriage which is invoked in one of the seven blessings at every Jewish wedding: “May You [God] cause these beloved friends to rejoice just as you caused Your creatures in the Garden of Eden to rejoice.”⁴ Marriage helps to fulfill the existential need for companionship, the species’ need to propagate, and society’s needs to share economic burdens and productivity and to share domestic responsibilities.⁵

Our sages considered this relationship essential to human happiness and fulfillment: “A man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness.”⁶

But problems between the primordial husband and wife soon ensued: sin, shame, denial of responsibility, assignment of blame, punishment, and exile. And the enduring struggle of husbands and wives to recreate Paradise in their own weed-infested gardens has continued for thousands of years. Despite being “one flesh,” a natural tension exists between individuals who attempt to cultivate the same plot of earth. Differences of temperaments and goals, personalities and egos, philosophies and priorities all contribute to varying degrees of discord.

Rashi elucidates the inherent difficulties in the husband-wife relationship in his explanation of woman’s designation as an *ezer ke-negdo* (a helpmeet opposite [her husband]): “If a [man] merits, she is a helpmeet, if he does not merit, she is opposite him to fight [with him].”⁷ Another rabbinic insight draws attention to this tension. In a fanciful play with the letters of the Hebrew words for man (*ish: aleph, yud, shin*) and woman (*ishah: aleph, shin, hei*), “R. Akiba expounded: ‘When husband and wife

³ *Baba Batra* 75a; *Breishit Rabbah* 8:13.

⁴ *Ketubot* 8a.

⁵ *Yevamot* 61b,

“If [a man] has children, he may abstain from performing the duty of propagation but not from that of living with a wife. This provides support for a statement R. Nahman made in the name of Samuel who ruled that although a man may have many children he must not remain without a wife, for it is said in the Scriptures, “It is not good that the man should be alone.”

See also *Hilkhot Ishut* 15:16. While “a man may not live without a wife... It is permissible for a woman never to marry” (*Hilkhot Isurei Bi’ah* 21:26), nevertheless “a woman should not live without a husband so that she not be suspect [of engaging in an illicit relationship].” (*Hilkhot Ishut* 15:16 and *Even ha-Ezer* 1:13)

⁶ *Yevamot* 62b. See also *Bereishit Rabbah* 17:18 which adds life and atonement to the list.

⁷ Commentary to Genesis 18:18.

are worthy, the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) abides with them; when they are not worthy fire consumes them.”⁸ The *yud* and *hei* form the Divine Name. If omitted, only *aleph* and *shin* are left, letters that spell the word *eish* (fire).

Of such great concern was it to find a proper match that in Talmudic times in the Land of Israel they used to ask a man when he got married, “*matza* or *motzei*? (Did you find a good wife or a bad one?)” “*Matza*”, for it is written, “Whoso has found (*matza*) a wife has found a great good.” (Proverbs 18:22); ‘*Motzei*’, for it is written, “And I find the woman (*motzei*) the woman more bitter than death.” (Ecclesiastes 7:26)⁹

Ideally, domestic relationships should not be governed by laws and regulations; they should be natural and reflect the love and respect that should form the basis of those relationships. The Torah, responding to the innate stresses and strains that inevitably arise when two separate and unique individuals attempt to live together, prescribes responsibilities, divisions of labor and mutual respect. These obligations encompass economic, domestic and personal relationships. The Mishnah lists the kinds of work that a woman must perform for her husband: “grinding corn, baking bread, washing clothes, cooking, suckling her child, making ready his bed and working in wool.”¹⁰ These seven are understood to be prototypes and to include many other similar activities.¹¹ Economically, any income that she earns belongs to her husband and goes toward the financial responsibilities of the household.¹² Domestically, she must perform traditional household chores.¹³ Personally, she must provide personal service to him such as making his bed and serving him food.

Similarly, a husband has obligations towards his wife. According to biblical law, he must provide her with maintenance, clothing and conjugal relations.¹⁴ According to rabbinic law, a husband must provide her medical care, ransom her if she is held captive, bury her if she dies, provide for her housing and maintenance in her widowhood, provide child support for their daughters, and provide appropriate

⁸ *Sotah* 17a.

