The Secret of a Happy Marriage

Contributed by Rabbi Shalom Arush
Tuesday, 19 June 2012
Last Updated Tuesday, 19 June 2012

By Rabbi Shalom Arush. [Abridged from his book, "B'Gan HaShalom," Chapter Seven]

Love Or Lust

It is important to understand that after the sin in the Garden of Eden, HaKodesh Baruch Hu [The Holy One, Blessed Be He] punished the woman by putting her under her husband's charge, as it is written, "Your desire shall be toward thy husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis, 3:16).

The meaning of this punishment is, first and foremost, that all of a woman's vitality and joy are dependent upon her husband. Even her efforts to get close to Hashem are dependent upon him. The more that the husband is G-d fearing, the wife will be more G-d fearing too. This is the meaning of his ruling over her, that everything in her life is dependent upon him. Therefore it follows that a husband is obligated to give his wife a great deal of love and attention, in order that she be happy and content.

Warning - there is one principle thing that derails the love and attention that a husband should express to his wife, and this is sexual lust, which evolves from the impurity of the snake that enveloped Adam and Eve after their sin. This is because as long as a husband has sexual lust toward his wife, there can be, in no shape or form, true love towards her. The love that a lustful husband thinks he feels for his wife is total self-love. He misinterprets his lust for love. The proof that his feelings aren't really love is that the minute he satisfies his lustful pleasure during the marital act, his desire for her subsides, and all of the great excitement and love which he just felt toward his wife disappears as if it never existed. He now even feels repulsion toward her. Certainly, he no longer has patience to speak with her and to continue to display expressions of love - in most cases, he just falls off to sleep. All of the attention he gave her was simply to satisfy his lust. Since this is his way of relating to her, like an object he needs for his pleasure, an object without feelings or soul, his wife suffers a living death and is transformed into an empty vessel.

In this situation, the husband wants to be with his wife, not in order to give, but in order to receive. It follows that he is not giving her vitality, and therefore he does not "rule over her," and she comes to disparage him. This is implied in the verse, "Your desire shall be toward your husband and he shall rule over you." When will he rule over her? When she longs for him - and not the opposite. However, if he is the one who lusts and longs for her, then she rules over him because of his lust, and this brings destruction to the house.

This household ruin occurs because the husband's lust causes an opposite reaction in the wife - instead of feeling a desire toward him, she feels repulsion. When the husband is fueled by lust and not by love, relations with him become like a punishment for the wife. Every time he wants to release his lust with her, she experiences great suffering, and recoils at his touch. For her, the night of her ritual immersion [ed.-which usually follows 12 days, from the beginning of her period, of abstention from any physical contact between husband and wife] becomes like a death sentence, as if she is facing a henchman's axe. In the husband's mind, he is coming to give her love, while she feels the darkness of hell. For her, he is like the angel of death or some horrible monster.

In contrast to this, when a man doesn't lust after his wife, she feels a strong desire for him, and when he shows her the slightest affection and warmth, she feels like she's in heaven.

Our Sages have taught us that all love which stems from lust will eventually turn into hatred. This is another reason why a man driven by lust will bring about the ruin of his home. When the day comes when the wife turns him away because she is repelled by being a vessel for his lust, he will hate her. He will be angry at her for not meeting his needs, and even blame her for leading him into sin.

And as long as he is driven by his lust, he will certainly cheat on her. For even if he doesn't have actual relations with another woman, he will certainly betray her by looking at other women and fantasizing about them. For the root of sexual transgression is in the eyes, and when a man is driven by lust, he already doesn't really love his wife, for his evil inclination is always drawn after prettier and more enticing women, because a man is more drawn to what is forbidden to him than to what is permitted.

A man who gazes at women can never love his wife! And the wife of such a man will always feel anger toward him. The great Rabbi and teacher, the Ben Eish Chai, told a story about a man who came to see him. When he asked the man how many wives he had, the man answered that he had only one. The Rabbi told him that he was lying, for he saw with his spiritual radar that he had many women hidden away in secret places. The Rabbi explained that he saw that the man was driven by evil fantasies and lusted after women, and had their images fastened in his mind and on his heart, the secret places where he kept them hidden from his wife.

A man like this is cheating on his wife. In addition, he is committing severe transgressions of the Torah which has commanded us not to entertain evil thoughts and not to gaze after women at all. And he is violating two of the Ten Commandments - not to commit adultery and not to covet your neighbor's wife.

Mitzvah Onah - The Obligation to Have Marital Relations With One's Wife

Warmth and the outward expression of endearment before marital relations is very important to a wife. While the marital union is the pinnacle of mutual closeness, like all climaxes, it must be preceded by the proper stages of development. Physical closeness which is not preceded by emotional closeness is something repulsive to a woman. A woman's longing is for the emotional and psychic closeness of her husband and for his loving attention to her. When this exists, she also desires physical closeness as well. But if her husband does not display sincere affection and a day to day concern for her needs, she is literally turned off by their physical union. For any physical union that is not accompanied by a meeting of the minds, degrades and pains her. Every husband must take this matter to heart for this is the foundation of a healthy and happy marital relationship with one's wife. All of a husband's success in leading a happy life and earning a living are dependent on his keeping distant from lustful behavior and everything associated with it.

A wife's attraction to her husband comes not from a physical desire, but from the longing to receive warmth and caring affection from him. If these are missing, then everything is missing for her. Along with this, if this warmth is missing then the husband can transgress the prohibition of compelling his wife to engage in the marital union against her will, for when she doesn't feel loved, it is like being raped. Therefore the essence of the mitzvah of onah, of pleasing his wife, is to speak with her in a caring and lengthy manner, revealing to her his true feelings about how clever she is, how understanding, how kindhearted, what a valuable prize he won by marrying her, and things of this nature. A husband should try to discover as many ways he can to please her and show his love and esteem for all that she does.

