



Published on www.bilvavi.net

[Home](#) > Getting to Know Your Family - 03 Source of Marital Discord

Getting to Know Your Family - 03 Source of Marital Discord

“Eizer K’Negdo”, A Helpmate Opposite Him: Appreciating Opposition

The Torah writes that when Hashem created a wife for man, He created woman as an “*eizer k’negdo*”, a “helpmate, opposite him”. A wife is the “helper” of her husband - precisely because she opposes him.

Besides for a wife, though, there is also another being in a person’s life who opposes him: the *yetzer hora* (the evil inclination), which challenges him. The reason why we have a *yetzer hora* is so that it can be a kind of “helpmate” to us, because when we overcome its challenges, we become elevated.

If a person doesn’t understand that it’s it good for him to have a *yetzer hora*, he views the *yetzer hora* as a bothersome force in his life. He may think about his *yetzer hora* in terms of having to do *teshuvah* over his sins on Erev Yom Kippur, and he’s mostly bothered at his *yetzer hora*.

Such a mindset is really erroneous, because the person doesn’t appreciate the fact that he is challenged and opposed. What will happen when he gets married, with such a mentality? Now he has to deal with a person who is constantly opposing him, on a regular basis. He reacts to her with the same way he can’t stand his *yetzer hora*.

One who can’t deal with his own challenges, and would rather live life without challenges, will also not be able to survive marriage. The nature of a wife is that she opposes her husband - sometimes more and sometimes less. He might not be used to dealing with anything that challenges him, so he will recoil in disgust from the challenge. He has never learned how to deal with opposition, so he will not either know how to deal with the opposition in his marriage; each husband will react according to his various nature, personality, and *middos* - and he will fight with her as he sees fit, acting destructive to the marriage.

If one is already used to the idea of dealing with opposition before he got married - because he knows how to appreciate the challenges of his *yetzer hora* - he will have a much easier time dealing with the oppositions when he’s married. But if he never accepted that in life we are supposed to be challenged by opposition, he will not be able to deal with the challenges of marriage either.

Thus, ideally, before one can deal with the challenges in his marriage, he has to know before he gets married how to deal with challenges in the first place! Otherwise, it’s as if he is navigating his way through an ocean without a boat; he will get lost and drown.

Becoming Aware of Your Yetzer Hora

Firstly, the issue is, if we are really aware of our *yetzer hora* or not. How aware are we to the fact that we have a *yetzer hora* in us that challenges us? If we wake up a person at 2 A.M. and we ask him if he has a *yetzer hora*, what does he respond? Can he say it even in the middle of his sleep?

Every man has a force inside him that is opposing him, and it sounds like an inner voice that challenges him. It's called the *yetzer hora*. It's not enough to know you have a *yetzer hora* - you have to recognize it in yourself.

Inner Voices

A person always has inside himself two voices that are whispering to him: a voice telling him to do good (the *yetzer tov*) and a voice telling him to do bad (the *yetzer hora*). Imagine if a father tells his child to do A, and his mother tells him to do B. Chazal say to listen to the father. The child has heard two voices, and he must decide which voice to listen to. That's a clear example of hearing two different voices. But do we hear **inside** ourselves as well that there are two different voices going on? The issue is, if a person is aware that he has these two inner contradicting voices inside himself.

To illustrate, once a student came to Rav Dessler zt"l distraught. He had a dream in which he had killed his son. He came to Rav Dessler shaking as to what the dream meant. Rav Dessler told him, "Sometimes your son annoys you, and for a few moments, you wish he wouldn't be in your life. Because you wished for a few seconds that he shouldn't exist, you are able to have a dream about killing him." The lesson of this story is that a person is often unaware of the voices going on inside himself, deep in his subconscious.

Most people are not aware of the two "voices" inside themselves. They only hear one voice, and that is the voice that will dominate. But we really have several voices in us; in fact, both the *yetzer tov* and *yetzer hora* each have several voices. One might hear different voices inside himself when he feels very challenged and there's a lot of tension going on in his surroundings, but on a general basis, a person usually does not hear more than one voice going on inside himself. If he has never learned how to deal with two opposing views inside himself, he will not be able to deal with outer challenges either.

For example, when we need to buy something for the house, like a table, do we ever ask ourselves why we are buying the table? If we think into it deeply, we will discover that there is always more than one reason. There is never one reason that motivates us. There are always several motivations in anything we do. Most people are consciously aware of only one reason, because there is a lack of awareness to the motivations.

