

# SHALOM BAYIS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

*very sacred offering of an individual belongs to him, until it is given to that priest at which time it becomes the priests. God told Moshe, "Speak to the Children of Israel, and tell them about when a man's wife deceives him ..." (Bamidbar 5:10-12)*

This is a parshah about shalom bayis — peace in the house — though it seems like just the opposite, since it discusses the laws of the suspected adulteress. And, certainly what precedes this section of the parshah seems to have nothing to do with the matter of shalom bayis at all, dealing instead with gifts given to the kohanim officiating in the Temple. Until, that is, Rashi makes the following connection:

What is stated above this section? "Every sacred offering of an individual belongs to him ..." If you retain the gifts due to the kohen, by your life, you will have to come to him in order to bring him your unfaithful wife." (Rashi, Bamidbar 5:12)

Now, the Talmud states that God punishes measure-for-measure (Sanhedrin 90a), implying that a person who denied the kohen his rightful due was setting himself up for his wife to stray and, at least, God forbid, become a suspected adulteress. With respect to the shalom bayis of such a person, Rashi seemingly says, strange as it may seem, what counts is how the man treats the kohanim, not his wife.

However, a quick analysis of the comparison prompts the following question: Why would anyone deny a kohen his rightful due, a gift that the Torah designates for him? After all, the kohanim work for God, but on our behalf, and the more successful they are before God, the more successful we are in the world in which we function. Weaken the kohanim, and we weaken ourselves.

Unless, of course, a person doesn't believe that. After all, unlike the average working man, the kohanim work on a spiritual plane, doing physical things that affect spiritual realities in ways that we can't confirm. They work in the Temple, but we feed them, and it takes emunah — faith — for us to believe that our blessing comes from what they do, not so much from what we ourselves do.

However, what if a man lacks such faith? What if he is someone who believes that "seeing is believing," meaning that what he can't see, he can't believe. Giving "freebies" on an ongoing basis to a bunch of priests who sit in "kollel" all day long, day-after-day, might become difficult for a person lacking the faith that the spiritual system facilitated by the kohanim in the Temple service controls the physical one of which he is a part.

Implies Rashi: if you lack belief that your blessing comes through the kohanim, and disregard them as a result, then you must also lack faith that the blessing you are enjoying at home comes through your wife — Rav Chelbo said: One must always observe the honor due to his wife, because blessings rest on a man's home only on account of his wife, as it says, "He treated Avram well for her sake" (Bereishis 12:16). Thus, Rava used say to the townspeople of Machuza: "Honor your wives, that you may become wealthy." (Bava Metzia 59a)

— and more than likely, disregard her as well, and the level of shalom bayis necessary to keep one spouse loyal to the other.

The funny thing about the source of this idea is that, if you recall, the entire incident was the result of Avraham's failed attempt to hide Sarah in a box and sneak her past Egyptian customs. As a result, he let her fall into the hands of Pharaoh's border patrol, who kidnapped her and brought her to Pharaoh for marriage, having been told by Avraham that Sarah was his sister, and not his wife.

Indeed, had a miracle not happened for Sarah, Pharaoh would have forcibly married her. In fact, the only reason why Pharaoh endowed Avraham with so much wealth, after returning Sarah untouched and on her behalf, was because he had been so spooked by the entire incident, which required God to clear up, while Avraham had simply waited (praying and having tons of faith in God) to see what would happen next! Not exactly the get-rich-quick scheme to which the Talmud seems to be referring! (In fact, the entire experience was so distasteful to Sarah that the next time it happened, later on with Avimelech, Avraham didn't even ask Sarah to do the same thing. Rather, he just imposed it on her, and once again, let things take their Divinely-guided course, resulting again in a great miracle, but a lot of whispering by others as well when Yitzchak was born shortly after.)

To answer this question, and to learn the lesson, there is a previous Rashi on the following verses:

As he approached Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I see how beautiful a woman you are. When the Egyptians see you they will say, "She is his wife," and will kill me and keep you alive. Please tell them that you are my sister so that they will treat me well on your behalf, and my life will be spared because of you." (Bereishis 12:11-13)

Midrash Aggadah: Until now he had not noticed her [beauty] because of their modesty. (Rashi)

In other words, it was only as they entered Egypt that Avraham Avinu noticed how beautiful Sarah was, looking at her, for the first time, as the Egyptians would look at her. Knowing that they were entering the land of superficiality, and that they would be viewed in a superficial way, Avraham looked at his wife superficially, and saw her skin-deep beauty, and it concerned him.

