

## Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 13

### Talk. Whatever happens, talk!

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman



Someone once asked Rav Aharon Kotler for the phone number of a certain individual. Rav Aharon did not remember the number at first, but he thought for a few moments – searching his memory – and, in the end, he succeeded in recalling that bit of information.

The impressive obscure memory recall prompted a small smile of satisfaction to spread across the famed rosh yeshiva's face.

Rebbetzin Chana Perl Kotler – who we should remember was the daughter of none other than the great Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer – was present when this interchange took place. “*A shud af a gutteh kup,*” she said disapprovingly. In English that translates to, what a shame that such trivial information is taking up space in your brilliant mind.

Rebbetzin Kotler clearly did not like the idea of such a great Torah scholar experiencing a feeling of satisfaction in having anything other than Torah wisdom stored in one's long-term memory or that anything other than Torah wisdom should be important enough for storage in the long-term memory to happen in the first place!

And Rav Aharon just as clearly must have agreed that she was absolutely correct; for when those words came out of his wife's mouth, Rav Aharon's expression instantly turned from satisfaction to mortification.

According to the version of this story that I heard many years ago, the person who witnessed this whole scene was also privy to what followed.

Rav Aharon and Rebbetzin Chana Perl retreated to a different room wherein the latter expressed deep remorse over the embarrassment that she had inflicted. It seems that they thought that they had closed the door but had unwittingly left it a bit open, or perhaps whoever it was that witnessed this story just could not contain his curiosity and peeked through the keyhole.

Whatever the case may be, this is the narrative that's been transmitted. That this visitor-observer saw the Rebbetzin profusely expressing her regret over what she had said.

When I first heard this story, I was struck by the greatness of both of these towering personalities. I was struck by the greatness of Rebbetzin Chana Perl that her love and great sense of value for Torah knowledge and wisdom was so great that she considered it unbecoming for a person possessed of a brilliant mind to feel a sense of satisfaction from any other mental feat. I was further struck by her greatness that, despite the fact that her husband clearly agreed with her position, she quickly expressed very deep remorse for saying something that caused him emotional pain. And, of course, I was struck by the greatness of Rav Aharon that he immediately accepted the truth of his wife's words, despite the embarrassment that doing so entailed for him, and did not try to defend himself against the verbal barb.

Upon further reflection, though, I have come to the conclusion that there is another point of greatness – quite possibly the most important one of all – that is evident in this story. And that point of greatness is excellent, open communication.

How often does it happen that something stinging or hurtful happens between spouses only for the pain to be relegated to the realm of suppressed resentments. How often does it happen that friction and tensions, over whatever the issues in the moment may be, are not addressed but instead just pushed down into the unseen simmering pot of ill will.

The great Kotler couple did not allow this to happen. The point of tension, friction, and pain was dealt with forthwith and not allowed to mar or scar their beautiful relationship.

The need for open communication is crucial in every realm of married life, and research indicates that it may be particularly urgent when children enter the picture. Seeing that in our society by and large children enter the scene very quickly and remain a permanent fixture for many years, it stands to reason that respectful, open communication should be accepted as one of the very top priorities in married life.

It may feel easier in the short-term to just go with the flow and assume that roles and responsibilities will naturally fall into place, but therapists and researchers point out that doing so can be a recipe for disaster.

The desire to maintain a certain degree of independence and not wanting one's individual identity to be negated by the joint identity is perfectly understandable. In fact, there are experts who assert that each spouse maintaining a healthy degree of independence and individual identity can be very helpful towards maintaining long-term mutual attraction. To

make that work, though, the terms and conditions of how that is going to practically play out need to be considered with candor, planned in partnership, and calibrated collaboratively.

Think of it this way. Suppressive silence is the petri dish in which anger and resentment grow and metastasize; whereas respectful, open communication – the disinfecting sunlight that banishes the germs of dissonant distance – cultivates cooperation, collaboration, and loving cohesion.

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