

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 10 - Why won't you just change!

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At the age of 42, Nora bore her first child and it was devastating. A deeply religious individual,



Nora had been counting on her miracle baby growing up to be a Rhode's scholar (please don't ask me what that means, as I have no idea). That dream was shattered into a million pieces, though, the instant she laid eyes on her one and only biological progeny.

He was a Down syndrome baby. A harsh appellation to say the least, as though to imply that the sum total of this tiny, innocent, helpless human being is his medical condition. But, tragically, that is how Nora and her husband viewed this child. Especially seeing that they already had two

adopted children who were both perfectly healthy and well adjusted.

This story is related by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski in his book, *Life's Too Short*. And the end of the story is as follows.

Every night, Nora and her husband would kneel down by their baby's crib and utter the following prayer. "G-d, you have done so many miracles for us over the course of our lives. We ask you for but one last miracle. Please change him."

Now, the reason why Rabbi Dr. Twerski knew of this story – with all its intimate details – is that Nora attended an Alcoholics Anonymous group that he guided. And at one point, Nora had this to share.

"After many nights of prayer, the miracle occurred. G-d answered our prayers, and he has changed *us*. If that little child did not come into the world for any other purpose than what I am about to tell you, it was all worth it. When I sit in the rocking chair and cuddle him in my arms, and I look at his pudgy little hands that have only the one crease, and at his funny-looking eyes, and I realize how much I love this child with all his defects, then I know for certain that G-d can love me even with all my defects."

This message follows the main theme of the book that so many of life's intractable problems sit on a root of a distorted self-image, a feeling of being impossibly unworthy and unlovable.

But I'd like to take another angle.

One time, on an excursion with my children on one of the many beautiful mountain paths that surround Bet Shemesh, I decided that for the fun of it I would turn over large rocks. Hatzala people always warn about that. "Don't ever turn over things like large rocks and pieces of wood with your hands as there could be a snake or scorpion who calls that thing home!"

Ever since I heard that warning many years ago, I've tried to follow it assiduously. In all honesty, though, I found it to be a chore as never did I discover a snake or a scorpion under the rock or wood.

Until that day.

I was turning over large rock after large rock – with my shoe-covered foot of course – not expecting a thing. And then, suddenly, there it was. In all it's terrifying, hideous glory.

A large black scorpion with intimidating claws that can make you forget that the real danger hovers little and high in the rear! I had never seen a scorpion – sans cage – so up close and personal and I felt like time froze. The whole experience took not more than about two seconds, but the vividness and detail with which I can remember it, despite the passage of roughly ten years, is as though it took two hours.

So, what happened? Nothing really. The scorpion just went into reverse and slid-crawled right back under his cozy warm rock. And that was that.

But it got me thinking.

For crying out loud! There are you are, stuck in a dark dank dungeon with practically no light or air, and here someone comes and brings you into the great, bright, open world and you just go ahead and shove yourself right back into your prison of darkness and gloom?!!

What a strange creature!

At least, that's what I thought until it hit me: I am not all that different from that scorpion. Allow me to explain.

Around the same time, I was puttering around with something or other on a Friday afternoon and it brought me to a spot in which I usually would never be found at such a time on erev Shabbos: the pedestrian street (Nachal Revivim) which is in front of the apartment building that we live in.

Because I was there, I got to witness an occurrence that would happen often in those days, but of which I had previously been completely unaware. An adorable young boy who had Down

syndrome was making his way up the street with a few of my upstairs neighbor's children. My neighbor was also standing in front of the building, and the boy called out to him, "Tatty!"

My neighbor is not that boy's father, and the following conversation between me and my neighbor ensued.

"Why is he calling you tatty?"

"He comes to us for Shabbos pretty often, so I guess he feels like I am another tatty for him."

"What?! You host this child for Shabbos? Often?!"

"Yeah, sure. My daughter volunteers for Ezrat Achim and they arrange these types of things so that parents of special needs children can have a break from time to time."

My neighbor delivered those lines in classic, Yerushalmi understatement style; as though there was absolutely nothing remarkable whatsoever about the fact that he would host a boy with Down syndrome – often! – despite the fact that his small apartment was already bursting at the seams with his own many children.