(If one does not understand himself and the contradictions inside him, he surely won't be able to understand his wife. He must first understand his soul, then his wife's soul, and then see how to work out the contradictions).

Most of the problems that occur in a marriage do not have to do with the actual 'marriage' itself; the problems all begin with a lack of knowledge about oneself. One who is aware of himself can sense the inner voices in himself, and he will have a lot easier of a time when tension mounts and he hears contradicting voices inside himself, because he's already used to it from beforehand.

But often, a person is used to sort of 'pushing away' the inner voices inside himself from letting them register in his conscious mind, and then he only hears them when he's in an extreme situation, such as when he's very angry or very sad. He then begins to hear several voices inside himself, (as well as the voice of his wife challenging him), and he gets confused and bewildered when this happens, because he is not used to hearing several voices all at once. He thinks that perhaps something is

wrong with him, wondering why he does not know himself well. He will feel a need to go for therapy or to go to a psychologist, because he feels very confused about himself.

But if he's already used to hearing inner voices inside himself before a time of tension comes, he wouldn't get so frustrated when he encounters tension and opposition in his marriage. The *yetzer hora* is called *Tzefuni*, "hidden one"^[1], a force that resides in a person's heart; if a person is used to hearing its voice all the time, then he wouldn't get so flustered when he begins to hear several "voices" going on at once in his home.

Most of the problems in marriage do not begin with the marriage, but with the person. We can call it "bad *middos*" if we want, but that is generic. There's a deeper reason to it. It's because a person does not know how to deal with himself at all. 'Fixing' your bad *middos* is already the second step. The first step one needs to begin with is to simply become aware of what's going on inside you.

If one is not aware of himself, he doesn't know what his motivations are. He might do *chessed* and give *tzedakah*, and he looks like a very nice person to all who see him, but nobody has no idea what's going on inside him (and they never will) - and neither does he. When he encounters situations in his home which he cannot remain silent about and he feels a need to explode at all the challenges he is facing, the problems then begin.

Knowing Yourself

So first, a person has to become aware of himself. He must learn how to recognize his soul and the nature of his soul.

If a person doesn't learn in-depth the laws of Shabbos, he won't be able to be careful when it comes to the laws of Shabbos. The same is true when it comes to relationships. We won't be able to get along with others if we have no self-awareness towards ourselves.

There is no way to get along with others - your family or your neighbors or anyone else - if you haven't first learned how to get along with yourself. Of course, you will be able to get along with others if you have good social skills, and you will still be able to get along with your wife too, but it won't be enough to **build** a true Jewish home as it should be.

Let us be very clear to the reality (Some people have a very hard time accepting this, but it is the truth). We must know who we are. We cannot go through life and live good with our wife and children if we do not recognize our own self. A superficial person will say "What is there to know? I know myself already."

Most people are like a closed bank account inside themselves, and they do not have the key to open that "bank account". It is impossible for a person to have a harmonious home if a person lacks self-awareness.

The study of *Mussar* - self-improvement - is really based on knowing about how the human soul works. The great masters who started *Mussar* were greatly involved with understanding and explaining how our soul works. It's impossible for a person to understand matters of *Mussar* and improve himself if he is unaware of his internal world. If a person doesn't know himself well, and he tries learning "*Sefer Kitzur Chovos HaLevovos*" (a summary of *sefer Chovos HaLevovos*) to get quick advice, it won't work, because advice and tidbits of wisdom cannot build our life! One has to become aware of himself - only that will build him.

A person has to clarify to himself who he really is, and develop an honest self-awareness towards himself. This does not simply mean that a person has to realize that he has *bad middos* in addition to

his qualities. Rather, he should be aware of why he has those bad *middos* and that they are coming from the soul, which is the source of all our *middos*.

Even if a person looks into the *sefarim* for advice in matters, the advice won't help if he doesn't understand himself well.

Often people want to be helped and they are impatient: "Okay, so what should I do? Tell me what I should do, *l'maaseh*", and they don't know themselves well. This is not the way to go about things. First a person has to know himself well, who "I" am, and then he can ask questions about how he should act. One cannot know how to act if he doesn't know how to think in the first place.

Marital Disputes: First Understand Your SELF

For example, a couple comes to a marriage counselor to sort out their feuding. The husband says, "My complaints against her are A, B, and C", and the wife also lists her complaints on him. The marriage counselor makes a "compromise" between them and shows them how they can come to a compromise and thus he "saves" the marriage. But does the husband really know **why** he did what he did, and **why** his wife did what she did?

