

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 14

Be attractive

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

At first glance, it sounds as though the Gemara is describing very



meritorious women. “She may have a husband who is as diminutive as an ant,” says the Gemara in its trademark pithy style, “but she places her seat amongst the noblewomen saying, ‘I have a husband just as you do!’ If her husband engages in lowly labor such as wool

production that generates a terrible odor, she nevertheless calls him to sit with her on the patio where all can see them together. He may be from a family that has a poor name in more ways than one, but all she asks is to be called his wife. She accepts the poverty and does not even demand from him lentils to put into the soup.”

Sounds like extremely meritorious women, doesn’t it?

BRIEF PAUSE FOR A TRIGGER WARNING: This newsletter addresses delicate subjects in a forthright manner with clearcut language. Proceed at your own discretion.

But as often goes with learning Gemara, things are not always how they seem at first. In actuality, the Gemara is talking about women who are leading quite the sinister life.

“These women,” concludes the Gemara in Kesubos 75a, “engage in promiscuous infidelity and demonstrate honor and affection towards their husbands so that when they get pregnant, no one will suspect a thing.”

It's one of those Gemaras that can make your head spin, right?

But that's exactly how Gemara learning works, doesn't it? It can all be awfully confusing at first, and only by applying assiduous thought and analysis does one gain clarity and understanding.

Now, we all know the story of Rachel the wife of Rabi Akiva. At her own initiative, despite being raised in the lap of luxury and fabulous wealth, and in the face of the virulent opposition of her parents, she married a lowly, poor shepherd – considered one of the very lowest rungs of society in Talmudic times – and bore grinding poverty for decades. All because she saw the spark of greatness in him and knew what he could one day become if only the right person would step in and make that happen.

We also know the story of the wife of Rabi Chanina ben Dosa who likewise bore grinding poverty to the extent that she would sometimes burn wood or coal in her empty oven just so that her neighbors would not think that she never has what to bake.

And, of course, there are the women who are *inyana d'yoma* – the righteous women in Mitzrayim who maintained the flame of hope against all the odds and lavished their husbands with royal treatment despite the men's utter deflation, degradation, and defeated bodies and spirits.

Obviously, then, Chazal do not mean to imply that any woman who gets married to a man who is seemingly low on the socio-economic ladder is an adulteress traitor. What Chazal are saying is that there *are* women like that.

But why is that important for us to know?

Ok, there are adulterers in the world. Both men and women. As the Gemara says in Bava Basra 165a, “a minority of the population engages in illicit sexual activity”.

So what is this Gemara in Kesubos trying to tell us?

Well, for one, it is clearly teaching us a very, very important fundamental rule for life: looks can be deceiving! Know how to spot the narcissist. Learn to recognize the difference between genuine love and respect versus fake flattery which is simply self-serving.

But I think that there's another important angle to pick up from this Gemara. And that is, gentlemen, that maintaining your wife's attraction to you is a real thing.

Of course, I am addressing the men right now because that is the subject that emerges out of this particular Gemara, but it obviously goes both ways and there are plenty of other Gemaras to that effect. But since this particular Gemara in Kesubos is addressing the female-to-male angle, I am going to talk in those terms.

The particular mechanism by which women may become attracted to men can be very different in substantial aspects from the way men become attracted to women – as is implied by this Gemara and *l'havdil* indicated by current academic streams of thought – but that there exists a basic reality of a woman needing to feel attracted to her husband is as clear as can be.

The Gemara is describing situations in which the woman is clearly put off by her own husband and is just using him as a strawman for her sexual activity with other men that *are* arousing her interest in one way or another.

What this means, then, putting it rather bluntly, is that if a man does not manage to maintain his wife's attraction to him, it is not as though the fundamental female need for being attracted to a male will just go dormant or die. That need lives on as strong as could be. And if she's not attracted to her husband, then one *should* expect that she will start finding herself attracted to some *other* man.

Or multiple other men.

Now, before you start throwing your digital rotten tomatoes at me and x out this window in disgust, let me make it clear that I do *not* mean to imply in any way shape or form that most women who find themselves unattracted to their husbands will go ahead and start engaging in forbidden behaviors.

Chas v'shalom to even suggest such a thing.

Clearly, as we see from the Gemara in Kesubos as well as Bava Basra, there will be *some* women who will do that – no different from the fact that there will be some men that will do that – but that certainly is not the case regarding the overwhelming majority of women (that is, from Jewish women).

It's also important to point out that even men and women who are perfectly attracted to their spouse and have no lack on that score can fall prey to the wiles of the *yetzer hara*.