⁹ *Berakhot* 8a.

¹⁰ *Ketubot* 59b. *Hilkhot Ishut*, ch. 21. Even if a woman has household help that can perform these functions, she must still be involved in some of the housework; see *Hilkhot Ishut* 21:4.

¹¹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 5:6; *Korban ha-Eidah*

¹² *Even ha-Ezer* 80:1. We will see later that her income is assigned to her husband in exchange for his obligation of providing maintenance.

¹³ *Hilkhot Ishut* 21:3, 7; *Even ha-Ezer* 80:4. In describing these obligations, Rambam enumerates such duties as washing her husband’s face, hands, and feet, pouring his beverages, making his bed and serving his food

¹⁴ *Ketubot* 47b; *Hilkhot Ishut* 12:2.

inheritance for their sons.¹⁵ In accepting the obligations of the *ketubah*, a husband undertakes to “work for, esteem, feed, and sustain [her] as is the practice of Jewish men who faithfully work for, esteem, feed, and sustain their wives.”

In addition to the obligations enumerated above, Jewish law calls for love, honor, and respect:

Our Rabbis taught: Concerning a man who loves his wife as himself, who honors her more than himself, who guides his sons and daughters in the right path and arranges for them to be married at a young age, Scripture says, “And thou shalt know that thy tent is in peace.” (Job 5:24)¹⁶

R. ‘Avira used to give the following exposition, sometimes quoting it in the name of R. Ammi and sometimes in the name of R. Assi: What is the meaning of the verse: “Well is it with the man that dealeth graciously, that ordereth his affairs rightfully?” (Psalms 122:5) A man should always eat and drink less than his means allow, clothe himself in accordance with means, and honor his wife and children more than his means allow, for they are dependent upon him and he is dependent upon ‘He who spoke and the world came into being’.¹⁷

Rav said: One should always be heedful of wronging his wife, for since her tears are frequent she is quickly hurt.¹⁸

People say, “If your wife is short, bend down and hear her whisper!”¹⁹

Our Sages commanded that a person should always eat less than what he can afford, should dress in accordance with what he can afford, and extend honor to his wife and children in excess of what he can afford.²⁰

Rambam summarizes:

Our Sages commanded a man to honor his wife more than [he honors] himself and to love her as much as [he loves] himself. If he has financial resources, he should spend generously for her according to his means. He should not instill excessive fear upon her and should speak pleasantly to her. He should not be depressive or angry.

¹⁵ *Hilkhot Ishut* 12:2.

¹⁶ *Yevamot* 62b; *Sanhedrin* 76b.

¹⁷ *Hullin* 84b.

¹⁸ *Baba Metzi’a* 59a.

¹⁹ *Baba Metzi’a* 59a.

²⁰ *Hilkhot De’ot* 5:10.

Likewise, our Sages commanded a woman to honor her husband excessively; his fear should be upon her. She should conduct herself according to his direction and she should view him as a prince or a king. She should follow the desires of his heart and shun anything that he despises. This is the way of the holy daughters and sons of Israel who are pure in their relationships. In these ways will their cohabitation be pleasant and praiseworthy.²¹

These descriptions of the domestic duties required and the subordinate nature of the relationship between husbands and wives grate on many modern ears. Our time is one in which has offered greater equity and autonomy in marital roles and has, in many ways, significantly changed the role of women. Let us analyze these statements in their philosophical, social and halakhic contexts in an attempt to understand the positions and the sensitivities of our tradition. We must be careful when evaluating the sources that no one statement is cited in isolation; doing so would give a skewed and false impression of Jewish tradition and law.

There might have been room for significant criticism had all of the obligations and duties been one-sided, i.e., from wife to husband. However, this is clearly not the case. Jewish marriage is an institution of mutual obligations in which the partners are required to work for the common good, to provide what they are able and to sacrifice what they must in an exchange of reciprocated responsibilities.²² One partner is not subordinate to the other.²³ Haim b. Betzalel, brother of Maharal of Prague, wrote, “A husband should not treat his wife as a servant.... Each of them is a master and each of them is subjugated to the other so that it is impossible to distinguish between them. He acquires her as a servant through the betrothal money and she acquires him as a servant through the dowry that she brings into the marriage.”²⁴ Their mutual obligations of respect create a proper balance and prevent abuse and inappropriate control of one over the other. While contemporaries may not express these ideas in these terms, nevertheless, the underlying message is important: marriage is not only about self-fulfillment, it is about reciprocity and being in a mutually beneficial relationship. In the Jewish tradition, the sharing of responsibilities and the balancing of interests in an equitable manner defines the traditional view of this relationship.

