

Adei Ad, strengthening marriages and Shalom Bayis through education and awareness

## The Ten Commandments of Marriage

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The concept of marriage does not apply only between men and women in Judaism; our entire relationship with our Creator is considered a marriage. Our wedding anniversary is the holiday of Shavuot, the day on which we received the Torah. And just as a marriage should be continually renewed, so too, each and every year we once again relive the giving of the Torah, our marriage to G-d.

We received the Torah as an entire people, men, women and children, and we are taught that Mt. Sinai itself, the smallest and most humble of all the mountains, was held above our heads, symbolizing the wedding canopy, the *chuppah*. When we received the Ten Commandments, the foundation of the Torah, this represented the giving of the marriage contract, the *ketubah*, representing our love, commitment, respect and responsibility within this relationship.

Every time a man and woman marry, as they stand under the wedding canopy it is a reenactment of our wedding day with G-d, the day we received these Ten Commandments. Therefore, it is clear that when we look more deeply into these commandments we will find not only spiritual advice for enhancing our marriages, but very practical and essential guidelines as well.

### The Ten Commandments

#### **1. I Am the L-rd Your G-d Who Took You Out of Egypt, from the House of Slaves.**

Let there be no doubt—in my work teaching and counseling couples, I have met many people who feel uncertain they are married to the right person. They may have been married for decades, but they are still not quite 100% sure. Some may have been sure at a certain time, but then doubt crept in. “Was I too rushed or immature when I made my decision? Is he the right person? Would I be happier with someone else? Did we both grow in different directions, become different people, in the years since our wedding?”

Yes, you were immature when you got married, but that is a good thing. You met when you were younger, still flexible, and you grew up together. You *did* both develop and change since your wedding, but if you keep each other *involved* in the changes and the growth, they only serve to make you more interesting to each other.

Make no mistake: doubt can kill any *good* marriage. I hate to

think what it can do to a shaky one. I have had experiences with women who were content only after recognizing and wanting to accept: “This is my husband. This is the man I chose to marry.” And upon recognizing that decision, you recognize that this is the man you are intended to stay with, work with, live with, raise children with, pay bills with, figure things out with, and grow old with—this man, and only this man.

Now, in this first commandment, the first word is *anochi*. *Anochi* means “I” in the Egyptian language. Now, why would G-d start the Torah, indeed the very first of the Ten Commandments, in a foreign language and not in *Hebrew*?

At that time we, the Jewish people, had just come out of Egypt. Although we used our Hebrew language, Egyptian had also become quite familiar to us. G-d chose to communicate to us in a common language—some common ground with which to start off the relationship. This holds a lesson for us all.

At some point in life a woman might think to herself, “Oh, he is so different from me.” Still, with effort and devotion, common ground can be found. If you have to “speak a foreign language” for a while, do so.

The use of the word *anochi*—I—teaches us that G-d put Himself, His very essence, into the Torah. The lesson for us is that we must likewise put our heart and soul into our marriages.

*Who took you out of Egypt?*

Why does G-d keep reminding us where we come from? Is it so pleasant to keep hearing that we were once slaves? Can't we just forget the past and “move on”?

We all come from somewhere. Much as we would like to start fresh as newborns from the wedding on, and have no baggage—the fact is we all come into marriage carrying our backgrounds, childhoods, habits, expectations, differences and perhaps even—G-d forbid—traumas. If we have something in our past that we need to deal with, we must do so and not sweep it under the rug. Anything swept under the rug today will only grow bigger by tomorrow, or next week, or ten years from now. Sooner or later it has to be taken out, examined and laid to rest. Sooner is much better than later. You can really hurt yourself, as well as other members of your family, if you trip on all those lumps under the rug.

Until we acknowledge our baggage, the temptation exists to

blame our insecurities on our husbands. Is there something within us that needs to be dealt with, something from way back?

We are not the only ones who have a past. Our husbands, too, come from a different home, went to a different school, perhaps grew up in a different culture. As similar as we think we may be, we are still going to be different. Sometimes a woman gets upset about something her husband does or doesn't do because she makes the assumption that "he should know." For example, you may have a way of celebrating your birthday growing up where you always had a cake and received presents. But things may have been done quite differently in his parents' home. So, if you never explain what you expect on your birthday, you can't be upset if your husband doesn't know that you want a cake and presents. Each partner must take the other's past into consideration.