What we can derive from this Gemara in Kesubos is simply that when the attraction is lacking, that reality constitutes a risk factor for engaging in illicit behavior. Meaning, someone who is prone to engage in illicit behavior is more likely to do so if they are in a context of an unfulfilling marriage, but by no means should one assume that infidelity is exclusive to such contexts.

A fulfilling marriage can certainly be a protective buffer against the *yetzer hara*, but it is no guarantee.

All that, though, is really a sidebar. Because for the overwhelming majority of men, it would be preposterous to start wondering, “Would she ever cheat on me?”

Utterly preposterous.

“Okay then,” you may be wondering, “if that’s the case, why on earth are you bringing up such a sordid, distasteful topic?!”

Great question.

And the answer to that question is that successfully navigating marriage is not simply a question of will my spouse be forever faithful. In fact, it is precisely the over reliance on faithfulness borne of the marital commitment that so often eats away at the quality of a marriage.

Men! If you don't see to it to maintain your wife's attraction to you, and you just allow yourself to slip into auto-pilot mode – relying, perhaps to a great extent unconsciously, on the rock-solid faithfulness of commitment – sure, if your wife is an *isha kesheirah*, as the overwhelming majority of *Bnos Yisrael* indeed are, then you have no reason to worry about anything extramarital going on outside of the home; but it doesn't mean that you're going to have a high quality relationship *inside* the home!

If a woman begins to feel unattracted to her husband, it will necessarily negatively impact the quality of the relationship. It can significantly degrade your *shalom bayis*.

That, I believe, is perhaps *the* fundamental lesson that Chazal are trying to teach us in that Gemara in Kesubos by describing those evil women use their lowly husbands as a strawman smokescreen for their proclivity to promiscuity. The lesson is that female to male attraction is a real thing and it's super important.

We tend to think of attraction much more, or perhaps even exclusively, as a male to female phenomenon. We may neglect the fact that female to male attraction is no less necessary and important.

Once again, the particular vectors of attraction can be substantially different – so men shouldn't start spending inordinate amounts of time in front of the mirror fixing their hair, nails, and clothes just so – but to recognize that there is this thing called “my wife needs to be attracted to me” is crucial.

As we see from the Gemara, whereas male to female attraction may tend to revolve heavily around physical characteristics,

appearance presentation, and charm; female to male attraction can tend to be weighted much more to a man's status and stature.

What that means is that if your wife views you as a respectable man, she is more likely to feel attracted to you. It is not just that she will experience nonsexual feelings of respect and esteem towards you, but it will generate and maintain her sexual interest in you.

Her feelings of attraction to you.

Another quirk that many of us seem to have is a discomfort with the idea of just how important sexual interest and attraction can be in a marriage.

Some of us may tend to think of our sexuality as a kind of, "oh well, there is no choice but to attend to this" type of thing; and perceiving it as something that profoundly impacts the *entire* marital bond can make us feel crass and lowly. As though sexuality is somehow, on some level, a "dirty" thing.

The reality, though, as is clear from numerous Torah sources, is that both of those points are as far from the truth as could possibly be. Sexuality is *not* a "dirty" thing, but one of the most special, sacred, and powerful *kochos* with which HaKadosh Baruch Hu has endowed us. It is a *koach* through which, as Chazal tell us, we become partners with HaKadosh Baruch Hu in the creation of new life and intimately bound up to his divine Presence.

And this *koach* is a fundamental, inseparable aspect of the entire marital bond.

To more fully understand these points with empowering clarity and depth, I strongly recommend purchasing my *kuntreisim* on *shalom bayis* as well as my book entitled, "Help! My son is growing up. What Should I say?!" As the title indicates, the stated goal of the book is to inform parents as to how they can best educate their children; but a large part of it is dedicated to

elucidating some of the fundamental Torah concepts regarding sexuality.

After all, parents who have clarity and confidence on the topic will be that much better equipped to educate their children about it.

But for now, I would like to give a few concrete examples of some of the things that I believe men can and should do in order to maintain their wives' attraction to them.

Look good. No, as mentioned above, this does not mean that you should start fretting about your appearance the way women tend to do. There is no need, and it may even be *assur al pi halacha* to spend an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror doing your hair and putting together your dress ensemble just so.

But don't do things like allowing your hat to become a dusty *shmata*. Ditto for wearing a shirt that has stains on it or not getting rid of pants the back of which is shining like a new car. Do take a few moments to see to it that your hair (and *peyos* where applicable) is in order. Don't let your glasses, if you have them, become a veritable petri dish of smudge. And keep your shoes reasonably clean and polished.

