

The First Year of Marriage: Turning Challenges into Opportunities

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In the first year of marriage, known as *shana rishona*, the potential for happiness is unparalleled. A couple has just started their lives together, experiencing everything for the very first time in a way that exudes a freshness and elation, and there is a palpable excitement that accompanies everything they do.

On the other hand, *shana rishona* also carries with it natural transitions, adjustments and possibly even challenges. The couple must make the adjustment from spending a few hours at a time together to living with each other. They may relocate to another community, state or country, leaving close friends and family behind. Routines shift, jobs may change, and responsibilities begin to pile up. Various scenarios arise, which the couple has not previously navigated through. All the while, they are learning new things about each other.

What, then, is the proper mindset with which a couple should enter *shana rishona* and approach their upcoming experiences and long-lasting relationship? This essay offers perspectives on the way young couples can take advantage of any upcoming challenges and reap the wonderful benefits of *shana rishona* and marriage.

Comparing Dating to Marriage: Apples and Oranges

In 1953, Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, was approached by a young man who wished to determine whether or not he would have a successful marriage with the woman he was dating. The young man proposed a plan to rent two separate rooms in someone's house where he and the woman he was dating would be able to stay. This would enable them to experience as close to a marriage

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relationship as possible; they would be together within a few minutes of waking up and they would stay together until right before they would go to sleep. However, the young man was concerned about the prohibition of *yichud*² and so he brought his plan to Rav Moshe to gain his approval. In two brief paragraphs, Rav Moshe easily dispenses with the halachic side of the question. He then goes on to write the following:

This is only in regards to the halachic side of the question. In practicality, it is not fitting to do this because a person should not try to be too discerning [in these matters]. If the woman is found to be favorable in her appearance and her family, and she is known to be someone who follows halacha, he should rely on this and marry her with the hope that she is the one who was destined to him from the Heavens. The man should not test her beforehand, and if he does, it will not work, because these tests are meaningless. As the verse says, "you shall be wholehearted with Hashem."

Igros Moshe Y"D 1:90

וזהו לענין מדת הדין אבל למעשה אין זה כדאי לעשות כי אין להתחכם הרבה והאשה שמוצאת חן במראה ובמשפחתה ושמועתה טובה שהיא שומרת דת יש לסמוך ולישא אותה בתקוה שהיא המזומנת לו מן השמים ואין צריך לבחון אותה מתחלה וגם שלא יועיל כי אין הבחנה זו כלום ותמים תהיה עם ה' כתיב
שׁוֹׁת אַגְרוֹת מִשֵּׁה יוֹרֵה דַעַה ה' א
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On the surface, one can question what Rav Moshe is trying to explain. After all, is this really true? Surely if a couple spends enough time with one another, learning each other's habits and moods, can't they better predict what their married life will resemble? What then is Rav Moshe implying with his response?

On a basic level, we could say that Rav Moshe is referring to the practical differences between being a married couple and a dating couple. We cannot compare being together 24/7 to even being together 17/7. However, I believe Rav Moshe was referring to something even more profound and insightful.

Can one Predict the Future? The Ever-Changing Present

During the dating stage, a man and woman have a certain focus and goal: they are trying to determine their attraction for one another, both physically and emotionally. This attraction can be based on numerous factors, differing for each individual. Some women may be attracted to an outgoing and confident man, while others feel more drawn to someone who is more on the sweet and reserved side. Some men prefer a woman who is involved in the world around her, constantly helping others and working with numerous *chesed* organizations. Conversely, some men prefer a woman who can give an informative lecture or inspirational *shiur* while others prefer those who simply keep to themselves and focus on their own personal growth.

While these factors may be crucial in allowing the attraction to develop between the couple, they would be wise to keep in mind the possibility that there are still many unknowns and that things may change and evolve after marriage. These changes may take place for a number of reasons.

² The prohibition against seclusion of a male and female. The details can be found in *Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer* no. 22.

