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Step 2: Seal Your Exits

Rabbi: In the previous step, Step 1, we discussed the necessity of commitment to sustaining your relationship. Whatever has motivated you to commit-- whether it be the belief that g-d brought you together or that beneath your relationship lie an unconscious agenda for growth and healing, commitment helps you show up, take responsibility for your actions, and be ready to work on your relationship

even when the going gets tough. Now that you have committed, it is time to seal your exits.

Rivka: Exits are any leaks in your relationship where the energy that should be between you and your spouse is diverted elsewhere. They could be anywhere from the more extreme and catastrophic exits of infidelity and substance abuse to the more potentially benign exits like work, parenting, and using the internet. If any of these activities are being done to avoid being with your spouse, they're called energy leaks, or exits that can leave your marriage lifeless.

The fact that you've committed to your marriage is a great start because it automatically brings back more energy into the relationship. Couples that are not committed are facing every which way but toward their spouse and are extremely susceptible to energy leaks or exits. Commitment allows you to do a 180. In other words, to directly face your spouse and look at the person you may no longer recognize.

Rabbi: Now that you are focused on the relationship how can you make sure the energy stays where it needs to be, between you and your spouse? Before we address that question, let's talk a little more about the ways in which you may be leaking energy outside of the relationship and why you would even want to do such a thing. As we said before, exits are energy leaks that sap the life out of a relationship. Why would you want to render your relationship lifeless? Perhaps because you don't feel safe.



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Rivka: We're not talking about not feeling physically safe, like in the case of physical abuse. We're talking about feeling emotionally at ease, where you don't feel on guard or defensive.

I know that in our relationship if we are experiencing tension, I totally check out and my instinct is usually to avoid dealing with it and instead of talking about my feelings, I do the dishes or clean the house.

Rabbi: Yet our goal should be to create an atmosphere where we can feel safe enough to engage with each other, especially when we are in pain. In most relationships, the opposite is usually the case. When the space between you and your spouse is not safe, you are looking everywhere but to your spouse to find refuge. It's just too scary to turn to your spouse because you have gotten used to the fact that they don't represent safety for you.

Rivka: You know that almost every time you bring up a concern you have, they explode in anger or get defensive, and therefore you're probably finding it much safer to distract yourself by immersing in another activity or finding someone else to talk to who will really listen.

Safety is a basic human need. It's all about survival and when it comes to life and death we will do whatever we need to do to stay alive, even if that means unconsciously pulling the plug on our marriage.

Rabbi: I tell my couples when they first come in that my # 1 goal is to create safety in their relationship. While we will learn more about how to actually create safety in Step 3- detox your marriage and Step 4- acknowledge the other, know that once the relationship is safe, the defenses can come down.

Rivka: When are your defenses up? We are defensive when we feel threatened. When there is something we need to protect. If we are not under threat, we no longer need our defenses. So Step 2, sealing the exits can be a challenge if you don't feel safe and are exiting your relationship.



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Rabbi: As we said before, it could be that you will not be able to seal all of your exits until you do some of the other steps first and that can be OK. I encourage you to seal what you can and know that the more exits you can seal, the greater chance your relationship will repair and heal.

When couples first learn about exits, they often wonder how such seemingly healthy activities such as exercise, housework, or sleeping can

be unconscious attempts to avoid their spouse. If you love working out, the house is a mess, or you are tired, what could be wrong with addressing these needs? The answer lies in your intention.

While it is rather hard to have entirely pure motives in any activity, begin to ask yourself, is one of the reasons I am engaging in this activity to avoid spending time with my spouse? If the answer is yes, then it is an exit.

Rivka: An exit is really a cry for help. Just like your children may “act out” when they are not getting their needs met, adults also “act out” when they are feeling frustrated in a relationship.

Marriage can sometimes be tough and it might be easier to shut down than engage. Especially if you feel like every time you open up, your words and feelings are used against you, it totally makes sense why you would want to figure out a different way to get your needs met.

In the perfect situation, you would like your relationship to change so that you could get your needs met within the marriage. A major step to getting your needs met is to stop getting them met elsewhere. If you don’t deal with your needs within the relationship, nothing is going to be repaired.

Rabbi: Unless there is infidelity and the marriage breaks apart, couples can spend years living an invisible divorce. Instead of soul mates, they are roommates. They may stay together until the kids leave the house, trying to



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make it work but suffering inside or feeling unfulfilled. That's a shame, because your marriage can be better.

Rivka: Start becoming conscious about why you are exiting so you can make an actual choice to deal with the pain you're feeling as opposed to avoiding it by consuming your time with other activities, some of which are so damaging to your relationship.

Make a stretch, challenge yourself and go against your nature by keeping the energy in your relationship instead of letting it exit out.

Rabbi: Therapy, if the right kind, can be helpful and ok, where that therapy is about facilitating your relationship with each other. Even individual therapy can be helpful when it is focused on the issue of the individual as opposed to being an outlet for dealing with marriage problems. Where it gets dangerous is *individual therapy* that encourages you to get divorced or labels spouses without meeting them.

