

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 21

Daf yomi marriage

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

“Look, before you finalize the divorce, I want you try one last thing.”

Nir¹ looks at the rabbi with weary eyes; but not without a flicker of hope.

“What?”

“For the next week, I want you and your wife to watch Reb Eli Stefansky’s daf yomi shiur together.”



Wildly incredulous would be only mildly accurate in describing

how the bare-headed Nir feels about that suggestion. After all, he and Ravit live in the uber-secular, highly-upscale neighborhood of Nof Yam in Herzliya. True, ever since attending that Orot seminar on Chanukah, Nir had begun inching closer to religious observance; but that is exactly the point!

It is precisely Nir’s shifting tide that led to their marital breakdown.

She had gone to the seminar with him, but what for Nir became a transformative encounter was, for Ravit, a fleeting curiosity. At first, Nir’s newfound religious enthusiasm was a source of mild irritation. Ravit hoped it would pass. Big mistake. And as Nir began attending more

¹ Other than Reb Eli Stefansky, all names and places have been changed to protect the privacy of the subjects of this story.

Torah classes and prayer services, and taking upon himself more mitzvot, Ravit grew increasingly agitated.

“I was born secular, I was raised secular; we’ve lived secular our entire married life! All our friends are secular... and secular I will remain!” For Ravit, religion is a non-starter. No ifs ands or buts about it. And this issue had long hit the boiling point.

“Rabbi Seligman,” Nir is practically pleading, “how do you expect me to get Ravit to sit with me for an hour every night to watch a Talmud class when the whole reason why we registered for a divorce is that she *can’t stand* religion?!”

“I know it sounds crazy,” Rabbi Seligman calmly responds, “but, at this point, you really have nothing to lose, right? So why not give it a try?”

Nir sighs. Hard to argue with that logic. As strange as it sounds... he’ll try. After all, he really does have nothing more to lose.

“You want me to *what*?!!!”

Ravit’s reaction is every bit as fiery as Nir expected.

“Look,” Nir says as he locks eyes with his soon-to-be-ex-wife, “even though you don’t like all this religion stuff, you once told me that you respect Rabbi Seligman. You said he’s thoughtful. Smart. Balanced.”

Ravit is silent.

“You and I both know that the problem between us is not a lack of feelings for each other...”

Nir pauses, swallowing hard. The unshed tears cause his eyes to glisten. Ravit feels a stabbing pain in her chest. She cannot hold Nir’s gaze. The ocean of pain she sees there is just too much.

“So even if it sounds totally absurd,” Nir soldiers on, “would you just give it a shot? After all,” Nir echoes his rabbi’s words, “by this point we have nothing more to lose, right?”

Hard to argue with that logic.

Ravit almost cannot believe herself, but it's not like Nir is asking her to put a scarf on her head and go pray in a Synagogue. Worst case, she figures, it'll be like watching an episode of Shtisel.

"Fine," Ravit finally blurts out, "We'll try it. But only for a few days."

Ravit doesn't understand much of the actual Gemara, but something about the whole MDY thing pierces her. Like a mountain of stigma dissolves into just a few hours of daf yomi.

The stories. The camaraderie. The humor. The animated charts and colorful characters. And the *people!* Chassidim in long coats sitting next to guys in jeans and knitted kippot.

Reb Eli himself doesn't fit any mold Ravit expected. He's as engaging and energetic as he is witty and classy. Clearly passionate about Torah and mitzvos, but incredibly relatable. Very much of this world.

There is something so normal – even *fun* – about it all, that Ravit is deeply, unexpectedly moved.

And so is Nir.

Ravit had always thought becoming religious meant big black yarmulkes, long scraggly beards, oppressive head coverings for women, days spent immersed in ritual and rite... an absolute dead-end to life as she knows it. Nir's stubborn stiffness about everything religion had only reinforced her fears.

But this? This is different. Ravit is seeing an entirely different reality. A Jewish observance suffused with laughter and smiles, banter and bonding. This Reb Eli, as serious and committed as he clearly is to Torah and mitzvot, reflects and represents balance and normalcy. His Judaism is not a Judaism of suffocation and repression, but of inspiration and delight. It's *alive*.

"If embracing religion means becoming like *this*," Ravit finds herself thinking, "maybe it's not so terrible. I could live with this."

It's not only Ravit who's attitude undergoes a seismic shift. Nir is also changing.