You see, these things are less about "looking handsome" as they are about looking and ***being*** respectable. That's why respectable behaviors are also important. Work on your posture. Try to not to slouch. Eat like a mensch. Deal with your bodily needs in a discreet manner (e.g. don't burp out loud at the table). Definitely make a point to not walk around the house in your underwear.

You get the point.

And, once again, by no means am I trying to imply in this newsletter that it is the men who need to attract the women and not vice versa. If anything, the strong implication that arises from numerous Gemaras is that women maintaining their husbands' attraction may be even more fundamental to *shalom bayis*, but it certainly is not less fundamental.

The point of this newsletter is simply to bring attention to a largely overlooked fact that maintaining attraction is a two-way street, and a man needs to recognize that his wife needing to feel attracted to him is a real thing. It's a really important thing. And he should live his life in a way that will maintain (and maybe even increase) that attraction.

Coming back to the more practical side of things, as we see from the Gemara, in whatever your chosen occupation is, exert effort to excel. That doesn't mean trying to "beat out the competition", but excelling to utilize your own personal *kochos* to the fullest extent of which you are capable.

So, for example, if your primary or exclusive occupation is *limud ha'Torah*, don't just learn. Become **accomplished** in your learning.

Make sure that you learn the *sugyos* in a thorough, methodical manner that will lead you to a solid and clear grasp. Things should not be all gray and fuzzy. And if you need to switch up the way that you learn in order to achieve this, so be it.

Some people do much better with *sugyos* that are more focused on *lomdus*, whereas others do better on *sugyos* that are more focused on *cheshbon*. Some do better learning very slowly *b'iyun rav*, and others do better learning quick *bekius*.

Figure out what your personal *kochos* are and put them to work.

And no matter how you're learning, make it a point to do sufficient review so that you truly **acquire** your learning. That you remember, at the very least, a significant portion of what you've learned. Become an accomplished *talmid chacham*, an accomplished Torah scholar. Someone who is *yadav rav lo*.

As Chazal put it, really, we ought to be learning and reviewing to the point of *mechudadim b'ficha*. Even if that degree of expertise may feel like too high of a bar, we should at the very least – certainly for those whose primary or sole occupation is *limud*

ha'Torah – be aiming to achieve some level of accomplishment that approximates that goal.

Personally, I would strongly recommend being in a kollel that mandates accountability by administering regular tests. As one very *chashuveh* rosh kollel of one of the top *dayanus* kollelim in Yerushalayim put it, “tests keep you honest”. And that’s another thing. *B’etzem* Torah is *ein sof*. *Limud lishmah*. But it can be very hard for most people to be motivated to truly accomplish and achieve if they are not actively pursuing a tangible goal. Which is why it can be extremely helpful to be in a kollel that is specifically training for some type of *semicha*.

It’s not that now the only reason why you’re learning is that you want to get a *semicha*, but that the tangible goal towards which you are working keeps you highly motivated to learn well and to learn right. To not just learn, but to become a truly accomplished *talmid chacham*.

By no means, though, is this idea of striving for personal excellence limited to full-time *lomdei Torah*.

If your occupation is plumbing, then work hard to become the best plumber that you can be. Keep yourself up to date with the latest advances in the field. Make a point to at least once in a while visit massive stores that carry a vast array of plumbing paraphernalia. Ask questions. Watch demonstrations. Keep as large a stock in your car as you can. And once we mentioned the car, keep it in top condition. Keep yourself in top condition. Be the plumber that is every homeowner’s delight to encounter. Both in appearance presentation as well as pleasant demeanor and impeccable work ethic.

No matter what field you may be in, there are always ways to learn and improve. To excel. Once again, not for the purpose of beating out the competition, but for achieving what it is that you uniquely can achieve. These things don’t just happen by themselves. You cannot excel by just going

with the flow like a leaf being blown by the wind. You've got to specifically seek out, learn how, and actively work on becoming the best, most accomplished version of you that you can possibly be.

Of course, by now, it should be abundantly clear that all these things are important in and of themselves. *Kibalnu mei'raboseinu* that *nichbadus* is a very important *middah* and *daas l'navon nakel* how important it is for each person's individual sense of satisfaction in life to achieve and accomplish. To a great extent, it is these twin towers of *nichbadus* and personal achievement that separate the men from the boys.

And, in pertinent commentary to the context that we are addressing herein, women tend to be attracted to men, not boys.



If you enjoyed this newsletter, **please share it** with two other people who would likewise benefit from it. Thank you!



To receive the Shalom Bayis Newsletter **directly to your inbox**, click on the link below or email rbsa613@gmail.com.
<https://stats.sender.net/forms/egO2ke/view>



For questions or to **book a consultation**, email me at rbsa613@gmail.com