Let us consider the domestic obligations prescribed above. Jewish law asserts that many of the marital obligations are not absolutely binding and that, by mutual

²¹ *Hilkhot Ishut* 15:19-20.

²² *She'eilot u-Teshuvot Hatam Sofer, Even ha-Ezer*, II, no. 74; *Hatam Sofer*, Novella to *Baba Batra* 41a. These and other sources are cited in Yosef David Epstein, *Sefer Mitzvot ha-Bayit* (New York, 1981), pp. 119-120.

²³ *She'eilot u-Teshuvot Maharshdam, Even ha-Ezer*, no. 198.

²⁴ *Sefer ha-Haim*, II, ch. 4.

consent, they may be waived. Thus, if a woman relinquishes her claim to maintenance or if a man surrenders his right to her income, these obligations are not mandatory. Such agreements are lawful and legitimate.²⁵ This is true of every aspect of married life with the exceptions of conjugal relations, the 100 or 200 *zuzzim* of the marriage contract (*ikkar ketubah*), and a wife's right of inheritance which may never be waived during the course of a marriage.²⁶ Accordingly, societal norms, or individual husbands and wives themselves, may determine which personal, domestic or monetary responsibilities they may expect from each other. Couples may waive any that are inappropriate for their relationship or the standards of the society²⁷ in which they live. Likewise, in the past, the social standing or economic position of a woman determined the nature and extent of her domestic responsibilities, exempting her from many duties.²⁸ This qualification is certainly sensitive to the norms of society and contemporary mores.²⁹

Finally, Rambam's formulation, i.e., "this is the way of the holy daughters and sons of Israel who are pure in their relationships," indicates that he is not speaking in purely legal terms but is proposing an attitude in relationships that he maintains is the most appropriate. Failure to abide by these standards would not be sufficient grounds for divorce.³⁰

Shalom Bayit

Peaceful and harmonious relations between husband and wife are essential in order for their relationship to thrive and their household to be viable. Married life was meant "for living and not for suffering."³¹ The state of domestic tranquility is

²⁵ *Ketubot* 58b,

R. Huna stated in the name of Rab: A woman is entitled to say to her husband, 'I do not wish either to be maintained by you or to work for you'. He holds the opinion that when the Rabbis regulated [the relations of husband and wife] her maintenance was fundamental while [the assignment of the proceeds of] her handiwork [to her husband] was due [only to their desire for preventing] ill feeling. If, therefore, she said, 'I do not wish either to be maintained by you or to work for you', she is entitled to do so.

See *Hilkhhot Ishut* 12:6; *Even ha-Ezer* 38:5.

²⁶ *Tosafot*, *Ketubot* 63a, s.v. *Rav Huna amar mi-tashmish*; *Hilkhhot Ishut* 12:7-9; *Helkat Mehokek* to *Even ha-Ezer* 80, no. 27.

²⁷ *Hilkhhot Ishut* 21:1.

²⁸ *Hilkhhot Ishut* 21:6; *Even ha-Ezer* 80:8.

²⁹ In commenting on a woman's obligation to recline at the Passover *seder*, *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 472:4, remarks that only important women are obligated to do so. Rema comments that all of the women of his day were to be considered "important."

³⁰ *Sefer ha-Makneh* to *Kiddushin* 31a.

³¹ *Ketubot* 61a:

known as *shalom bayit*.

