

## Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 12 - When to put your foot down

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Married for 37 years, Brachi\* could not help but wonder if she'll ever have the relationship she



yearns for. Zev is a good man who provides for the family and fulfills his obligations as an ehrlich Yid. But right from the beginning of their marriage, Brachi felt like something was not right.

She couldn't put her finger on it, but the feeling of loneliness was ever present. No, Zev was never harsh, short, or abrasive in any way. If anything, the exact opposite was true. He was very soft and gentle. Too soft and gentle. Even meek. Somehow, the relationship just wasn't right. In fact, there really wasn't much of any real relationship at all.

But that would take Brachi a long, long time to fully realize.

In the first few years, her working assumption was that there must be something wrong with the way she was interacting with Zev. Brachi earnestly kept in mind everything she had been taught as a kallah and tried her best to implement everything to the t. And she didn't stop there. She bought practically a whole library of shalom bayis books and assiduously pored over them all. She attended classes and courses. Spoke to Rabbanim, rebbetzins, and mentors. Went for brachos... There was nothing Brachi wouldn't do to try to make things work.

But nothing was working.

Eventually, slowly, Brachi started to realize that it wasn't only with her that Zev seemed to have relationship issues. While they were still in their "kollel family" years, Zev's yeshiva once made a big event. It was a mesibas siyum of a major masechta that the yeshiva had spent three years on, and Zev's rosh yeshiva felt very strongly that wives absolutely have to be part of such a celebration. After all, as we learn from Rabi Akiva, "What's mine and yours is hers".

Watching the large screen in the women's section, Brachi noticed that Zev was sitting off to the side by himself. In between speeches, she could see all of the avreichim and bachurim engaging in lively talk with one another. Conspicuously non-participant, though, was Zev. And it wasn't as

if he was absorbed in a sefer. He was just sitting and staring. As if his soul was totally disconnected from the social surroundings by which his body was surrounded.

Seeing that, a light started to turn on in Brachi's mind. As incredibly difficult as it was because of her four children ranging in age from six months to six years, Brachi was determined to go to Shul the following Shabbos; at least for mussaf. Sure enough, when she peeked through the mechitza to see what Zev was doing after davening was over, she noticed that he was kind of aimlessly ambling towards the exit. No saying good Shabbos to anyone. No schmoozing for a few moments with the rav.

Nothing.

The contrast was painful. Everyone in shul had something to do. One group of men was engaging in an after-davening learning chaburah. A few pairs were sitting and learning b'chavrusa. Some were standing next to the bookshelves looking something up, probably on the parsha, Brachi figured. Others were learning with their sons. And most of them were just stam schmoozing a bit before they headed home. Zev practically stuck out like a sore thumb.

As if someone had plunked a misfit in the middle of a beautiful social scene.

It's not as though Brachi immediately figured it all out. Concepts like *ishah kesheirah osah retzon baalah* and *chochmas nashim bansah beisah* had been drilled so deeply into her psyche that coming to the full realization that the problem in her marriage was not something that she'd be able to solve took a long time.

A really long time.

One of the other examples of Zev's problems with social interactions, or lack thereof, was the way that he interacted with the children. Really, it was the way that he didn't interact with the children. Just like with her, everything was so stilted.

Brachi had once heard a chashuveh rav say that women shouldn't get worried if they feel that their husbands don't talk enough because "many men have constipation of the mouth". For the longest time, Brachi attributed Zev's ubiquitous silence to that, but as the years turned into decades, it became more and more obvious that whatever Zev was struggling with was not your run-of-the-mill male constipation of the mouth.

It was only after their twentieth anniversary that Brachi began broaching the idea of counseling. Deep down, she felt that, really, Zev needs to get therapy on his own; but she was willing to make it a "we" issue instead of a "you" issue. When Brachi started talking about the idea of getting help, though, she began experiencing something that had never happened before. No, there was no physical violence, and not even any harsh words. But a certain harshness was definitely there. It may have been nonverbal, but it was definitely there.

As the years continued passing, Brachi realized that Zev must feel threatened by the prospect of having some outsider "pry into his personal space". But Brachi was desperate. She had been

suffering, she now realized with full clarity, from a non-relationship relationship for so many years; and she could no longer go on this way. Her marriage and family life was almost entirely mechanical.

Like a body without a soul.

Brachi was in agony.

Seventeen years passed from their twentieth anniversary. From time to time, Brachi succeeded in getting Zev to consult with a shalom bayis expert, try out a therapist, read a book, listen to a shiur... But there were never any substantial changes. A bit of “window dressing” here and there perhaps, but it was so painfully fake and anyway short lived. Whatever the real issue was, it was clearly not being addressed.

Last week, Brachi contacted me to request a consultation. We discussed her situation at length, examining numerous angles, the majority of which I haven't mentioned at all. However, particularly because of the message that I conveyed in last week's newsletter, I felt it to be very important to share one of the main thoughts that I shared with Brachi (with her permission of course).

“I think you've been too much of a pushover. Too nice. Yes, for seventeen years you've been trying to get Zev to realize that the two of you need help – that he needs help – but you've been way too soft and gentle in how you've gone about it. When Zev conveys, whether verbally or otherwise, that he doesn't want to see a certain therapist or wants to discontinue counseling sessions, you buckle and let him have his way.

“But you're suffering terribly because of this. And the truth is that Zev is too. You desperately need a real relationship – and who doesn't?! – and you don't have it. For 37 years, at no fault of your own, you've basically been sacrificing your own happiness and emotional well-being for the sake of not taking a chance at hurting Zev. You're forever worried that if you push the issue too hard, he will be hurt.

“This approach, though, is getting you nowhere fast. Sometimes, there is no choice but to put your foot down. Hard. I don't mean that you should start yelling, or speaking in a hurtful manner, or issue threats. Of course, you should be as gentle and respectful as you can.

“But you've got to be firm. Completely firm.

“Now, maybe you'll decide that you'd rather sacrifice your own happiness and fulfillment for the sake of not taking a chance at causing Zev pain. Personally, I would question the wisdom of such a decision, but it's obviously your decision to make. However, if you are going to do that, then it should be a decision. A conscious choice that you make and not just a behavioral pattern that you happened to fall into unawares.

“And if you decide that you are not willing to be a martyr, then you need to put your foot down. No more taking no for an answer. There's a time and place for everything, and assertiveness and

insistence also has its time and place. Might it cause Zev pain if you absolutely insist that he finally, finally deal with his issues? Of course it will.

“It may even crush him at first. Some people have issues that are so deeply ingrained and enmeshed that the process of therapy can be absolutely agonizing. But it’s important to realize that, ultimately, putting your foot down and no longer taking no for an answer is, in the long run, going to help Zev as much as it helps you. In fact, it may help Zev even more than it helps you.”

\*All names and other identifying details have been changed.