



LOVE CRITICISM: How the Rebbe Rashab's Advice Can Save a Good Marriage

IZZY KALMAN

ALL WEDDINGS ARE HAPPY and most marriages start out good. The man and woman are both fine, intelligent people; they experience each other as soul mates and get along nicely. At some point, though, they find themselves angry and fighting much of the time. They don't understand what went wrong. They are both the

same people they used to be. Nothing catastrophic has happened to destroy their relationship. They are both liked and respected by people in the community. They can't fathom why their partner continues to treat them in ways they don't like. "Maybe we weren't really *bashert*," they begin to think. Fortunately, such couples can be easy to help. These are the "good marriages" I am addressing in this article.

Admittedly, there are many things that can hurt a marriage. This article is not a comprehensive manual on marital problems. It will deal with the one factor that is probably the most frequent source of strife for a couple: criticism.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE

Most people who know my wife, Miriam, and me consider us to have an ideal marriage. And they are not far from the truth. But it wasn't always that way. We suffered terribly during our first six or seven years together and we even contemplated divorce.

I began college as an electrical engineering major, but after two years I transferred to psychology because I decided I would rather be a therapist. I didn't realize it at the time, but I think my subconscious motivation was my parents' relationship. They were both Holocaust survivors and got married in a displaced persons camp in Munich after the war. Many desperate souls entered quickly into marriage with people whom they would not have chosen under normal circumstances.

My parents were one such couple. They were both good, devoted parents, but as husband and wife they were a disaster. They rarely had a real conversation. They were constantly angry at each other. Each one, when

alone with me, would tell me how terrible the other was. My mother, in fact, continued complaining to me about my father for years after he passed away, as though he were still around making her miserable. Once I remarked that my father wasn't completely evil. My mother responded with shock: "You mean you have something *good* to say about your father?" She meant it. She couldn't imagine that I saw him any differently than she did.

My parents' relatives and friends all spent many hours with them playing amateur psychologist, trying to get to the root of their

take long and we were right back to the way we used to be.

WHAT CHANGED?

Meanwhile, in my work as a psychologist in schools, I discovered that the most common complaint of kids is that other kids are picking on them, insulting them and making fun of them. I was well aware that the real reason kids get picked on constantly is that they get upset when they're picked on. I discovered I could use role-playing to demonstrate to kids that they are victims of an illusion. [Visit

I expected marriage to be bad and I wasn't disappointed.

problem so they'd finally be able to get along. They all failed.

During my college years, I worked summers as a waiter in the Catskills and loved to hear the comedians at the evening shows. Their most frequent topic of ridicule was marriage. They seemed right on target.

In my early adulthood, I had some good friends who were married. But the couples were constantly complaining about each other and I couldn't understand why. I thought each of them was terrific and to me they looked like great matches. But they ended up getting divorced.

Not surprisingly, I was terrified of marriage. Finally, when I was 30, Miriam gave me an ultimatum and with great trepidation I dared to take the plunge. We were constantly angry at, and criticizing, each other.

We went for marriage counseling for a period. We got along better as long as the counseling lasted. After it ended, it didn't

nsheichabadnewsletter.com home page for a demo. -Ed.] They think they are getting upset because kids are picking on them. The truth is the other way around. The real reason they're getting picked on is that they *get upset* when they're picked on. When they learn how to refuse to get upset, kids stop picking on them.

After several years of great success teaching anti-bullying skills to children I thought, *Maybe I should be taking my own advice. Here I am, teaching kids that if they stop getting upset, they stop getting picked on. Maybe the same thing works for marriage?*

I decided one day to try it. I told myself that for the next week I would refuse to get upset no matter what my wife says.

It worked like a miracle! And it was effortless. I just let Miriam say whatever she wanted about me and didn't try to stop her. I simply treated her like my best friend, which, in reality, she was. In a matter of days the relationship was better and has continued to

improve. The only thing we still argue about is that Miriam insists that *she* was the one who made things better. I insist it was me!

Of course, the relationship hasn't only been smiles. But we get upset with each other very rarely, and when we do, we work the problem out immediately. We can't stand staying upset with each other.

DEEPER THINKING

As I became involved in giving seminars and writing articles and books, my thinking about the dynamics of relationship problems and how to solve them deepened. It occurred to me that there are ways that we treat people like enemies that we aren't aware of. They treat us in return like enemies and we don't understand how they can be so mean to us. I defined a set of rules for treating people like friends rather than enemies, and use role-playing to demonstrate how the system works.

Shlomo HaMelech said in *Koheles*, "There is nothing new under the sun." I began recognizing ancient sources for what I was teaching. I came to realize that I was teaching the practical application of *ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocha*. Treat people like friends even when they treat us like enemies. Then they are likely to treat us in return like friends.

Rabbi Nachman Segal of the Chabad Israel Center of Staten Island, where I attended regularly before moving to Israel, would often read entries from the daily *Hayom Yom* of the Rebbe at the end of *shacharis*. One of these, from 12 Sivan, blew me away: "Cherish criticism. It will bring you to your highest level." Ever since I heard this I've been quoting the Rebbe Rashab on this, even to my secular audiences.