In its original application, concerns of *shalom bayit* motivated activities that removed obstacles and defined parameters of behavior so that people could co-exist safely, effectively and pleasantly. Thus, kindling Shabbat candles was instituted for the sake of *shalom bayit* so that people would not bump into walls or trip on objects that may have been left around the house.³² When forced by limited economic circumstances to choose between lighting Shabbat candles and lighting Chanukah candles, Shabbat candles have priority. This is because Chanukah candles are intended to publicize the miracles of the holiday and no benefit may be derived from them. If they were the only lights, members of the household would be forced to grope in darkness. However, Shabbat candles provide usable light and prevent the distress caused by living in the dark;³³ concerns of *shalom bayit* have priority.³⁴ The Shabbat lights also enable people to sit around a table and eat their meal in the proper atmosphere.³⁵ In addition, when financial concerns are not an issue, lighting many candles on Shabbat is encouraged as increased light “increases domestic tranquility

R. Huna related: R. Huna b. Hinena tested us [with the following question:] If [a wife] says that she wishes to nurse her child and he says that she shall not nurse it her, wish is to be granted, for she would be the sufferer. What, [however, is the law] where he says that she shall suckle the child and she says that she will not suckle it? Whenever this is not the practice in her family we, of course, comply with her wish; what, [however, is the law] where this is the practice in her family but not in his? Do we follow the practice of his family or that of hers? And we solved his problem from this: She rises with him but does not go down with him (i.e., she enjoys his advantages but does not suffer his disadvantages). What, said R. Huna, is the Scriptural proof? — For she is a man's wife, [she is to participate] in the rise of her husband but not in his descent. R. Eleazar said, [The proof is] from here: Because she was the mother of all living, she was given [to her husband] to live but not to suffer pain.

³² *Magen Avraham to Orah Hayyim* 263:13. *Magen Avraham* is commenting on the obligation of single students who are living away from home to light Shabbat candles. Thus, *shalom bayit* is not limited to marital relationships, but to domestic safety and tranquility.

³³ Rashi, *Kiddushin* 23b, s.v. *shelom beito*. *Shabbat* 25b,

“And thou hast removed my soul far off from peace; I forgot prosperity. What is the meaning of, ‘and thou hast removed my soul far off from peace’ (Lamentations 3:17)? R. Abbahu said: This refers to the kindling of the light on the Sabbath.” (Jeremiah laments that they could not even afford this; loss of light brings loss of peace.)

³⁴ *Shabbat* 23b.

³⁵ *She'iltot, Parashat Tetzaveh*, no. 63.

and increases happiness.”³⁶

Concerns for domestic tranquility prompted our Sages to caution husbands and wives to act sensitively and responsibly towards each other. In order to avoid discord in matters of finances, a significant source of conflict between husbands and wives,³⁷ the rabbis regulated responsibility for and expenditures of domestic finances and, at times, limited the ability of one party or another to disburse or control funds unilaterally.³⁸

A woman is legally exempt from financial liability for any damage she may cause to household utensils and furnishings, for otherwise, Rambam explains, “there would never be domestic tranquility but, rather, she would be overly cautious and refrain from domestic chores, and there would be strife between them.”³⁹ *Pele Yo-eitz* counsels that, for the sake of domestic tranquility, a husband should not be too demanding and exacting concerning the household budget.⁴⁰ Quoting Proverbs 15:17, “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it” and Proverbs 17:1, “Better is a dry morsel, and quietness with it, than a house full of feasting with quarrels,” *Sefer Hassidim* warns that it is better to be satisfied with a modest Shabbat meal if doing so will reduce economic pressures and the resulting tensions and quarrels between husband and wife. Real *oneg Shabbat* (Sabbath delight), he writes, is the absence of disputes.⁴¹

One spouse may not repressively limit the actions the other, as that would be

³⁶ *Bet Yosef, Orach Hayyim* 263:17. Likewise, according to Rosh, *Yoma*, ch. 8, no. 27, a blessing is made upon lighting candles for Yom Kippur because of *shalom bayit*; *Magen Avraham* to *Orach Hayyim* 263:15. See *Bet Yosef, Orach Hayyim* 610:2 for a record of the debate concerning the recitation of a blessing under these circumstances.

³⁷ *Baba Metziah* 59a:

Rav Yehudah said: One should always take heed that there be food in his house; for strife is prevalent in a house on account of [the lack of] food, for it is written, “He makes peace in your borders; He fills you with cream of wheat” (Psalms 147:14). Said R. Papa, Hence the proverb: When the barley is quite gone from the pitcher, strife comes knocking at the door.