## **2. Do Not Have Other Gods Before Me**

Don't look at other men; don't compare your husband to other women's husbands.

Recently my phone rang, and it was a woman I didn't know. She wanted to talk. She was unhappy. She was married several years, and suddenly realized that her husband was not as smart, polite, fine, well-brought-up, sophisticated, as . . .

As she spoke, I felt that part of her sentence was missing. "He's just not as good as . . ." "As whom?" I asked.

She would not answer. Pressing harder, I asked if they had been out recently with another couple. Taken aback, she exclaimed, "Oh, you saw us at the restaurant?" (The fact is that I did not even know to whom I was speaking!)

I assured her that I had not seen them, but explained that it was clear she was comparing her husband to someone else, and I asked her to tell me what happened.

She wistfully described how the night before, at the restaurant, her friend's husband had pulled out the chair for his wife, taken her coat and respectfully hung it up for her. Her own husband never noticed her chair or her coat. The other woman's husband had known just what to order, and had even known his wife's preferences. Her own husband sat there waiting for her to order for him, announcing that he hated fancy food. Then he joked about people who eat anything other than steak and potatoes. The other man had been so sophisticated and genteel, while her own husband inadvertently insulted the waiter. Why, the other husband had even known *all about wines!* She had come home feeling very disappointed in her husband.

This is absurd, of course. Knowing which wine to order does not a good husband make! One could argue that the opposite is true.

Focus on the good that is in your husband, the things that matter. By recognizing them, you will strengthen them. Thanking him for his patience while learning with the children, for example, will strengthen that quality in him. Acknowledge and reinforce the good.

Comparing leads only to trouble. This is your spouse; there is no other.

## **3. Do Not Say G-d's Name in Vain**

Don't speak about your husband lightly or needlessly.

We sometimes have a tendency to put down our husbands in a laughing, joking way. Why? Is there a purpose? What good can it possibly do?

A couple shops together at the supermarket. As they stand at the checkout counter, the wife remembers that she forgot to get something. She sweetly asks her devoted husband to go back down the aisle and get her favorite cereal. As she watches her husband go up and down the aisles—dairy, frozen, produce, cleansers—looking for *her* favorite cereal that *she* forgot, she turns to the woman on line behind her and says, "Can you believe this guy? He's going through the whole supermarket looking for cereal! *Men!*" Now, what was that for? What did these words accomplish? Why is this condescending husband-bashing necessary?

We all have a need to air our feelings. It helps to hear that others deal with similar situations—that a certain behavior is just "typical male" and not to be taken personally. This is why I strongly encourage women to have a mentor (a *mashpia*), a good friend, someone to talk to. We all need that heart-to-heart sometimes. It is healthy to have someone close and reliable with whom to confidentially and privately discuss issues that are weighing on us. This is not needless talk. This is conversation with a purpose, where one speaks of one's husband with respect. Quite different than flippantly and publicly putting him down.

A couple married only a year came to see me. They were in shock. They had just heard that a rumor was going around the wife's hometown saying that they were getting divorced! The trouble was that they were the last to know. *There was no truth to it whatsoever.* The mystery soon became clear.

The wife was a very young woman now living in Israel, her husband's country. Immediately following their wedding, it was necessary for her to accustom herself to a foreign language and an entirely new culture, far from home and far from anyone she knew. At the same time, she had to adjust to married life. This is never an easy challenge, and of course there were some difficult moments.

One day, not long after getting married and moving to Israel, a friend called. Hearing her friend's voice brought her homesickness to the fore. The stressed newlywed allowed herself the luxury and release of a long, tearful whining session to her equally young, as-yet-unmarried and still-in-school friend. She cried about how lonely and homesick she was—how difficult all the adjustments were.

This inexperienced, young schoolgirl, clearly the wrong person to confide in, hung up the phone quite unhappy and overwhelmed. She had been handed a burden that was too heavy for her. So she shared it. She told her mother that her friend was miserable in her marriage and wanted to come home. It wasn't long before the divorce story spread around town, especially since nobody in America ever saw the young woman, who had actually made the adjustments quite admirably in her own way, managing quite

well with her new husband in Israel!

Fortunately, this couple is still happily married, albeit with a lesson learned. We must remember to speak to others about private issues only when there is a clear purpose, and we must carefully choose to whom we speak, as well as when and where.

