

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 18

Desire wanes, or does it?

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

“It is already a number of years that he does not engage me in intimacy; why does he daven like that?!” So wondered the wife of Rabi Chiya bar Ashi to herself when she once overheard the part of her husband’s davening wherein he would always beg Hashem to save him from the yetzer hara.



It was no idle musing. Rebbetzin Bar Ashi came to some clear, concrete conclusions and she decided to act on them.

One day, continues the Gemara in Maseches Kiddushin 81b, Rabi Chiya bar Ashi was learning in his garden. His Rebbetzin got herself all dressed and made up beyond the point of recognition. She then walked along the path adjacent to the garden, passing by her husband once, and then another time.

She caught his attention, and, true to her plan, he did not recognize her.

“Who are you?” he asked. She responded, “I am Charusa. I’ve just returned from a trip.” Charusa was the name of a well-known adult escort who lived and worked in the area.

Rabi Chiya then expressed that he would like to engage her services.

“You see that pomegranate on the thin branch at the top of the tree? Bring me that pomegranate and I will provide you with my services.”

Rabi Chiya jumped up, climbed the tree, plucked the pomegranate, and they found some location to consummate the deal.

Finished with their deed, “Charusa” went straight home and resumed her normal garb and look, but it took Rabi Chiya, who was racked by pangs of guilt, longer to do the same.

By the time he did finally come home, his wife was already busy with her normal chores and had the oven going. Rabi Chiya saw the oven full of flames and... climbed right in!

“What on earth are you doing?!” she cried.

He came clean and told her what happened.

“It was me!” she protested. But he paid her no heed. That is, until she told him so many details that she could not possibly have known unless it indeed had been her in disguise.

Although the Rebbetzin somehow managed to coax her husband out of subjecting himself to a fiery, premature death, he was inconsolable. “Even though it was you,” he told her, “I nevertheless had intent for sin.”

For the rest of his life, Rabi Chiya bar Ashi fasted in penitence until he finally died in a fire in accordance with his wishes. And thus concludes this tragic, eye-popping story.

Waning desire can be a real issue in a marriage. In fact, the Gemara tells us elsewhere that one of the key concepts of niddah-imposed separation is the upkeep of desire (Maseches Niddah 31b). There are plenty of baalei teshuva who vouch for the fully literal implication of that statement, for they have experienced first-hand the rejuvenating impact of *taharas ha'mishpacha* on their intimate life.

That built-in boost notwithstanding, the extremely comfortable familiarity of married life can tend to chip away at erotic desire which in turn tends to feed off of a sense of adventure and excitement. But what we see from this story, despite its tragic ending, is that waning desire does not have to be a no-way-out inescapable fate.

It may be that some individuals (perhaps most) will eventually reach an old-age no-libido point of no return, but based on current research it would seem that for most people there is no reason to expect that to happen before they hit their 70's or 80's, and even then, it's by no means an across-the-boards physiological "end of lease".

On the face of it, Rabi Chiya bar Ashi was suffering from low or zero libido. But his perceptive wife picked up on the fact that appearances can be deceiving. She realized that what was really missing was some "spice" to awaken the desire that was essentially there and cause it to become aimed at her. Instead of sinking into self-pitying (and self-defeating) thoughts like "my husband is bored of me!" or "my husband must not love me!", she decided to take action.

If serving the same soup for years causes the palate to become bored and desensitized, she figured, no problem, I'll just add some spice. She added so much spice that it tasted like a brand new, unrecognizable dish. A new adventure, if you will.

Now, clearly, the Gemara is indicating that a woman should not actually trick her husband into thinking that she is someone else – nor should a man try that with his wife – as that would effectively be inducing someone to sin (at least in the realm of thought).

But couples who find themselves struggling with waning desire don't necessarily need to add so much spice to the soup to the point that it appears like a completely new dish, as even adding just a bit of spice can often revitalize and breathe new life into the entire experience.

In general, life can often be a tug of war – or, perhaps better put, an ebb and flow – between familiar vs new, comfortable vs exciting. The new and exciting is just that, new and exciting! It's exhilarating, bringing a breath of fresh air to life. The new and exciting carries the power of vitality and rejuvenation.

That being said, imagine waking up every morning to a new bed, a new house, new clothes, new streets, new everything. Disconcerting would be putting it mildly. A person would go stark raving mad! Without a doubt, we need a base of familiar and comfortable to be able to function and feel secure in the world that we occupy. But if we forever stay securely in our cozy comfort zone and never venture to bring anything new and exciting into our lives – things that force us to stretch, grow, and broaden the horizons of our life experience – then life can become a boring drudgery of utter monotony.

Without a doubt, marriage and family life is one of those key institutions that provide us with security, familiarity, and stability. But as in life in general, there is meant to be an ebb and flow, a dance if you will, between the familiar and the new, the comfortable and the exciting.

With the power of imagination, creativity, and playfulness, plenty of spice can be sprinkled into a marriage. Erotic desire does not have to be relegated to wistful memories of the “good old days”. Although desire may inevitably wane at times, by dancing the waltz of familiar vs new and comfortable vs exciting, it can always be waxed back to a lustrous sheen.



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