Compliments are very important to a wife. If this is missing, the husband has not performed his duty of mitzvah onah. Not only is the wife left feeling unsatisfied, but this lack of proper, loving attention causes her feelings of repulsion and anguish. In this instance, she certainly does not enjoy the physical union for it is as if forced upon her against her will. She justifiably feels that her husband has just satisfied his own lust without concern for her, and she is left feeling broken, cheated, and used as if she were merely an object for his lusts.

Therefore, as long as a man is controlled by his lusts, he will never have a happy marriage. For he is only concerned with satisfying his own lusts, and not in pleasing her, and thus he fails to do the mitzvah of oneh which is to satisfy her needs for emotional fulfillment and spiritual elevation. A woman needs to feel her husband's love, and when this is missing, she would rather do without his touching her completely, for she does not have the same physical drives as the husband. {styleboxop width=200px,float=right,color=skyblue,textcolor=black,echo=yes} She longs to be united with him emotionally and spiritually, and then the physical union also has meaning and becomes an exquisite channel of love.{/styleboxop}

When a man engages in the marital union driven by lust, he is not performing that mitzvah of oneh at all. He is only satisfying himself, since he is merely getting rid of his built up sexual tensions which he aroused by gazing at women and fantasizing about them. When this need in him is aroused, he decides that it is time to have relations with his wife, not to satisfy her needs, but to satisfy his. He desires to do the mitzvah, not for its true intent of making his wife happy, but merely for his own pleasure in satisfying his lust.

A wife has no interest or desire for this type of bestial behavior, and she would much rather rest from the tiring labors of the day.

In summary, a woman is not a creature of physical lust. And if there exists a woman, one in a million, who is driven by lust, it is clear that she is the reincarnation of some man, or that she was led into sexual sin which sparked the hellish fire of lust in her, for in normal cases, a woman is not born with the passion of physical sexual lust.

Flee From This Hell

For many years, I have counseled married couples with all sorts of troubles and sufferings, and I have seen how the personal anguish of the husband and wife, and the lack of love and peace in the marriage stems from the fact that the husband has fallen into the hell of sexual lust.

Many husbands get in touch with me in the straits of mental anguish, confusion, anxiety, depression, even to the point of wanting to commit suicide. From their stories, I know that they have fallen into the hell of lusting after their wives. Their sexual fantasies torment them day and night, literally driving them out of their minds. Many complain that their wives refuse to have relations with them. They expect that I will agree with them and reprimand their spouses for not fulfilling their obligations as a wife. They are surprised when I not only reject their complaints, but warn them that if they do not flee from the hell of their lustful behavior, they will suffer the rest of their lives. For either his lust will cause his wife to be repulsed by him, or he will go crazy.

As long as a husband is consumed with lust, there can be no peace in the home. This is true for many reasons, including the fact that a man who is driven by lust cannot have the refined traits needed to get along with others, like honesty, faithfulness, humility, serenity, patience, and joy. Rather, because he has blemished the Brit [covenant] of sexual purity by being consumed with sexual passion, as long as he doesn't rectify it, he will be possessed by evil traits like anger, depression, dishonesty, and the like, which directly lead to discord in the home and the ruin of the marriage.

Accordingly, when a husband escapes from this lust, he we also merit to rectify his bad character traits and acquire the good attributes that will bring him, with G-d's help, to a happy and peaceful marriage.

Don't Give Up Hope!

It may seem from what we have written that because lust is such a powerful drive, and the happiness of a marriage is based on doing away with it, that a man is doomed to suffer until he escapes from it completely. This could take years. Is a man therefore doomed to lifelong battles and suffering in his home?

Here, it is important to understand that the Creator does not demand more from a person than his station allows. The main thing is that a husband recognize his problem and the lowliness of his lust, and begin to work on purging it from his heart. Let him no longer deceive himself into thinking that since his wife is permitted to him, he has permission to give free reign to his lusts. Rather he must acknowledge that every time he gives in to a whim of his lust, he immediately blemishes the wellbeing of his marriage.

Every day, he must beseech G-d to help him guard his eyes from straying after women, both outside and in his own house. For when he gazes lustfully at a woman, he transgresses several prohibitions of the Torah. Even in his home, he shouldn't gaze lustfully at his wife. It is G-d's will that he pray for assistance in this every day. Let him beseech G-d to take away the lust in his heart, so that he should have no pull or attraction to this low and vain pleasure.

This work rests with the husband alone. It is between him and HaKodesh Baruch Hu, and not with his wife, lest she misunderstand him and think that his desire for a higher standard of holiness stems from a lack of love toward her, G-d forbid. Therefore, his work must be to pray to G-d and beg Him to free him of his lust.

When he recognizes the error of his ways and begins to redress them through heartfelt prayer, then G-d will cancel the harsh judgments weighing against him, even though he not be as holy as Moses, our teacher. It is enough that he is doing his best to overcome his lust for G-d to cancel the sufferings that have become his lot in marriage. Little by little, he can rise up the ladder of holiness. Goodness will suffuse his life because guarding of the Brit of sexual holiness is the source of all blessing. Guarding the holy Brit is the gateway to Heaven and the pathway to Divine loving kindness.

For this reason our Sages called guarding the Brit (shmirat habrit) guarding the "Yesod" or foundation. Likewise, when a man damages the Brit, he damages the very foundation upon which the world rests. Safeguarding the Brit is the foundation of everything. It is the gateway to all true success and to all of the spiritual elevations that a man longs to attain, with the help and grace of G-d.