One of the things that really stands out for Nir – and Ravit too – is Reb Eli reminiscing about the recent MDY safari in Serengeti. A *daf yomi safari*?! Nir is blown away. Maybe becoming religious doesn't mean abandoning joy and fun. Maybe it doesn't mean becoming rigid and humorless.

From Reb Eli – and the whole MDY “family” – Nir learns something he hadn't allowed himself in months:

To chill.

And that chilling... brings a wave of warmth.

The glacial wall between Nir and Ravit begins to melt.

A few days ago, Nir and Ravit walked back into the rabbanut offices.

Not to finalize their divorce.

To close their divorce file.

They've decided to give their marriage another chance.

And all it took was a bit of daf yomi.

Reb Eli Stefansky style.

In case you're wondering, yes, this is a true story; with some literary polish, of course.

No, I do not know Nir and Ravit personally. I don't even know their real names. But, after hearing the story from Reb Eli, I contacted Rabbi Seligman (his real name I do know) and he confirmed the story, adding many details.

I wanted to speak with Nir and Ravit directly, but Rabbi Seligman explained that Nir is still extremely wary of people finding out about his growing connection to Judaism. He's part of a wealthy, elitist, leftist circle of secularists who do not tend to view religion or religious people kindly, to say the least.

But the story needed to be told. Not just because it's powerful, but because it carries deep relevance for *shalom bayis* more broadly.

Like Nir and Ravit, couples often feel that insurmountable obstructions grow between them.

For some reason, there seems to be a “conventional wisdom” that entrenched friction between couples can often be traced to trivialities. As though otherwise intelligent, caring people suddenly become unreasonable blockheads when it comes to negotiating the most important relationship in their lives. This seems to be the same “conventional wisdom” that holds that many (most???) divorces happen because we live in a frivolous “throw-away” generation.

I believe, though, that a bit of genuine thought reveals this “conventional wisdom” as nothing more than a bunch of nonsense; that the overwhelming majority of people do *not* allow their marriages to go to pot over trivialities. Nir and Ravit didn't file for divorce over trivial matters. For Nir, being able to grow as a person, as a Jew – to be able to fully reconnect with the tradition of his ancestors – was non-negotiable. Going through the process of learning about and embracing his Jewish heritage was simply not something that he could forego. Even if it would cost him his marriage.

Ravit's angle was no less principled. In her mind, religion was a world of suppression and suffocation; there only to strip you of your liberties and suck all the verve and vitality out of you. There will be no more you. Upon the altar of religion, Ravit thought, the you must be sacrificed to a frightening, omnipotent, unknowable Being. She felt her spouse was turning to some sort of cult-like mentality where individual rights and freedoms no longer matter. She simply could not accept such a life even at the expense of her marriage. There was nothing frivolous or trivial about her attitude.

Maybe some people do in fact allow trivialities to get in the way of their marriage. Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know because situations like that have not come to my attention. My own impression is that the overwhelming majority of people are not like that; if there are serious problems in the marriage, it means that there are serious, deeply substantive – perhaps even fundamental – issues that are at the core of those problems.

Perhaps for some people those issues will forever remain insurmountable. After all, the same Hashem who created the sacred institution of marriage also created the possibility of divorce; and, other than the He who is all-knowing, how could anyone feel comfortable judging those who come to the extremely painful decision that they have no choice but to actualize that option?

That being said, I think the story of Nir and Ravit is eye-opening in what it suggests about even the most intractable marital crises. Sometimes, it seems, with but a shift in perception, a massive mountain of a problem can suddenly melt away.

To be clear: I am not trying to suggest that the newfound perception and understanding of Jewish observance that Nir and Ravit discovered through Reb Eli's shiur means that they had been entrenched in a mind-frame of frivolous trivialities all along. Absolutely not. Their pre-MDY perception of the world was certainly not in any way shape or form a function of flippant attitude or being unbending sticklers for trivialities. Their issue was as real and profound and insurmountable as it gets.

Clearly, Nir and Ravit were zocheh to a very special siyata d'Shmaya to have been recommended such an out of the box suggestion. But I believe that once this has happened, their story brings a great light of hope into the world. A light of hope that, maybe, just maybe, can help other couples by illuminating possibilities heretofore never considered. A light of newfound discovery wherein glacial barriers dissipate as though they never existed.



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