Forget for a second about what he did, and what she did. Does the husband know **why** he did what he did, and **why** his wife did what she did? The issue is not what or she did. The issue is **why** each of them is doing what they are doing to each other.

The husband might of course say, "**Because she has bad middos!!**" But that is really a very superficial answer. It is because she had thousands of factors in her motivation that prompted her to act how she acted, being that the soul is so complicating. Of course, it is true that he or she has *bechirah* (free will) to work on his\her *middos* and fix them. But he\she has many reasons why he\she acted the way she did.

If a couple would just know this, that self-awareness is what needs to come before fixing bad *middos*, and then **80% of marriages** would be solved. Of course, we need to work on our *middos* and correct them. But once they realize what the source of their problems are, it is much easier to understand each other. They are much closer to working on themselves once they become aware of the reasons that are motivating them to act in the way they are acting.

It should be very clear that most of the problems in marriage can be traced to their root. When you know the root of what's causing the problems in the marriage, you can then work with them to solve them.

For example: a husband doesn't understand why his wife is yelling at him. He calls up the marriage counselor, "My wife is yelling at me!!" Imagine if a person is handed a Gemara on page 90 of the tractate, and the middle of the page is shown to him, and he is asked, "What does it say here?" He has no idea, because he didn't see what came before it. You can't start from the middle. So too, if the wife is yelling at him, he has to discern what caused her to yell at him in the first place.

See The Bigger Picture

Sometimes people ask me, "I just have a short question about something...." But there is really no such thing as a short question. Every small question is really part of a bigger question, because every matter in life is complex, like a *sugya* of Gemara. Every detail that one wants to know about is really part of a bigger picture.

For example, if a 35 year-old comes to me and asks a question about a particular detail, there is an

entire 35 years that are really included in his question – which is half of a person’s life - just, he doesn’t realize it. There’s always a lot more going on.

There are always many motivations in one act. One needs to think into all the possible motivations of why he acts the way he does and why she acts the way she does, and then he/she can begin to understand himself and the other. But you can’t understand the other if you don’t first try this with yourself.^[2]

So when people have “Shalom Bayis” problems (marital difficulties), it’s not really a “Shalom Bayis problem” as it’s generically called, but it is rather a problem that begins with a lack of understanding towards oneself. When a person is having difficulties in his marriage, it’s really because he doesn’t understand himself well, and as a result, he doesn’t know how to navigate the difficulties with his spouse.

Let’s say a boy in *shidduchim* hears about a girl that she has good *middos*, she’s kind, etc. They say about the boy, “He knows how to learn, he is diligent in his learning, he has a lot of *Yiras Shomayim*.” These are all general descriptions which do not really say much. If one has a poor recognition towards his own self, he does not know himself any better than what people are saying about him – which are just generic descriptions.

People do not really know who you are, other than what time you get up in the morning for *Shacharis*, and if you’re basically regarded as a “good guy” and that you know how to learn. This is all a very shallow sense of self-recognition. Often a person’s true personality is very hidden from his awareness, and he relies on what others are saying about him, while in reality, they don’t know him much better than how much he knows himself (and he doesn’t know himself that well).

There’s a popular phrase, “The older you get, the more you mature”. I saw a sefer that gives advice for *shidduchim*, and one of the things it said there was, “If you want a good *shidduch*, find out if the girl is emotionally healthy or not.” Does a person think he’s so mature and experienced from life that he knows how to find about this? If one doesn’t know his own self before he gets married – and he probably doesn’t – how is he supposed to do any research on the girl and assume that he knows all about her??

This is the deep fundamental issue behind all marital issues and on many issues of life: a person usually lacks self-awareness of himself. This is an issue that comes way before any of the other issues and it is the deep source of most issues. When it goes unnoticed, a person will just take life as it comes, and he doesn’t understand why he’s having so many problems in life and in his marriage.

Leaving Superficial Understanding

We understand that if someone doesn’t learn Torah and he wants to fulfill it, the first thing he must do is learn Torah. So too, if a person wants to know how to act correctly in life, he needs to learn about his soul and recognize himself.

The less a person is used to thinking, the harder of a time he will have with this. We can’t totally change a person over. But one thing we can do is the following. We can realize that we complicating. We are not simple to understand. Don’t ever think that you are simple.