I was stunned. Absolutely dumbfounded.

The thought that went through my head was, "Wow! That is just amazing! I could never do that." And that was the end of that.

Until later I realized, "My goodness, I am doing exactly what that scorpion did!"

I had been exposed to a huge, bright, airy, ever-expansive world of chess, and all I did was crawl back under my dark, dank rock. "I could never do that".

Of course, who wants to be like a hideous scorpion, so I came up with the following formula: "Wow! That is amazing! I don't think I am holding there at this point in my life, but who knows, maybe one day *b'siyata d'Shmaya* I could also do something like that..."

We all know that we are in this world to change and grow, but having our comfortable rock rolled away can be scary. When we're exposed to the possibility of something so bright and airy and expansive, we might tend to get overwhelmed to the point that we feel that our very survival is under threat.

The urge to just crawl back under the rock can be intense.

In marriage, there can be a lot of times when you think, "If only my spouse would change..." This phenomenon is true of any relationship, but with marriage it seems to take on much greater dimensions and intensity. If you don't care for some of your chavrusa's or coworker's or neighbor's quirks or idiosyncrasies, you can often get away with playing the avoiding game.

But with a spouse, that can be a recipe for disaster.

What we sometimes may miss, though, is that the call to change is meant to be inward focused. A super-organized yekkisheh woman, for example, may find herself endlessly exasperated by her ADHD husband's sloppiness and disorganization. She may find herself hoping, praying, and yearning with every fiber of her being that her husband change!

But, really, it may just be that the reason why Hashem has given her this *nisayon* is not so that she will reach out to Him in heartfelt prayer that her husband should change, but that *she* should change. That she should grow and develop the great middah of *savlanus*.

Before she got married, she may have been figuratively living under a large rock of everything simply *must* be a certain way. A dark, constricting world of impatience and intolerance for anything less than just so. By ordaining that her *zivug* will be a person who hopelessly throws monkey wrench after monkey wrench into her carefully aligned gears, Hashem has rolled the rock off of her. Exposed her to the potential of a brighter world. An airier world. A much more expansive world wherein acceptance, patience, and forbearance can reign supreme.

This is just one example, but we all know what our dark, constricting rocks are; and we may also recognize how strong the urge can be to crawl right back under that rock and insist, "**You** are the one who has to change!"

Now, I'd like to put in a few words of balance here.

Number one, there are times when "**you** are the one who has to change" is 100% correct and must indeed be insisted upon. Abuse is an example of that. Whether it is the husband or wife who is the one suffering from the abuse (see this [article](#) that I co-authored for Mishpacha magazine that reveals the great scope of men who suffer from domestic abuse), it should not be tolerated.

The one who is perpetrating the abuse is absolutely the one who must change. The abuse must come to a full stop. Or else.

That doesn't mean that the victim cannot use the situation to experience personal positive change and growth. He or she most certainly can. But the abuse should not be tolerated. At all.

Number two, even when it comes to the mundane, relatively trivial annoyances of life, marriage is a binding contract and it requires both parties thereto to be considerate and mindful of their marital obligations. There is nothing wrong with hashing out grievances. In fact, it is probably more often than not the only real way to deal with them.

Sure, we all love stories of great tzaddikim who ate food for decades that did not agree with their palate. What *tzidkus*! But that's exactly the point, that can work for great tzaddikim who have worked on themselves to reach a very high level of eradicating self-centeredness and cultivating tremendous care for others. But for us normal folk, staying silent is more likely than not to cause simmering resentment.

Not good for a marriage. Not good at all.

So, sure, when things bother you, go ahead and hash it out. Do it with respect and love of course. Say it in the manner that **you** would want to be spoken to. But by all means do go ahead and discuss the things that bother you.

At the same time, though, it would do us all a great deal of good if we concomitantly recognize that when a spouse is simply unable (or perhaps even unwilling) to change and we feel stuck with a terrible yearning of, "If only he/she would just change!!!", perhaps that might mean that it's time to turn that thought on its ear and ask ourselves, "Maybe **I** am the one that needs to change..."