

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 25

Incompatible or just plain stuck in a rut?

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

“We just don’t enjoy the same things.”

It’s a reality that causes many a couple to find themselves slowly drifting apart, isn’t it?

Perhaps imperceptible at first, the slow agonizing deterioration of the relationship eventually becomes painfully unmistakable.



Many husbands and wives feel that they just don’t have much in common.

She likes playing board games, he likes to go hiking.

He enjoys bowling, she enjoys eating out.

She loves vacationing in the mountains, he finds it the most boring place in the world.

He can animatedly discuss the latest scientific discoveries for hours, it makes her fall asleep.

At first, an apparent lack of leisure alignment can seem like a mere triviality. Nothing of import, and not worth taking note of.

Over time, though, it can really take a toll.

After all, a marriage is meant to be marked by descriptives such as *chedvah* and *achavah*, not disinterest and distance.

Without a doubt, shared overarching life goals and the joint efforts in the enterprise of family building constitute an extremely powerful glue that can bind husband and wife to one another in bonds of deep love and commitment.

Nevertheless, like it or not, most of us exist in a reality wherein leisure plays a large role. An oversized role, perhaps, but hugely impactful nonetheless.

What is one to do about this, then? Are a man and woman who discover that they don't share many interests doomed to a relationship devoid of verve and vivacity?

Do they have no choice but to compartmentalize their lives such that the marriage relationship will be the place of cheerless duty, while enjoyment and excitement exist only in the realm of self and friendships?

Or is there perhaps some solution to this vexing problem?

Well, one possibility that some couples may find helpful is this: try something new!

Pause. For a moment let's forget about marriage and just talk about people as individuals. Consider the following conversation between two individuals (say, in yeshiva or sem).

"Hey, would you like to play backgammon?"

"I don't play backgammon, but I'd be happy to play chess."

"Come on, give it a try. I'm telling you, you're going to like it."

"Oh no, I've watched people playing backgammon before, and I find the game mystifying in the most boredom-inducing way imaginable."

“Wait a minute, do you know how to play?”

“No, and please do not try to teach me the rules of the game. It’s just not for me.”

Sound familiar?

Not everyone will fit into quite that stubborn of a mold, but, by and large, lots of people (maybe most??) kind of choose their “things” and stick with them.

Mayonnaise vs mustard. Monopoly vs martial arts. Magic tricks vs meditation...

Individuals assume for themselves a persona of well-defined interests, and that’s that.

To be sure, an intrepid few are not only willing to try new things but actively seek out such opportunities. Most of humanity, though, seems to be far more comfortable maintaining fidelity with the familiar.

And there’s a multi-trillion-dollar industry that highlights this reality. No matter how well-known a company may already be, they keep pouring millions upon millions into marketing and advertising. They leave no stone unturned in their efforts to ensure that their products stay front and center in your mind.

Because push comes to shove, a deep, unconscious mechanism in your brain impels you to stick with the familiar.

Turns out, though, that this brain mechanism is actually not the healthiest thing for the brain in the long term.

Research has found that the experience of novelty can improve brain processing speed and working memory¹. In addition to

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<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00117/full>

factors such as nutrition, exercise, and sleep, brain health experts have identified trying new things as an important component to neuroplasticity and long-lasting cognitive function².

From picky-eater-cum-adventurous-foodie to hopeless-alcoholic-cum-avid-runner, many people have tried things they thought they'd hate only to discover that they immensely enjoy them.

Trying new things can be daunting. There's that anxious, perhaps semi-conscious voice that silently screams, "It's just not for me!" But it's worth calming that voice and telling him/her, "It will be alright; it's not dangerous".

Try something new. Your brain will thank you. And, in all likelihood, your marriage will too.

What's the worst-case scenario? You'll wind up confirming that you in fact don't like it? No problem. Just try something else !

If this spoke to you, chances are it will speak to someone else too: a friend, a neighbor, a relative. Share this with them. It might be exactly what they needed today. And you'll be the one who gave it to them!



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² <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/tips-to-leverage-neuroplasticity-to-maintain-cognitive-fitness-as-you-age>