For years, the most basic element of my program for ending bullying and improving relationships had been to teach people how to defuse criticisms and insults—which are simply a nasty form of criticism—by treating them as the words of a good friend. But I had never gone so far as to say we should "love criticism." It seemed too extreme. But the Rebbe said it! We should actually love criticism.

LOVING CRITICISM IS AGAINST OUR NATURE

The Rebbe's advice sounds so simple, but without proper training people find it difficult to implement because it is against our nature. We hate being



Izzy and Miriam Kalman at their wedding, March 21, 1983.

criticized. We like to think we're perfect, and to have people treat us like we're perfect.

Our *nefesh habehamis* is designed for self-preservation. When someone criticizes or insults us, our *nefesh habehamis* sees it as an attack and tries to defend us by arguing that the person is wrong. It may also counterattack by criticizing and insulting the person in return. Sometimes we may even respond to the verbal attack with a physical attack. But it's a mistake to give in to our *nefesh habehamis* by getting defensive and counterattacking when we're criticized or insulted. Rather than stopping the verbal attacks, these strategies cause them to escalate and even become perpetual. Rather than winning, we create lose/lose situations.

WHY WE SHOULD LOVE CRITICISM

But it feels bad to be criticized. Why should we love criticism?

It's because no one is perfect, and Hashem wants us to constantly improve ourselves. This is the goal of the *nefesh haElohis*. The first step is to know what's wrong with us.

It is easy to see what's wrong with other people because our eyes and ears point outwards. It's much harder to know what's wrong with *us*. And that's why we need to criticize each other—so we can find out what's wrong with us and work to correct it.

Hashem doesn't want us to think that we're perfect and to demand that others treat us as though we are



Izzy and Miriam Kalman today. Artwork in background by Michelle Katz.

perfect. Such people are either overly sensitive or they are *baalei ga'avah*, narcissistic. No one likes being with a *baal ga'avah*. Whenever we criticize them, they go into a rage. Very quickly, those who know them learn to keep their thoughts to themselves.

The smart thing is to realize that when people criticize and insult us, it is really Hashem's way of keeping us humble and encouraging us to improve ourselves. This is so even if they happen to be wrong, and even if they have no intention of helping us.

DEMONSTRATING HOW IT WORKS

We may think that it is extremely difficult to be grateful for criticisms and insults, and that one must be on a very high spiritual level to do this. Fortunately, it is easier than we might think. In reality, the natural responses of defensiveness and retaliation are hard work because they cause the situation to intensify and continue, so we end up expending much more effort being angry and retaliating.

Whether I am working with individual therapy clients or leading seminars for adults, mental health professionals or educators, I make abundant use of role-playing to teach the cause of interpersonal problems and how to solve them. First we play the scenario from the perspective of the *nefesh habehamis*. Then we tackle the same scenario again from the perspective of the *nefesh haElohis*, using the skills and tools emphasized above.

SITUATION #1: WIFE COMPLAINS THAT HER HUSBAND DOESN'T MAKE ENOUGH MONEY

First, the *nefesh habehamis* way:

Wife: I need money for a new *sheitel*.

Husband: A new *sheitel*! How can we afford a new *sheitel*? You know how much a *sheitel* costs!

Wife: Of course I know what a *sheitel* costs! I was going to buy one today, but our credit cards are all maxed out!

Husband: So stop spending so much money!

Wife: I don't spend a lot of money! I buy everything on sale but there still isn't enough money! Why don't you work harder?

Husband: I work very hard!

Wife: Well, my friends all got new *sheitels* in the past year! Mine is falling apart! Why can't you make as much money as their husbands?

Husband: How do you know I don't! Maybe you just spend more than your friends!

Wife: I don't buy things we don't need! You're just blaming me because you're not ambitious, like my friends' husbands!

Husband: Don't compare me to other men! I work much harder than they do! You have no idea!

Wife: Yes, I do! I see the proof in the bank!

Now we'll have the husband respond the *nefesh haElohis* way:

Wife: I need money for a new *sheitel*.

Husband: You need a new *sheitel*?

Wife: Haven't you noticed? Even my good one is falling apart and I'm getting embarrassed to wear it.

Husband: I wish we could get you a new *sheitel*. Can we afford one?

Wife: I wanted to buy one today, but it turns out our credit cards are all maxed out.

Husband: Is our financial situation that bad?

Wife: Yes.

Husband: I had no idea. You know, my paycheck just goes into the bank and you take care of the bills. I know you are careful to buy on sale. I didn't realize we were falling so behind.

Wife: I try not to complain. But it's getting tough. Why don't you work harder?

Husband: I wish I could make money by just working harder. But I get the same salary regardless of how much energy I spend. I don't know what to do.

Wife: My friends' husbands all seem to make enough money to buy them new *sheitels*.

Husband: How do they manage it?

Wife: Maybe it's because they have better professions. Some of them are doctors and lawyers. One of them is an accountant, and believe it or not, he makes the most money of all!