Firstly, no matter how much time the man and woman spent getting to know one another, they simply cannot possibly know everything about the other person. Further, it is impossible to predict how each spouse will act or react given certain scenarios that will naturally arise in the future. How will they each respond emotionally to certain events that come their way? How will they handle stressful situations? As an example, dating couples often discuss how they will act as parents in certain situations: Will they be more strict or more forgiving? Will they be more actively involved or more removed, allowing the child to gain independence? Yet, no matter how much they pontificate these matters in advance, one can never be sure how they will act or respond until they are in that given situation.

Revealing Layers of Understanding...

The various experiences of early marriage, family life and life itself allow couples to continue to learn more about themselves and their respective spouse. Marital therapists refer to this as layering. A couple is constantly revealing deeper layers of the other's emotions and psyche. The more life stages the couple goes through, and the stronger the couple works to bond with one another, the more layers that will be revealed.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler eloquently made the same observation. In his various essays about relationships and self-awareness, Rav Dessler relates that a wise person may believe that he or she knows the prospective spouse "fully" before marriage; however, this is incorrect. The depths of true knowledge come after marriage through multiple experiences of giving and sharing (*Michtav MeEliyahu* Vol. I, page 73).

A second important shift that takes place between dating and marriage is that our own needs may shift. Therefore, what may have been attractive for someone while he or she was dating, not only may become irrelevant for that person within the marriage, but may even become an obstacle. For example, a woman may be very drawn to the active and athletic lifestyle of the man she dated. However, after the wedding, when he continues to go out one or two nights a week to play ball or exercise, she realizes that she would rather be able to spend more time with him and perhaps it would be better if he wasn't as athletic. Similarly, a man may have been attracted to a woman because of her outgoing and friendly personality while they were dating. However, once they settle into their marriage, and he begins to feel the expectation on his shoulders to be just as outgoing and social as she is, her social nature can become a burden for him. Examples such as these can permeate every relationship.

In a series of *vaadim* (discussions) on *shalom bayit* (peace in the home), Rav Shlomo Volbe, zt"l, *Ma'amarei Hadracha LeChatanim* (p.24), explains that it is impossible to avoid differences between a husband and wife. After all, they each come into the marriage with 20-plus years of different influences and various environments. That is in addition to the simple fact that just as we all have different physical appearances, so too we all have a unique emotional and psychological makeup.

For this reason, Rav Moshe felt the strategy presented by this young man would not be beneficial. There is only so much we can plan and figure out before marriage. We, of course, must make sure there is a physical and an emotional attraction. But after that, we have to accept

the reality that marriage (and life itself) is a journey that brings some uncharted territory. It is specifically within that unknown space that we truly have the ability to forge an intense bond with our life partner. As Rav Volbe says, having differences is not a sign of a weak marriage, but rather a sign that the couple is bonding together in a deeper and more powerful way.

True Growth...

True growth can only happen if we are open to these experiences and potential differences. If we approach marriage with expectations that everything will proceed exactly as “planned,” when these differences arise and layers become revealed, they may serve as challenges and obstacles. However, if we enter marriage with an open mind and a willingness to accept with love whatever it is that may come, then we have given ourselves the ability to turn challenges into opportunities and obstacles into stepping stones. As the *sifrei machshava* (see, for example, *Tzidkat HaTzadik* no. 49) explain, our shortcomings are not our weaknesses. Rather, it is specifically where we struggle that Hashem grants us the potential to accomplish greatness.

Drs. John and Julie Gottman, world-renowned marital therapists, offer a practical tool for all married couples to facilitate this acceptance: building love maps.³ These therapists highly encourage couples to check in with each other periodically throughout marriage, and answer a list of questions regarding everything from past experiences to current likes and dislikes. Using the underlying premise that people evolve and differences are constantly arising, it is imperative that a couple attempts to keep track of these differences so that they do not turn into roadblocks, but rather are used as methods of nourishing a deeper and stronger bond.

May Hashem give all of us the insight and perspective to approach *shana rishona* and our marriages with the open-mindedness and acceptance that allows natural transitions, differences and even challenges to become the strengths of our marriages.

³ John and Julie Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic* ([W.W. Norton](#), 1999), p. 81.