

What Makes A Marriage Tick?

By: Shimon Posner

Newlyweds think the question doesn't apply to them and never will: they are the first to discover marriage and the final authorities on it too. After the honeymoon wears off the question looms large: and after the honeymoon is over anything can happen.

Marriages tick like clocks, and whether it is a wind-up or battery there will be moments that they stop telling time and need some attention to get going again. When they stop telling time you may think they are broken: some people panic at this point and curse the day they bought this stupid, broken watch that breaks so easily. You have to have more faith in the manufacturer before you can be bothered with the watch.

Successful marriages have two qualities in common even though the marriages themselves are as diverse as the couples in them: acceptance and faith. The honeymoon ends when the spouse in question (always the other spouse) does something thoroughly inexplicable and totally at odds with the logic of the judging spouse. Something that (try as they sincerely might) they cannot put themselves in that somebody else's shoes and come up with any justification for what they did. At this point they simply say, "I don't understand what s/he did, but who says I have to understand everything to live with it?" Couples who can't or won't reach that point throw the watch out with the battery.

Faith and acceptance. No matter what life brings, it will challenge, and a challenge by definition has no ready response. Trust in the manufacturer of life allows you to weather the storm and the drought -- even when they follow each other in maddening succession.

Acceptance means that it's a good thing to put yourself in each other's shoes, but not the only thing. Sometimes people don't want anyone else trying on their shoes.

Good marriages often lead to good lives. Acceptance can work well in any field of life, business partnerships, extended families, espionage. It is the quintessential Torah experience: Sinai. It was there that the Jews agreed to a relationship regardless of how much they agreed with G-d. "How could G-d..." does not have to be a prelude to ending a relationship: it can be a deepening of a relationship. "You may not be a perfect G-d, but you're still mine. So now if I'm not so perfect, I'm still yours." A mitzvah doesn't need my stamp of approval; it just needs me.

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Beha'alotcha

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But a marriage is doomed for the start if the very relationship itself is not hallowed, sanctified, holy. For why bother working through a tension if there will just be another one to follow and another one after that. The institution has to be not just a nice idea, not just an ideal, but a sacred, virtually inviolable, part of our lives. Otherwise it is a meaningless, wasted struggle for nothing. This - it's too in the guts to be called a 'core belief' -- is something that Abraham willed us.

So maybe faith and acceptance is essentially one thing: faithfulness. And maybe that is why after so many years, and so many disappointments, and things we simply can't understand, we still love this marriage and love this G-d of ours and His Torah. Maybe we don't say I love you often enough, maybe we don't say I'm sorry, maybe we forget a thank you, but we never forget each other. And for as long as there are a heaven and earth, as long as time itself is still being marked, we'll be ticking away.

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