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By Rabbi Paul Kipnes , 8/17/2015

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If you could share one piece of sage advice with a soon-to-be-married couple – your “secret to a

long marriage” – what would it be?

I thought about this as my wife Michelle and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. Sitting in a fancy restaurant, we toasted with a deliciously dry Viognier. Surrounded by fragrant flowers, watching a beautiful sunset, my bride melted into tears and my heart soared.

I have accomplished a lot in 51 years of life, but being – and staying married – tops the *kvelling* list. We love and are committed to each other and our marriage. We invest time, patience, and understanding into our relationship.

Being married and staying married is hard work, and remaining married is a major achievement, not to be taken lightly. Kids are exhausting, work is overwhelming, and life's pressures, temptations, and frustrations can be intense. While U.S. divorce rates are dropping, divorce still *seems* pervasive, so for many, the expectation of being together “until death do us part” feels unattainable.

So what's the secret to a long marriage?

As I sit with engaged couples, so in love and sure of their future, I wonder: What insights can I provide to increase the odds that their marriage will make it?

I find myself needing to push couples beyond their intense feelings of love in the moment to recognize and embrace the intense work they will need to do in the future. How can I get them to understand that they must work hard to never-endingly nurture their partnership so it lasts a lifetime?

I tell couples to focus on the goal of celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary together. The wedding-day chuppah, cake, flowers, and dress are exciting, but, I remind them, their guests are there not just to wish them well on this special moment. More significantly, they're there to send them off to begin the exciting, adventurous, challenging journey toward their 50th anniversary.

Jewish tradition holds a cryptic message about marriage.

The ancient rabbis embedded the dark vision of the prophet Jeremiah into the *Sheva Brachot*, those seven blessings with which we bless wedding couples. They chose words from Jeremiah, spoken as he sat crying, watching his people be sent into exile and his holy city of Jerusalem lying in ruins. The prophet lamented,

Lo yishama b'arei yehudah uvechutzot yerushalayim... Never again will there be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. The voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bride and the voice of the groom, the jubilant voices of those joined in marriage under the bridal canopy, the voices of young people feasting and singing.

Jeremiah recalls the worst episode in all of Jewish existence at that time. Why insert his dark words into the bright hopefulness of the marriage ceremony?

Read closely. Where Jeremiah said *Lo yishama* (never again), the rabbis preserve *Od yishama* (once again). By switching just two letters from Jeremiah's lament, we can discern three important lessons for a lasting marriage:

1. **Every marriage faces dark times.** By including these words in the wedding blessings, we tell couples: Just like Jeremiah witnessed the darkest hour in our people's history, you, too,

will face moments that cause you to worry that your world will fall apart, too.

I know of no marriage so perfect that it has not faced dark times. And yet, because couples don't generally talk about these challenges with others, this reality – and the wisdom of how to overcome it – are rarely shared with engaged couples. Without that knowledge, they cannot prepare to face the difficulties.

Perhaps we all might speak with others about these uncomfortable truths – the challenges, the disappointments, and our successful responses – so couples can strategize how to address them.

2. **You can make it through the dark times.** Our people, in Jeremiah's time, thought their world had ended, yet here we are, a Jewish people that survived the darkness. Where Jeremiah cried out *lo yishama* (never again will joy be heard), the rabbis blessed *od yishama* (once again it shall be heard). Similarly, we should tell wedding couples: You can, with intention and hard work, refine and redefine your lives together, so that your marriage, too, will again find joy, gladness, and celebration.

"It is not easy," we should warn them. "It takes hard work." Our ancient rabbis toiled ceaselessly to reformulate Judaism to respond to its contemporary challenges. Married couples similarly need to expend boundless energy and unending creativity to keep vitality and vigor in their marriages.

3. **Sometimes seemingly small changes – replacing two letters with two other letters – can transform hopelessness into hopefulness.** For married couples, it can take just two elements – the two partners – to change the dynamics. Two partners who place being married above everything else and who keep focused on the mantra, "We can stay married." Honesty, trust, and, sometimes, couples counseling are helpful, too.

What else might we do?

With eyes wide open, patience, love and a willingness to face the good and the bad, we too can make it to the goal: 50 years of matrimony. [More than 30 long-married friends offered their secrets to a lasting marriage.](#)

In our book [Jewish Spiritual Parenting](#), Michelle and I write,

"There are once-in-a-lifetime experiences that mark momentous transitions. Indelibly etched in our hearts, they capture the blessedness of [life]. They are Shehecheyanu moments – moments of holiness and gratitude – that we cherish forever."

With eyes wide open, we are working hard to finish the journey together. We thank the Holy One for giving us life, keeping us in life, and bringing us to this special moment. Amen.

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