³⁸ *Hilkhos Ishut* 22:18; *Even ha-Ezer* 90:16.

³⁹ *Hilkhos Ishut* 21:9.

⁴⁰ *Pele Yo-eitz, erekh ahavat ish ve-ishah. Bemidbar Rabbah* 9:2 warns that a man should not be exacting and demanding at home and not to cry over spilled wine. See also *Megilah* 28a,

R. Nehunia b. ha-Kaneh was asked by his disciples: In virtue of what have you reached such a good old age? He replied: Never in my life have I sought respect through the degradation of my fellow, nor has the curse of my fellow gone up with me upon my bed, and I have been yielding with my money.

⁴¹ *Sefer Hassidim*, no. 863.

similar to imprisonment⁴² and is a form of abuse.⁴³ The Talmud castigates Papus b. Yehudah who was so suspicious and controlling that, when he would leave the house, he would lock his wife indoors.⁴⁴ Similarly, a husband may not restrict his wife's customary interactions with her neighbors:

R. Kahana stated: If a man placed his wife under a vow that she shall neither borrow nor lend a winnow, a sieve, a mill or an oven, he must divorce her and give her also her *ketubah*, because [should she fulfill the vow] he would give her a bad name among her neighbors.⁴⁵

Husbands and wives must be compatible with each other and, if unable to coexist, they should separate. The Talmud states, "No one can be compelled to live with a snake in a single basket."⁴⁶ It is for this reason that proper efforts must be made before a marriage to ensure that the man and woman are compatible with each other and can live together. Thus,

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: A man may not betroth a woman before he sees her, lest he [subsequently] see something repulsive in

⁴² *Yoreh De'ah* 235:6,

A husband who says to his wife, "I forbid you to go to your father's house or that your father's house is (*konam*) off-limits to you" [is as if he] says nothing."

This, despite the Mishnah, *Ketubot* 71b,

If a man forbade his wife by vow that she shall not go to her father's house, and he lives with her in the same town, he may keep [her as his wife, if the prohibition was for] one month; but if for two months, he must divorce her and give her also the *ketubah*. Where he, however, lives in another town, he may keep [her as his wife, if the prohibition was for] one festival, [but if for] three festivals, he must divorce her and give her her *ketubah*. If a man forbade his wife by vow that she should not visit a house of mourning or a house of feasting, he must divorce her and give her her *ketubah*, because thereby he has closed [people's doors] against her. If he pleads, however, [that his action] was due to some other cause he is permitted [to forbid her].

⁴³ *Yoreh De'ah* 234:62.

⁴⁴ *Gittin* 90a. See Rashi, s.v. *Papus b. Yehudah*.

⁴⁵ *Ketubot* 72a; *Hilkhos Ishut* 13:10; *Yoreh De'ah* 235:5.

⁴⁶ *Ketubot* 72a, 77a, 86b,

Rav stated: If a husband says, "I will neither maintain nor support [my wife]," he must divorce her and pay her *ketubah*. R. Eleazar went and told this reported statement to Samuel [who] exclaimed, "Make Eleazar eat barley; rather than compel him to divorce her let him be compelled to maintain her." And Rav? [Why does he order divorce rather than maintenance?] No one can live with a serpent in the same basket.

her, and she become loathsome to him, whereas the All-Merciful said, “And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” (Leviticus 19:18)⁴⁷

Physical, sexual and emotional abuse is absolutely prohibited. Couples must be respectful of each other’s dignities, bodies and sensitivities. “Rav said: One should always be heedful of wronging his wife, for since her tears are frequent she is quickly hurt.”⁴⁸ They should speak pleasantly and politely to each other and curb their anger.⁴⁹ R. Meir warns that “whoever marries his daughter to an ‘*am ha-aretz* (ignorant, uncouth person), is as though he bound and laid her before a lion: just as a lion tears [his prey] and devours it and has no shame, so an ‘*am ha-aretz* strikes and cohabits and has no shame.”⁵⁰ The *herem* instituted by thirteenth century R. Peretz b. Eliyahu of Corbeil against any man who beats his wife⁵¹ is one of many such pieces of legislation and decrees against this type of behavior.⁵²

It is forbidden for a couple to engage in intimate relations in a state of anger or disagreement⁵³ or to force one’s spouse to be intimate when she is unwilling.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ *Kiddushin* 41a. This may be another explanation for the *bedeken* that takes place prior to the wedding ceremony.