#### **4. Remember the Day of Shabbat and Keep It Holy**

##### *Remember*

Remembering is a good thing. Create good memories for yourself and your family. Time spent together, a smile, a note, a picture, birthday parties and family affairs are all wonderful memories. Pull them out of your memory bank when things get tough. Give your children memories to share. We all have good memories of some sort, collected from our childhoods, that surface at different times in our lives and give us strength. Create new ones in your married life together. Allow yourself, encourage yourself to dwell on the good times.

I once spoke with a woman who works with couples going through divorce. I wanted to help couples reconcile before they moved on to something as tragic and final as divorce. She told me how she knows whether there is hope for a couple to reconcile or not. She asks them conversationally, "So, how did you meet?" If they answer with a little smile, with a glimmer of some positive emotion in their eyes, she knows there is still hope. If they say they can't remember or look back at her, stony-faced . . .

*Keep* (literally, "watch")

Shabbat is the day when we reinforce our bond with G-d, a day we spend time on spiritual pursuits as opposed to "another day, another dollar."

*Make time* for your marriage. Take a day off, an evening away—some time with no phones, doorbells or other distractions.

A very busy man was always promising his wife to take time off to be alone with her, but it never worked out. He just didn't have the time in his day, he said. She had no doubt he was truly busy with important things. One day, she told him that one of his biggest supporters had called, saying he would be coming to town. She told him she scheduled a meeting for them in the lobby of the hotel where the big supporter would be staying. Her husband duly and gratefully marked the appointment on his calendar. When he showed up to the appointment with two hours cleared to spend with his supporter, he found his wife waiting for him. She said, "I am your biggest supporter, and I need some time with you."

Realize who your biggest supporter really is, and give him or her the time and attention he or she needs and deserves. Ultimately, your relationship stands to profit.

*To sanctify it, to keep it holy*

What can make our marriages richer, stronger and longer-lasting? We must recognize that there is a third Partner in our marriages, G-d. Holiness is the most important word in a Jewish marriage. Treat your marriage as the holy union it is.

Marriage is not just about the two of you. It is not about what

you want or what he wants. It is about you, him and G-d. What does He want? If you both focus on pleasing Him, you will ultimately please yourselves and each other as well.

The subject of *kedushah* (sanctity) in marriage is a topic in its own right. One must always remember that under the marriage canopy, G-d was invited into this union, and thereby made it a legal marriage "according to the law of Moses and Israel." As long as we respect and uphold that, making it part of our daily lives, we will merit that our home be blessed by G-d.

#### **5. Honor Your Father and Your Mother**

Take this literally. Honor your parents and your parents-in-law. It might be difficult at times. That is why it is a commandment. But if you make the effort to honor your parents, you will gain, and so will your children.

There is such a thing as *too much* involvement. The primary influence and focus after marriage should be one's spouse, not one's mother. When balanced, however, healthy and strong connections with the older generation are beneficial to everyone in the family.

In honoring our parents, especially once they reach old age, we must learn to give them what they need and what they want, not what we think we would want if we were them. In recognition of their age, we need to respect their whims.

As we respect and honor our parents' wishes although they may make no sense to us, so too should we honor our spouses' wishes. More than once I have received calls from men and women (calling in advance of a counseling session) asking me to convince their spouses to see things *their way*. Basically what they are saying is, "Make him think as *I* think; make him feel as *I* feel." People are different. It is so much wiser and more practical to expend effort on respecting the differences, rather than trying to erase them.

#### **6. Do Not Murder**

The Torah commentator Ibn Ezra says the prohibition against murder means "with your hand or with your tongue." Physical abuse and verbal abuse are clearly both forbidden.

When you speak cruelly to someone, you kill his or her character, you destroy their personality. Instead of blossoming, you make the other shrivel.

You may have seen this happen. A very talented, happy, and outgoing young man or woman seems to just withdraw after getting married—as if someone killed all their self-confidence. (If this happens to someone you know, be suspicious. There might be verbal or physical abuse taking place.) One of the main gifts of marriage is the self-confidence we can attain from a spouse who has confidence in us. A spouse's attitude can either build or, G-d forbid, destroy. Living in a critical, hostile environment is a killer. Living in an environment of love, acceptance and support, on the other hand, builds up a person's self-esteem, setting the stage for success in every aspect of life.

As a spouse, recognize the power you hold. Make the effort to encourage, sincerely compliment and express appreciation. If

stealing someone's confidence through verbal cruelty is the equivalent of murder, then uplifting the confidence of another can only be the equivalent of giving them life.

