

Improving *Chattan/Kallah* Education:

A Piece of C.A.K.E.

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A young couple came to my office for marital counseling three months after their wedding. They are obviously unhappy newlyweds and quite distressed about their situation. A half hour into the session the husband related to me that he did not feel that this marriage could last more than another six months at most. Issues such as overbearing parents and unrealistic expectations on both sides had plagued their brief marriage to the extent that they were both contemplating divorce. His wife then remarked, "Thank God I'm not expecting a baby!" After further discussion, it turned out that this couple had not yet consummated their marriage. They had been sleeping in separate rooms since their wedding and basically had been leading separate lives.

Although this may sound like an extreme example, cases bearing similar problems have become more common nowadays. Couples feel it is easier to get out of a marriage than to try to work things out. Fortunately for this couple, they sought help before it was too late.

Although the divorce rate among Orthodox Jews is relatively low in comparison to the general population, it is steadily increasing. Why?

A few years ago, I embarked on a research project to answer this question. I had several friends from my yeshiva days who were at the time divorced or in the process of marital dissolution. I began to look into our current system of pre-marital education and found many areas where it fails. As part of this study, I sent out 50 surveys to three groups within the Orthodox community: rabbis, engaged individuals, and divorced individuals. These surveys asked the respondents their feelings on what is contributing to the increasing divorce rate among Orthodox Jews and what type of preventive material should be included in pre-marital education.

Based on the responses from these surveys, I developed a structured pre-marital counseling training program to help improve the quality of Orthodox marriages. Many communities do not have a structured program where couples can study under skilled professionals or *Rabbanim*. Although some *Yeshivot* and seminaries offer classes in communication and relationships, very few truly prepare our young men and women for the challenges of marriage.

Our system of pre-marital education is lacking in five basic areas. We need: structure, coordination between *Chattan* and *Kallah* teachers, more time devoted to pre-marital education, inclusion of *Rabbanim* in pre-marital education, and post-marital follow-up counseling.

The Need for Structure

There are many *Chattan* and *Kallah* teachers available to talk with engaged individuals. They discuss the laws of *Taharat Hamishpachah* (laws of family purity) and perhaps include a discussion of what to expect on the wedding night. Very few of these teachers, however, follow a structured format to ensure that everything is covered. While it is understandable that the *Halachot* are important and take significant time to study properly, there are many other crucial ingredients that go into building a healthy marriage. Without proper orientation, these areas are often neglected. Based on my survey, critical topics necessary for successful marital preparation are:

- *Taharat Hamishpacha*
- Communication, conflict resolution and compromising
- Managing finances
- Intimacy
- Unrealistic expectations
- Anger management
- Dealing with families and in-laws

In my counseling sessions, I discuss each of these seven areas with the couples and then incorporate enjoyable activities and role-play assignments designed to promote an understanding of what they have learned.

The Need for Coordination Between *Chattan* and *Kallah* Teachers

I have rarely, if ever, heard of an ongoing dialogue between those who teach brides and those who teach their grooms. Consequently, I often hear *Chatanim* complain that their *Kallot* have been taught more *Halachic* stringencies than they, and vice versa. Communication between the teachers is therefore **essential** to ensure that both the *Chattan* and *Kallah* are on the same page.

The Need for More Time

There is not much that can be done about the time constraints that are placed on *Chattan* and *Kallah* teachers. Many couples have short engagements, which do not provide the time necessary to adequately prepare for marriage. It is also very difficult to reach couples who are not living in the same geographic area and/or do not have a qualified person in their area to instruct them. Despite these difficulties, parents who are planning weddings for their children should recognize the importance of adequate marriage preparation and should find a way for their children to receive it.

The Need to Include Congregational Rabbis in Pre-Marital Education

Nowadays, the most influential rabbi in a young man's upbringing may be his *Rebbe* from yeshiva. However, the *Rebbe* may not know the man's family and therefore may not be the most suitable person to educate the young man about marriage. The rabbi of his *Shul* is more likely to have a greater understanding of the family dynamics and thus may be more suitable to educate the couple. The family rabbi should play an active role.

The Need for Post- Marital Follow-Up

Another critical issue is the lack of follow-up education. This means that after the couple is married, they come back to talk to whomever educated them prior to their marriage. They discuss any issues that may have come up during the first few months and try to resolve them. Part of my policy with couples I have trained is that they must report back after three months, and again after one year of marriage. (Couples who have moved from their pre-marital location must still contact me via telephone, letter, fax or e-mail.) This policy has proven to be very effective.

Should pre-marital counseling and education be required before *Rabbanim* agree to marry a couple? In my study, 82% of the rabbis stated that pre-marital counseling should indeed be required. If it is not mandated, are there other ways to encourage couples to go through pre-marital counseling?

One answer may be to call it something other than pre-marital counseling. The term counseling gives the impression that there is a problem that needs to be corrected. To avoid this implication, I have developed what I call the ***Chattan And Kallah Education*** (C.A.K.E.) program, designed to raise awareness of issues that might arise in marriage. This seven-session program is based on the seven areas respondents to my study indicated were the strongest needs. The seven sessions can be condensed, but it is recommended to allow enough time for couples to process what they have learned. Additionally, classes have been formed where Chattan and Kallah teachers are trained to use this system.

To sum up, there is a great need to improve our current system of pre-marital education of Orthodox couples. This goal can be achieved by structuring our approach, involving local *Rabbanim*, and devoting more time to the process. It is my hope that this model will be used to help strengthen the foundation of Jewish marriage.

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