⁴⁸ *Baba Metzi’a* 59b.

⁴⁹ *Gittin* 6b:

R. Hisda said: A man should never intimidate his household. The concubine of Giv’ah was terrorized by her husband and she was the cause of many thousands being slaughtered in Israel. Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: If a man intimidate his household, he will eventually commit the three sins of unchastity, blood shedding, and desecration of the Sabbath. Said Rabbah bar Bar Hanah “When our Sages said that a man should ask three things of his household before Shabbat: ‘Did you tithe, did you make the *eruv*, did you light the candle,’ they meant that he should say it with sensitivity, so that it be acceptable to them.” Said Rabbi Ashi “I never heard these words of Rabbah bar Bar Hanah, but I have acted similarly based on my own reasoning.”

⁵⁰ *Pesahim* 49b.

⁵¹ Quoted in *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Binyamin Ze’ev*, no. 88.

⁵² See also *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Maharam mi-Rotenberg*, IV, no. 927; *Bet Yosef, Even ha-Ezer* 154:15; *Sha’arei Teshuvah* III, 77; *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Tashbetz* II, no. 8; *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Maharshakh*, II, no. 130; R. Hayyim Palaggi, *Sefer Hayyim ve-Shalom*, II, *Even ha-Ezer*, no. 31;

⁵³ *Orah Hayyim* 240:10; *Hokhmat Adam* 128:6.

⁵⁴ *Eiruvin* 100b,

Rami b. Hama citing R. Assi further ruled: A man is forbidden to compel his wife to the [marital] obligation, since it is said in Scripture: “And he that hasteth with his feet sinneth.” (Proverbs 19:2) R. Joshua b. Levi similarly stated: Whosoever compels his wife to the [marital] obligation will have unworthy children. Said R. Ika b. Hinena: What is the Scriptural proof?

Judaism always recognized and outlawed marital rape. One should always speak pleasantly and kindly and never terrify or intimidate the members of the household. A person should be gentle.⁵⁵ When R. Ada Bar Ahava was asked by his students to what he attributed his extraordinarily long life he mentioned, among other factors, “I was never stern within my house.”⁵⁶

It is obvious from our discussion that maintaining *shalom bayit* is the responsibility of both husbands and wives. Each partner in his or her own way must act respectfully and appropriately toward the other. And when the relationship is in serious trouble and the couple cannot resolve its own issues, others bear the onus of restoring their *shalom bayit* and must intervene appropriately when necessary, and refrain from intervening when doing so would be counterproductive.⁵⁷ Of such great importance is the restoration of *shalom bayit* that God Himself allows His Name to be blotted out by the *sotah* waters for establishing harmony between husband and wife.⁵⁸

As a means of endearing Abraham’s wife to him, the angels who visited Abraham to announce the birth of Isaac, inquired about Sarah. (Genesis 18) “Rav Yehudah said in Rav’s name: ‘The Ministering Angels knew that our mother Sarah was in the tent, but why [bring out the fact that she was] in her tent? In order to make her beloved to her husband.’”⁵⁹ Aaron was identified as a lover and pursuer of peace and distinguished himself by reconciling married couples that were at odds with each

“Also without consent the soul is hot good.” (*ibid.*)

Even ha-Ezer 25:2. *Magen Avraham*, no. 27 extends this restriction beyond the case of rape to any situation in which a woman is not fully agreeable to engage in intimate relations.

Nedarim 20b,

And I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me.” (Ezekiel 20:38) R. Levi said: This refers to children belonging to the following nine categories: children of fear (when a husband imposes himself upon his wife by force), of outrage, of a hated wife, one under a ban (a person under a ban was forbidden to cohabit), of a woman mistaken for another (having intended to cohabit with one of his wives, he cohabited with another), of strife (one with whom he had just quarreled), of intoxication [during intercourse], of a mentally divorced wife (when her husband has decided to divorce her), of promiscuity, and of a brazen woman (one who openly demands her conjugal rights).