Do not kill: don't kill his personality, his ability to succeed. Every husband and wife can and should be the cheering squad for the other.

### **7. Be Faithful**

What does it mean to be faithful? It means recognizing that there are areas of marriage that are private. It means that we don't reveal our personal issues to the public—that is betrayal. It means that both a man and woman should respect the private space and time within marriage as sacred, and know that what happens there stays there. It means trust.

A man was at work, and heard two of his coworkers discussing an incident that had happened between a man and his wife. As he listened to them laughing at this story, he turned bright red. He recognized the story. It had *happened in his house*. They were talking about *him!*

He realized that his wife had told her friend, who had told her husband, who was now telling his coworker this extremely private story. To him this was a lack of faithfulness on her part, a very important breach of trust, and it was nearly impossible to convince him to go back to her.

### **8. Do Not Steal**

Giving credit where it is due won't cost you a penny, yet can buy you the world.

A man I know earned his degree after many years of study. Whenever someone congratulated him, he replied, "The credit really goes to my wife. She took on extra jobs to support us so I could learn. She took the kids out of the house so I could study."

I know a speaker who starts every speech by thanking her husband. After all, she is standing there, beautiful, calm and well-prepared, while her husband is home putting all the children to sleep. She shares the credit with him.

### **9. Do Not Bear False Witness**

The commandment to be truthful reminds us to have honest and open communication in marriage.

Talk! Say what is bothering you. Please, oh please, just say it! We don't receive the gift of prophecy under the marriage canopy. Some women mistakenly think, "If my husband really loved me, he would know what is bothering me." Not true! If you really loved him, you would just tell him, simply and politely. The same applies to husbands.

Don't accuse—share. Stick with "I" sentences. "I feel uncomfortable when . . ." or "I worry that . . ."

Every time you keep something inside you without revealing what is bothering you, you add a layer of bricks to a wall of your own making. At first you can decide to step over the wall whenever you want. After some time, it requires a little jump. Okay, you think, you can jump over such a low wall whenever you decide to. Soon, however, you may need a ladder, but you can still

get over it when you really want to. As the years pass and you keep adding one row of bricks after another, the wall grows so high and so impenetrable that you just can't get over it anymore. Tragically, communication is now totally blocked by countless issues, some tiny, some huge. Issues that were never aired and never dealt with. With expertise and much effort, the wall can still be brought down, at any stage of life, but think how much more productive and less painful never to have constructed it in the first place.

### **10. Do Not Covet**

*Don't be jealous.* Now, who would be jealous of her own husband? But many women are.

In a lot of situations, especially if the woman is home with the children and her husband goes to work, they are jealous of their husbands' freedom. Husbands can generally come and go whenever they wish, while their wives must find babysitters and make 100 arrangements before they can walk out the door. Men just call out, "Bye! I'm leaving!" and breeze out the door. Often, if a husband is stuck at work and the wife is then stuck at home with supper, homework, baths and bedtime, this can lead to jealousy and resentment.

Every husband should bear in mind the burden that his wife carries, and try to help her as much as possible. In addition to that, he should appreciate and understand her. His verbal appreciation alone can lighten her load more than he can imagine.

Every wife should bear in mind that if she is unhappy and resentful, she should sit down with her husband, or perhaps with a mentor, and figure out what she can do to achieve satisfaction and set herself free from any resentment. Maybe she needs to get out and be in the company of other women. Maybe she needs to work additional hours. Maybe she needs to work fewer hours, or stop working altogether for a while, or try to ease the pressure in some other area of her daily life. Perhaps she needs more help in the house, or presently has inept help. Maybe there is one particular friend who is making her feel this way. Mother-in-law trouble; who knows? With a little thought and some discussion, she can figure out what she needs and attain it without hurting her children, and she can stop being jealous of her husband.

The Ten Commandments apply to all aspects of our lives and in every situation. If we look carefully and deep within, through adhering to these laws we will first be able to rectify ourselves; and from that, we will have the ability to rectify the world around us. The sooner we are able to fulfill the Ten Commandments—both literally and figuratively—the sooner Moshiach will come, and we will be redeemed. May it be now!

*Adei Ad is a community organisation dedicated to strengthening marriages and Shalom Bayis through education and awareness. Our programs include; workshops, education events and shiurim.*

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