

# Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 20

## Why does intimacy seem to lag?

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

Out of 81 frum women that were asked if they overall feel happy and satisfied with their marriage, a supermajority of 85% responded that they feel either “quite satisfied/happy” or “very satisfied/happy”. But that was insofar as the relationship in general is concerned. When it



comes to the intimacy part of the marriage, the results were different.

Not shockingly different, but definitely different enough to sit up and take notice.

As far as the intimacy part of marriage is concerned, 63% responded that they are “quite satisfied/happy” or “very satisfied/happy”. 63% is still an impressive majority, but it is nevertheless more than twenty percentage points less than what was responded regarding the general relationship. And that begs the question: why the lag?

In case you’re wondering if the results are similar for frum men who were asked the exact same question, the answer is that the results are strikingly similar; just that in the male population the contrast is even more pronounced.

83% of 140 men responded that they are either “quite satisfied/happy” or “very satisfied/happy” insofar as the general relationship is concerned, whereas 51% responded that way with regards to the intimacy part of marriage.

Now, before I proffer what I think may be a plausible explanation for this “intimacy satisfaction lag”, I need to make some disclosures about this data.

First of all, where am I getting these numbers from? When people request to purchase my *shalom bayis* guides, I ask them to fill out a survey (in appreciation of which I give a discount on the price of the guide). So that means that these responses might not be representative of the broader frum community.

For example, one could argue that my survey sample might be a “self-selecting” unique demographic of people who have challenges that may not exist to the same extent in the general frum population. Thus, perhaps this “intimacy satisfaction lag” may not exist in the general frum population.

Alternatively, one could possibly argue that my survey sample might be a “self-selecting” unique demographic of people deeply committed and devoted to making their marriage great, and that perhaps the “intimacy satisfaction lag” may be even more pronounced in the general frum population.

Another important point that I feel a need to highlight is that the sample size is not particularly large. 140 and 81 are definitely on the very small size as far as these types of surveys are concerned. So, once again, my survey sample may not be properly representative of the broader frum community. While I do think that my numbers are worth taking note of and discussing, it is important for me to be completely up front about the fact that the statements that I am about to make may not apply across the boards. So, with that admittedly long-winded (sorry!) disclaimer out of the way, here goes my conjecture.

We learn a lot about navigating relationships in general from just living in this world. We see them all around us. Our parents. Grandparents. Aunts and uncles. Teachers and school administrators. And the list goes on. Even if we are never directly told a thing about relationships in general, we absorb a wealth of information on the topic from simply being in this world and interacting with people on a daily basis.

That is obviously not the case insofar as intimacy is concerned.

As far as we know, there was only one individual in the entire history of the Jewish nation who got to be present when his role model was engaging in intimacy: Rav Kahana.

The *Gemara* in *Maseches Brachos* 62a tells us that Rav Kahana hid under the bed of Rav. Although he did not watch the goings-on, he

listened carefully and duly took note of how Rav went about engaging his wife in intimacy. He was so surprised by what he heard that he actually asked Rav a question on it right then and there! You see, to Rav Kahana, being under his rebbi's bed at that moment was no different than being in his rebbi's shiur.

Sure, to our minds it sounds scandalously outrageous – as beyond the pale as you could possibly get! – but to Rav Kahana, who was on a *madreigah* that we cannot even begin to fathom, it was simply a matter of learning the parameters of a mitzvah.

Of course, when Rav heard the voice of his *talmid* during those moments he said, “Kahana! You are in here?! Get out; it's not *derech erez!*” True to form, Rav Kahana's response was, “It's Torah; I need to learn.”

But other than Rav Kahana – as far as we know – there is no-one else in Jewish history who learned about intimacy by watching or listening to it in action.

Intimacy, by definition, is meant to be intimate. The private affair of the two people who are occupying their very private *kodesh ha'kadashim* where no other human being is allowed to be.

So there is a marked absence of organic learning that is experiential and implicit. And in that absence, there emerges a great need for learning that is by design. Deliberately engineered and conveyed with clear, direct language.

The fact that the numbers indicate a clear majority of people feeling quite/very satisfied and happy with the intimacy part of their marriage speaks to the great degree of success on the part of the systems that exist to provide this education. At the same time, the apparent “intimacy satisfaction lag” may suggest that there is room for improvement.

Anecdotally, based on email messages that I have received over the years from numerous people who have read my guides expressing a sentiment of “if only we knew this earlier”, this theory seems to be accurate (again, though, same population; so all disclaimers apply).

I believe that an important facet of this knowledge/experience gap lies in the realm of direct communication, or lack thereof.

Couples may find it a lot easier to navigate and directly negotiate the challenges that inevitably come up in the context of the general relationship. When it comes to challenges in the realm of intimacy, though, irrational reticence and stifling silence can tend to reign supreme.

Individuals and couples alike may find it difficult to identify exactly what it is that is bothering them, find the right words to express those difficulties, or muster the courage to initiate what can feel like an awkward conversation.

What seems like a very important first step in the journey towards improvement is acknowledgement. Acknowledge that if there does seem to be an “intimacy satisfaction lag” it is perfectly understandable and normal; and, in all likelihood, the fault of neither husband nor wife. In all likelihood, it is simply a function of lack of knowledge and experience.

And to close this issue, I’d like to mention another data point of my survey: hope is high. More specifically, when people were asked if they feel hopeful and positive about the marriage, the lag between the general relationship and intimacy became much less pronounced (for both men and women). There seems to be an inborn sense of, “These difficulties are not insurmountable barriers. They are but challenges that we are meant to embrace and deal with out of a sense of hope driven by purpose and meaning.”



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