But when a person is superficial, he thinks that he knows himself, because to him, everything in life is “simple”, nothing is hard to understand, according to his perspective. This is what a person needs to get rid of. We must all come to understand that we are complicating, and therefore, we must get to know ourselves, our motivations.

For example, nothing you hear is simple. A superficial person thinks he understands everything and that he's hearing simple words, while in reality the words can contain much more depth than what he's aware of.

Once I met someone who said to me, "I know how to give a *mussar shmuess* just like Reb Chatzkel Levenstein zt"l^[3] could. I can say the same exact things he said." This person thinks he knows himself, and he thinks that he can speak just as powerfully as the great Reb Chatzkel. But he's fooling himself. Not only is there a difference between him and Reb Chatzkel in essence, but even the material that he says is different, because it doesn't even compare to how Reb Chatzkel spoke. Why? Because Reb Chatzkel spoke from a much more inner place in himself than this person can, and therefore, even if the material is the same, it's not the same *shmuess* that Reb Chatzkel gave. It's a whole different grasp on reality, even though the same words are being said.

To illustrate further, there are people who think that their Rav gives them the same *derasha* every *Shabbos HaGadol*. "He said the same thing again this year", he thinks. He didn't realize that there were new things said this time, because he thinks everything is simple and therefore he thinks he knows everything already.

"I've heard it before", a person thinks. "I know it already." A person thinks he knows what "*yirah*" is, he knows what "*ahavah*" is, what "*rachamim*" is...

There's no way to know about these things unless a person has learned *sefarim* about them for a few years. You can't know these things simply on your own. They have to be studied, thought about, and analyzed.

When a person thinks he knows himself pretty well even though he has never analyzed his personality, he will never be prepared to work on himself. But if one begins to understand himself, he has hope in trying to work on himself and improving.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* says that everything in his sefer is well-known, so why is he writing it? It is because a wise person understands that he can see new depth in the same well-known facts he always hears about. Similarly, Reb Yeruchem Levovitz zt"l said that his teacher, the Alter of Kelm, taught how even things which appear simple are really very deep; he showed how depth can be contained in the most simple things.

The Basis

People who are not successful in *Avodas Hashem*, usually, are not far from the Creator; they are far from themselves.

There is no home which doesn't have problems in it. If there is a perfect home that's scot-free from any issues, that would be a miracle! Of course there are going to be problems in a home. Something you are involved in for so many years and decades cannot be problem-free. It's not possible for a couple to live peacefully for so many years if they do not recognize each other - there will *for sure* be problems.

But if one knows how to learn about himself and he becomes self-aware, he can then begin to learn about the soul of his wife and understand her. Then when he has children, he should then try to learn about his children's personalities and understand their souls well.

Surely one needs to be guided in how one can understand himself, his wife, and his children. But the basis is for one to become aware of this in the first place.

In Conclusion

The words here are based on the words of our wise Sages, and they are actually simple ideas.

In previous generations, most people also had the same issues of marriage like we have today, but they were able to deal with it easily. One reason for this is because they had more *temimus* (earnestness). But it is also because they worked hard at understanding themselves. In today's times, many marriages are failing because people are not willing to work hard at understanding themselves; they want the problems to go away, so they go for counseling, but they never really learn to get along with each other. They just learn various tactics that save the marriage, without all the hard inner work that should be involved.

If one wants to have a successful marriage, he must learn about himself and understand himself, and then he needs to come to understand his wife, and then his children, after that. Only in this way can one ever hope to have a harmonious home.

The words in the coming chapters will expand upon this idea, so if one does not implement the words of this chapter, the coming chapters will not be effective. Everything that is to come is based on this chapter. In order to solve problems, we need to understand the reality behind them, and if not, we can't solve the problems.

May Hashem give us the *siyata d'shamaya* to merit a great light to our souls.

[1] Sukkah 52a

[2] *During the shiur, the Rov explained that one can get to know himself by being aware of the four elements of the soul. He must discover what his most dominant element is, then what is second to most dominant, third to most dominant, and fourth to most dominant. Then he can see that all his failures in life are stemming from the element that is most extreme by him (there is always one element that is out of balance). Then he can begin to do the same with understanding his wife's soul. For more details, learn **Getting To Know Your Soul**.*

[3] Mashgiach of Yeshivas Ponovezh from 1940's to 1970's

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/getting-know-your-family-03-source-marital-discord>