



MARRIAGE

BRINGING SHALOM INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR EXTENDED FAMILY

— A PACKAGE DEAL

BY LEONARD CARR

FAMILY CELEBRATIONS ARE WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITIES to create new, shared history with loved ones. They are ideal times in which to enhance relationships, forge closer bonds, nurture intimacy, foster goodwill and unity. They provide great opportunities in a very tangible and meaningful way to bring more shalom into the world. The greatness of the opportunity to build shalom is inversely proportionate to the challenge of doing so. It is at the very times when it is most opportune for people to deepen their ties that the forces of division and disunity are unleashed. Simchas are defining moments in family history – the feelings associated with these times affect the culture of the family. Depending on how simchas are managed, they have the potential to create a lasting influence on family relationships – either for good or otherwise.

The reasons for this are many. Marriage is a good example through which to explore a few of the causes of conflict. I will also offer guidelines for how to use simchas as opportunities to further grow your capacity to be an agent of shalom in the world and fully enjoy those precious family events.

Good relationships need to be consciously cultivated and protected. The belief that relationships should or could happen automatically due to some natural fit is the root cause of most relationship woes. This applies to even relationships that you choose. How much more so must it apply to relationships that you fall into by association. There are large numbers of people that you become connected to by marriage or because they are part of some other package. These relationships include in-laws, step-children, business partners and other types of associates. New relationships can deliver



unexpected bonuses and increase your sense of being blessed by the primary relationship that brought special people into your life. On the other hand, new people can feel like a curse. Making them part of your life can seem like paying a very high subscription fee on the relationship that you chose to marry into.

There are natural tensions in all relationships. The closer the relationship the more the inherent capacity it has to generate tension. This is because the more you open yourself to someone, the greater your expectations of them and the more vulnerable you become to the inevitable feelings of hurt, frustration and disappointment that are part of any relationship.

Relationships that people fall into by association rather than choice often have more destructive tensions coupled with little, if any, incentive to address or resolve thorny issues. They are relationships that you need to

accept and find a way to live with if you want to maintain a positive relationship with your partner or whomever you have in common with these additional people.

In the face of relationship challenges, many people act out their feelings in an explicitly destructive way. When people show their feelings openly, then issues can be challenged and resolved. If not, then at least everyone knows where they stand with each other.

The greatest threat comes from those who play the game of being polite and then gossip about family members. The effects of gossip are very real and difficult to combat, because the gossipers pretend friendly motives and when confronted vehemently deny having spoken behind your back.

You can never have a complete picture of a person or the circumstances that influence their behaviour. Like the game of joining dots in a child's colouring book, each

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person in a gabble of gossipers adds few ideas about how to make sense of the scant information at hand. They collaborate to form a picture that seems satisfyingly complete and believe that they have uncovered the truth. The shared picture becomes a concretised reality about which they are certain. Certainty stands in the way of a true relationship – it closes off the possibility of discovering who the other person is. It prevents them from being open and telling you their story. The deeper your negative feelings towards someone, the more that you can be sure you do not know their story. The more you get to know someone's life story, the more you develop an appreciation of their context, challenges and of the experiences that shaped them.

All of these tensions come to the fore and get played out even by the most forbearing people around family simchas. The tensions that arise in relationships result from emotional issues like prejudice, pride, dislike, envy, competition, possessiveness, need for control or dominance, fear and shame. The most dramatic emotional issues are often evoked by issues relating to money. Families may harbour resentments based on beliefs like “she has ulterior motives – she is only after his money”, or judgments like “he is not good enough for her”. There could be envy and competition that you hear in remarks like “just because they have money they think they are great – in the old country they were just tailors”.

Bad feelings can arise from assumptions based on inevitable consequences of a couple becoming more autonomous as individuals, moving in with each other and away from their respective families. Families may express resentment at their family member having changed in ways that lessens the closeness or control that the complaining parties enjoyed prior to the arrival of the new person. There might also be a fear that the new person will take what ‘rightfully’ belongs to the family, like inheritances or material resources.

For these reasons and many more, there is always an underlying mistrust or animosity in families that lives just beneath the surface. People may choose to try and give the benefit of the doubt or ignore

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these issues. When, however, there is a crisis or stress – like a marriage, the birth of a baby, loss or anything that strains and tests relationships – then this animosity either gradually seeps out or suddenly bursts forth. Whenever there is a crisis, then the naked truth of the underlying feelings is exposed.

To avoid conflict, you need to make a commitment to never engaging in any dehumanising speech or non-verbal practices, which include:

1. Gossip
2. Tale-bearing
3. Insults
4. Ridicule
5. Shaming
6. Criticising
7. Complaining
8. Sexism
9. Racism
10. Snobbery
11. Name calling
12. Face pulling
13. Derogatory gestures
14. add your own favourites
...in seriousness or in jest, openly or behind someone's back.

When two people join together in marriage, they also connect their respective families. Each family is a world with its own culture of norms, traditions, expectations and beliefs. Each person carries this family culture inside them, together with the loyalties, guilt, rivalries and other psychological issues that you inherit, mostly unknowingly and against your will, as soon as you are born into and grow up in a family. Each family believes that their culture is normal and superior to other family cultures. They therefore believe it would be best for everybody if their values and expectations prevailed in all decision-making and in the forming of a new, extended family culture.

This approach inevitably leads to conflict and too often even to broken relationships.

In order to prevent or overcome this challenge, you need to enter into a new family with the openness and curiosity of an explorer entering an exotic place. You also need to have the reverence and respect of a guest unsure of the rules, sensitive and alert to the boundaries and tentative in your demands. Joining two cultures takes negotiation of new rules and roles. A fair negotiation requires that both parties believe their approach to family and entitlements in the relationship are equally valid. In order to build authentic connections, you need to start with a curious mind free from preconceptions or prejudice. You need to have a warm, open, soft heart, listening ears, attentive, humble and compassionate eyes.

When you give the benefit of the doubt, you are implicitly acknowledging that you are not all-seeing and all-knowing, and can therefore legitimately assume that any wrongs that you perceive are based on limited information. In the absence of certainty and all the necessary information, you can choose to judge favourably, knowing that on the balance of probability your perception and consequent beliefs about their true motives or intentions were faulty.

To build a house based on the value of shalom, you need to lay foundations of trust and compassion. With goodwill as the cornerstone, the basis is laid for the growth, over time, of deeper empathy and understanding. Taking stock of and acknowledging the contribution that people make to your life results in a sense of gratitude, which in turn gives rise to warmth and generosity. Families who honour these values create a space where hurt and anger do not derail the growth of maturity and mutual appreciation. ■