Sounds unbelievable doesn't it, a therapist encouraging divorce? Unfortunately, it is true and more common than you may think. I work with couples all the time where one or both spouses has been encouraged to get divorced by a therapist. In their better judgment, they decided to give it a last ditch effort and have been successful. That is why I am not fazed by anyone that calls me. I have seen how these five steps can transform relationships that have been left for dead by other professionals. I have found that besides cases of physical abuse where your life is in danger, most relationship issues can be dealt with.

Understanding how relationships work and how conflict can serve as a growth opportunity, is a much better strategy in dealing with relationship issues than getting wrapped up in the conflict as an individual therapist or most couples therapists would. Look at the bigger picture. See what growth and healing is trying to happen and facilitate the relationship.



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Too many marriages have been destroyed by bad advice from even well-meaning therapists. Here's something important to understand: it is not a therapist's job to give advice, rather to guide the client or couple to heal themselves.

Rivka: The same goes for friends, family, clergy, etc. Once you get others involved they are not neutral. Some of them have agendas; some have bad relationships of their own and would love to commiserate with

you. Some have issues with controlling men or abusive women. Unless they are a neutral party and a sounding board ***that are going to help you think for yourself***, they may, even with good intentions, poison the way you view your spouse. In order to save your marriage, you have to roll up your sleeves and work on your marriage. Going elsewhere to complain and get advice will usually not solve the problem or be effective at all.

Rabbi: Not too long ago, I published an article in a local magazine about the problem of outsiders interfering in a marriage with advice and guidance. You won't believe how many people came up to me and told me stories about how their marriage was destroyed by people whom they thought were trying to help them. People can abuse their authority or even think they are helping but they aren't.

Be careful whom you trust with the intimate details of your marriage. Your life depends on it. For those who are in a position of authority, refer to a competent professional. Encourage them to work on the relationship and take responsibility for their part instead of egging them on and encouraging the destruction of not only a marriage, but in many cases, a family.

As extreme as it may sound, involving others in your marriage is akin to infidelity.

By seeking involvement from others you are not being loyal to your spouse. Of course, this does not mean you should not seek help together. But seek



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competent professional help together and know ***that the right marriage counselor does not insert himself into the relationship;*** rather he facilitates your relationship so the two of you can determine your destiny.

Rivka: Speaking of infidelity, don't think that it is beyond you. As you could imagine, extramarital affairs usually destroy a marriage. And they are much more common than you think. Let's explore how easy it is to slide down the slippery slope of

infidelity.

Rabbi: If you are dissatisfied in your relationship and socialize with members of the opposite sex, you are playing with fire. Even if you are happy in your marriage, realize that your friends may not be. They may want to get close to you even if that is not your intention.

Facebook and texting the opposite sex is not appropriate for a married person. I am not trying to be harsh. I am telling you the reality as I see it from those who end up in my office and those who call me and share with me the downfall of their relationship.

Rivka: As we said before, the energy needs to stay in the relationship and the exits need to be sealed. Unfortunately, it's easier more than ever to connect with everyone but our spouse. With a push of a button, you are connected, and without some of the risks of meeting in person and being seen in public.

Use your best judgment and set up reasonable guidelines so you don't slide down the slippery slope. Even if it seems normal to double date or socialize with other couples, it's so much easier than you think to fall in love with someone other than your spouse, even if you really love your spouse. Chemistry is strong and can escalate into infatuation if you spend enough alone time with someone that you are attracted to.



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Rabbi: In Judaism there is a prohibition called *yichud*. According to this law, a man is not permitted to be alone with a woman other than his wife or immediate female relative such as mother, sister, or daughter. We will not go into all of the intricacies involved and how the law practically applies. What we **can** learn is that we are human beings and we have urges.

We need to be aware of what we are capable of handling and what we cannot. Even if we think we are not the type to be unloyal to our spouse, safeguards are helpful to protect us from even being tempted. In the laws of forbidden sexual relationships, Maimonides concludes by writing that the failure to observe the prohibition of not being alone with a member of the opposite sex is the biggest direct cause of infidelity.

Rivka: The main lesson to learn from this is that we must protect ourselves by setting up healthy boundaries. Not only does it protect us from going outside of the marriage, it honors the exclusivity of your marriage. You are showing your spouse that “I only have eyes for you.” And no one else could possibly enter the picture.

Rabbi: When you have a sense of inner belonging to your spouse and you demonstrate it through concrete boundaries that sanctify your relationship, you will not run the risk of that energy exiting the marriage. Sealing you exits is a vital step to showing up in your relationship.

Start recognizing how you may exit, and take action to bring that energy back into the relationship. Even if some of your exits may appear acceptable like exercising, eating, taking care of the kids, do your best to purify your intentions and deal with the unmet need that is causing you to escape.

As you seal your exits, you will be able to remove many of the impediments that are getting in the way from you saving your marriage.