Don't be mistaken. The modesty to which Rashi refers does not mean that Sarah covered herself from head-to-toe, forbidding Avraham to see even her face, for had that been the case, then how would Avraham had seen past that? Assumedly, Sarah was still dressed the same as always, even as they entered Egypt, and would have appeared no different than on previous occasions.

Rather, the answer has to do with the very definition of tznius — modesty — which Rashi explains back at the beginning of our history, once it first became relevant:

Both the man and the woman were unclothed, but were not embarrassed. (Bereishis 2:25)

They did not know the way of tznius, to distinguish between good and evil. Even though he (Adam) was given the knowledge to name the animals, he had not been given a yetzer hara until he ate from the tree, after which the yetzer hara entered him and he became aware of good and evil. (Rashi)

Hence, we see, modesty is the Torah's defense against the yetzer hara, which exists to do one thing and one thing only: get man to abuse Creation. As the verse says, "God gave the earth to man" (Tehillim 115:16), but not to do just anything he wants. Rather, it is his to use freely in the service of God, in a way that furthers the cause of Creation, not of his own personal material desires.

In other words, aside from being physically modest, Avraham and Sarah were spiritually modest. This meant that they existed to serve each other, not to abuse one another even in the slightest way. Essence was married to essence, and they managed to make sure that things like external beauty did not interfere with their devotion to the well-being of each another.

Every honorable princess dwelling within ... (Tehillim 45:14)

This is the verse that is quoted all the time to remind us that self- dignity is the true source of honor for a person in this world. As much as we would like to be independent of one another, to limit our exposure and vulnerability, the truth is, we are not. Therefore, how other people treat us has a lot to do with how we treat ourselves, and vice-versa.

There's a lot of midrash and Kabbalah behind the two episodes with Pharaoh and Avimelech. However, for the time being, the point being made is that, when people live superficially, then tend to treat themselves, and other people as well, superficially. It can only lead to self-abuse, the abuse of others, and the world around us, which can simply mean enjoying others in ways that do not facilitate their spiritual growth, something that is quite acceptable by the general world's standards.

One blatant and remarkable example is Hollywood. Incredibly, people, including, and often especially, married individuals, are paid and rewarded to act immorally, in the name of "entertainment." Husbands and wives actually allow their spouses to be used in the most "immodest" manner, as do parents their children, even allowing tens of millions of people to witness it, again, in the name of entertainment. Is it not a wonder that God has allowed the West to last this long?

That, the parshah is saying, can only erode relationships, not build them. That type of attitude towards one spouse destroys shalom bayis, between spouses, God forbid, and within society as a whole. We have to see people for who they really are, past their superficial aspects that we first see and deal with. We have to see people for the spiritual contribution they make to us and the world around us, which only enhances their physical beauty as well.

And now, with the economy being the way it is, we can't afford to forsake those who work in the spiritual realm on our behalf, so that we can be successful in the physical one. As tempting as it may be to cut back on tzedakah to yeshivas and kollels, etc., by doing so, we only tighten the financial noose around our own necks.

Obviously, there has to be a balance, one that depends upon one's level of belief in the spiritual system that runs this physical world. And, there is always room to build such a belief, or to enhance one, whatever the case may be. That way we can rise above the mundane physical reality, and enhance our relationships, in spite of pressures from the outside world, and even improve our financial position, even if the rest of the world does not. God runs the world, at all times, and even though He likes to play by the rules of this world that He set up, those rules do leave room for such miracles, for the person who is prepared to go past "seeing is believing," and live with the reality of "believing is seeing" as well.

Just one final note. My new book, "The Equation of Life" is now being sold through my online bookstore at [www.thirtysix.org](http://www.thirtysix.org), as well as a new audio program called, "Survival in 10 Easy Steps." The first will show you what history is about, and how to make the best of it, while the latter is 30 minutes of good advice about what to focus on during these difficult times in order to rise above them, and make the most out of life. Text

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