Husband: Maybe I shouldn't have chosen to work in *chinuch*.

Wife: Well, I don't know about that. The truth is you are a great teacher, and maybe money isn't the most important thing in life.

Husband: No, it's never been all that important to me. But I never imagined I wouldn't be able to afford to buy you a new *sheitel* when you need one.

Wife: *Sheitel, shmeitel!* I am so lucky I married a wonderful man like you.

Husband: And I am so lucky I had the *zchus* to get a wife like you! I must have done something right in a previous *gilgul!*

Wife: No, you deserve it for being a *tzadik* in this *gilgul!* But I still do need a new *sheitel*. I'm embarrassed to be seen in public this way.

Husband: Then we have to figure out where to get the money.

SITUATION 2: CRITICISM OVER CHILDREARING

First, the *nefesh habehamis* way:

Wife: Why do you always yell at Mendel? You are destroying his self-esteem!

Husband: I am not destroying his self-esteem! His esteem is so high that he looks down at his own father!

Wife: It's because you're always yelling at him! That's why he doesn't respect you!

Husband: He doesn't respect me because you are always taking his side against me!

Wife: Well, what do you expect? You're a grown man! You have no right to use your superior power against a defenseless young boy!

Husband: What are you talking about, defenseless! He has you to defend him! The only time he ever listens to me is if I resort to force! *Chosech shivto, sonei bno!*

Wife: Don't use Torah to justify abusing our child!

Husband: I'm not abusing him! He's the one abusing *me!* And your overprotection is encouraging him!

Wife: He doesn't need any encouragement from me! You're doing a pretty good job on your own by screaming at him all the time! Why shouldn't he be defiant when you're so mean to him? Why should he respect you when you act like a *goilem?*

Husband: How dare you talk to me like that? I don't act like a *goilem!* He doesn't respect me because *you* show me no respect! He learns it from you!

Now, the *nefesh haElohis* way:

Wife: Why do you always yell at Mendel? You are destroying his self-esteem!

Husband: Do I really yell all at him all the time?

Wife: Just about.

Husband: You know what? I get so frustrated by him. I don't know what to do anymore. He never listens to me. Does he listen to you?

Wife: Yes. At least he does before you come home. Then he doesn't listen to anyone.

Husband: Now that you mention it, he seems to disobey me mainly when both of us are home. When I'm alone with him, he treats me with respect.

Wife: He does?

Husband: Yes. It's really strange. You know what? Maybe Mendel is playing us against each other. Maybe he's discovered that when we're both home, he can defy us and then we start fighting with each other. *Divide and conquer.*

Wife: Let's check it out. You know what I'll try? Next time he's *chutzpadik* to you, I'll just tell him he has to show you respect because you're his father.

Husband: Wow! I'd really appreciate that! And you know what? I'll try not yelling at him. Maybe he'll respect me more if I talk to him calmly.

Wife: Yes, I think that would be a terrific idea.

Husband: Thanks so much for being supportive.

Wife: Well, maybe I shouldn't have been protecting him from you. It just scares me to see you yelling at him.

Husband: Yes, I guess it must be scary. But you have nothing to worry about. I would never want to hurt him.

Wife: Yes, I know. I am just worried about his feelings. Maybe I shouldn't be. If he were really so afraid of you, he wouldn't be so defiant.

CONCLUSION

I hope these examples have convinced you of the truth—that not only should we not shy away from criticism, we should embrace it and cherish it. Learn to love criticism from your spouse and it will bring your marriage to its highest level. ❁

Izzy Kalman has been a visionary in the field of bullying-prevention, as he empowers children with the wisdom and skills they need to resolve their social problems on their own. He has rewritten his bestselling book, *Bullies to Buddies: How to turn your enemies into friends*, for the frum population, teaching the correct practice of *ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho*, the age-old but poorly understood secret for turning enemies into friends. As soon as the revised book is ready for purchase, the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* will definitely let you know.

While we may think that yeshivas are safer than public schools, the truth is that bullying is a universal problem that plagues our Torah-based educational institutions perhaps no less than in the general world of education. Insults, gossip, social exclusion and even fighting are regular aspects of the social lives of our precious *kinderlach*.

This is not because schools are failing to address it. Yeshivas have taken up the anti-bullying mission as enthusiastically as anyone. It's just that the popular

anti-bullying policies and programs don't work very well and can even make the problem worse, as research and experience have consistently illustrated. The reason is that many of their basic principles are inconsistent with Torah principles, as world-renowned school psychologist Izzy Kalman has been explaining for years.

So if you can't rely on yeshivas to make all bullying disappear, what should you do if your child is suffering from bullying? First, ask yourself, "Do I want my child to have to rely on everyone else to solve their social problems for them, or would I rather they be able to do so on their own?"

If you are like most parents, you prefer the second option.

Visit nsheichabadnewsletter.com to read the many articles Izzy Kalman has written for the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*, or check out bullies2buddies.com. To set up an appointment to speak with Izzy Kalman, or to arrange workshops at your child's school, email izzy@bullies2buddies.com.


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