⁵⁵ *Ta’anit* 4a,

Rabina said: Despite this, a man should train himself to be gentle, for it is said, “Therefore remove anger from thy heart.” (Ecclesiastes 11:10)

⁵⁶ *Ta’anit* 20b.

⁵⁷ *Sedei Hemed, Aseifat Dinim, Ma’arekhet Hei*, no. 5.

⁵⁸ *Shabbat* 116a; *Sukkah* 53b; *Nedarim* 66b; *Makkot* 11a.

⁵⁹ *Baba Metzi’a* 87a.

other.⁶⁰ And the Talmudic Sage R. Meir asked a woman to spit into his eye in order to reconcile her with her husband.⁶¹ Based on the Talmudic account of two jesters who were identified by Elijah the Prophet as having a share in the World-to-Come because “when we see two people quarrelling we strive hard to make peace between them,”⁶² Rabbeinu Yonah writes that every Jewish community should appoint such people to bring peace between husbands and wives.⁶³

Marital harmony is of such great import that it is permitted, at times, to be less than straight in one’s dealings. It is permissible to offer insincere flattery to one’s wife for the sake of peace.⁶⁴ It is permissible to deviate from the truth in order to restore *shalom bayit*.⁶⁵ Even God Himself was less than straightforward when He repeated Sarah’s comment to her husband, Abraham. After hearing the news of her impending pregnancy, “Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ‘After I am grown old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’” (Genesis 18:12) When God related the event to Abraham, He said, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” (18:13)⁶⁶

Nevertheless, there are limits to the moral compromises that may be made. The Talmud relates the following story:

Rav was constantly tormented by his wife. If he told her, ‘Prepare me lentils’, she would prepare him small peas; [and if he asked for] small peas, she prepared him lentils. When his son Hiyya grew up he gave her [his father’s instruction] in the reverse order. ‘Your mother’, Rav once remarked to him, ‘has improved!’ ‘It was I,’ the other replied, ‘who reversed [your orders] to her.’ ‘This is what people say’, the first said to him, ‘Thine own offspring teaches thee reason’; you, however, must not continue to do so’ for it is said, “They have taught their tongue to speak lies, they weary themselves.” (Jeremiah 9:4)

Great religious decisors often factored in concerns of *shalom bayit* when determining matters of Jewish law, especially in matters of *taharat ha-mishpahah* (Jewish family purity), and found leniencies in order to protect and enhance the relationship between husbands and wives.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Horev, ch. 17.

⁶¹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah* 1:4; *Devarim Rabbah*, *parashah* 5, 15.

⁶² *Ta’anit* 20b.

⁶³ *Iggeret ha-Teshuvah*, day two.

⁶⁴ *Otzar ha-Midrashim*, Eisenstein, p. 222.

⁶⁵ See my “Nothing But the Truth?” *Judaism* 37:2, Spring 1998.

⁶⁶ *Yevamot* 65b.

⁶⁷ See, for example, *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Tzitz Eliezer* 6:20, 10:13; *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Yabi’a Omer*, VIII, *Yoreh De’ah*, no. 32.

A Closing Thought

In the prayer for peace at the end of the *kaddish*, we take three steps back, bow to the left and bow to the right as we recite, “He Who made peace in the heavens, may He make peace for us and for all Israel.” In explaining this unique practice of stepping backwards during this prayer, Rabbi Menahem Sacks, of blessed memory, suggested that our actions teach us a vital lesson. If we truly want to achieve peace, then we cannot remain fixed to our spots, unyielding in our convictions and inflexible in our understanding. We need to pause, step back and take a new view of our situation. We need to look at it from different perspectives, from the right and from the left, and reevaluate who we are, what we believe and what we are doing. Then, and only then, might we have a chance to achieve peace. This discussion gives us an opportunity to step back and reevaluate our most basic and significant relationships in new ways. It culls the wisdom and insights of the Torah and our sages, a Torah whose “ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17) , may they help us maintain homes, families and relationships that are pleasant and peaceful.