



Count on Me!

Marriage is defined in the English dictionary as: “a legally recognized relationship, established by a civil or religious ceremony, between two people who intend to live together as physically intimate and domestic partners.”

This mundane secular view of marriage is reflected in a narcissistic utilitarian arrangement, a proposition entered into by two people expecting to have all of their needs met, with a “what have you done for me lately?” attitude. If the answer is “not enough,” it’s time to move on to the next partner.

Not surprisingly, marriage around the world is on the decline as materialism is worshipped and the single-minded obsession with wealth, fun and the “easy life” are viewed as each person’s entitlement. Commitment and long-term devotion to a higher calling are passé.

Judaism takes a diametrically opposed approach to this devastating trend as evidenced by the Hebrew word for marriage: נישואין.

נישואין is replete with profound truths and messages that teach us the purpose, objectives and deeper meaning of marriage.

The leading definition for marriage in the Hebrew dictionary is to “elevate.” We are charged by G-d to take the physical and material world, and sanctify it. We are elevated when we strive to restore our wholeness by re-connecting with our soulmate and becoming one again.

Despite the highest standards of living, happiness seems to elude the masses. When happiness is pursued through external objects and thrills, it

dissipates quickly and leaves an emptiness and overall sense of futility.

With common spiritual goals, couples are strengthened. They uncover the true meaning of life while they grapple with their inner need to be the best that they can be. Each home is a satellite of holiness that brings us one step further to restoring G-d’s Unity, of which we are an integral part. Elevating marriage occurs when we buck the trend of focusing on me and constant reflections of “am I getting enough in this relationship?” by substituting questions like: “am I giving enough to my partner” and “am I doing acts of kindness for my partner that bring him/her happiness and contentment?”

Another definition of נישואין is “to carry.” Carrying something can be difficult and burdensome, even causing suffering at times.

It is important for couples to be aware that when difficulties arise in marriage, it is a G-d-sent opportunity to stretch one’s limits and transform that weakness in ourselves or in our marriage. It is a stepping stone to further our resolve and commitment to one another and to be actively engaged in choosing to be together rather than being on auto-pilot. This generates a very dynamic and invigorating component into the marriage.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing a very lackadaisical attitude today toward long-term commitment and the will to work hard to solve marital problems through compromise and soul searching. Marriage is a work in progress with a lifetime contract!

נישואין contains two more fascinating clues to a successful partnership: שינוי (change) and שונה (different).

As much as we try to marry people who are similar to us, we are each a world unto ourselves, with our own family backgrounds, personality traits, feelings and opinions. Merging these two worlds is a monumental, never-ending but gratifying endeavor. It requires great humility, an indispensable trait in healthy loving marriages. We have two eyes; one for seeing the good in our partners and the other to see our flaws and commit to changing them and growing as a result. Rav Avraham Twerski notes that the letters צ and ש are interchangeable, thus teaching that true שמחה and inner satisfaction are achieved by צמיחה, growth and self-transformation.

נישואין also connotes forgiveness; by forgiving ourselves for past mistakes and forgiving our partner for unintentional hurts we will forge the path to love, acceptance and unity.

Finally, there is a wonderful expression related to the passing of time: “don’t count your days; make your days count!”

Making marriage count is an awesome achievement requiring total commitment and complete investment of self as a giver and as someone who wants to bring out the best in his or her partner. When we do this, we are on the road to the ultimate commandment of בניך “and you shall teach your children.” By growing and developing ourselves and our marriages with these spiritual messages in the forefront of our consciousness, we are imparting the greatest legacy to our children and their children until the end of time.

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