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Step 3: Detox Your Marriage

Rabbi: In Step 2: Seal Your Exits, you learned the importance of, and how to, keep the energy inside of your relationship instead of letting it seep out elsewhere. Once you have decided to seal your exits and be face-to-face with your spouse, you may find yourself faced with an uncomfortable proposition, the discomfort of having to deal with the toxic relationship you may have exited in the first place.

This is why it can be so scary to close the exits. It is scary because you no longer have a way to escape or avoid dealing with the poison that might be present in your marriage.

Rivka: That is why the most natural and necessary step after Step 2: Seal Your Exits is Step 3: **Detox** Your Marriage. When you **detox** your marriage, you are allowing for your relationship space to become healthy.

Marriages that need to be detoxed have by definition been infected with toxins. What do we mean by toxins in a relationship?

Rabbi: While toxicity can be present in thought, word, or action, I have found that the most insidious toxins that manifest themselves in relationships come through our speech. When our words are laced with poison, we send daggers into our partner's heart, which infiltrate the blood stream and numb our connection with each other. I feel very strongly about the power of words and their ability to inflict pain upon our loved ones.

It is necessary to focus on this because our society often gives a pass on verbal abuse. Domestic violence and physical abuse have, thank g-d, become taboo in our society. While unfortunately, we have not rid our society of these evils, it is commonly accepted by all rational people that physical abuse is intolerable.



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Rivka: The majority of perpetrators of physical abuse are men and it is considered wrong for men to use their physical strength against women, and rightfully so. When it comes to verbal abuse, many people look the other way, especially when the perpetrators are women. While most women may not be physically stronger than men, they are much more gifted with their tongue and can use it as a harmful weapon.

Regardless of the gender of the abuser or the type of abuse, all forms of abuse are unacceptable and destructive for a relationship. If you are being physically abused, the most important thing you

can do is to make sure that you and your children are safe.

Rabbi: While it is possible to change, and I have worked with cases of mild domestic violence where the relationship improved, safety should be your number #1 concern. Only in an environment of safety can you effectively work on your relationship.

So while the damages of physical abuse to a relationship are self-evident, the harm that verbal abuse and anger cause are not always obvious, especially to the perpetrator. That is why it is particularly important to address this topic because many are not aware of the effect their words and their tone have on others. They may even feel that this is a normal or acceptable way to communicate or behave, especially if this was modeled for them growing up in their home. As we bring more awareness to this topic, I hope that you will learn to see verbal abuse for the real damage that it does.

Rivka: Verbal abuse can be neurologically damaging both for the victim and the perpetrator. If you are on the receiving end of an angry outburst, you may find yourself getting sent into fight or flight mode.

When you are being yelled at, blamed, or shamed, your brain is under major stress and picturing that abusive spouse in front of you will leave you stuck in



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anxiety. As you relate to your spouse in other settings, it might be hard to not constantly be on guard, waiting for the next outburst. The result of being on the receiving end of verbal abuse is that you no longer feel safe. And when you don't feel safe in a relationship, your ability to connect with your spouse is limited. You no longer feel safe to be open or vulnerable as you are too worried about protecting yourself from further damage, and rightfully so. While receiving verbal abuse is harmful to both men and women, it has an especially debilitating effect on men.

Rabbi: While men may not always be the best husbands, deep down in their hearts, their main goal is a happy wife. When his wife is unhappy, a man feels a sense of failure, like he is not doing his job. Feeling shame and failure are the worst things for a man as his M.O. is to be the provider.

When a woman constantly berates her husband by blaming him or shaming him, he feels awful, even if he does not express his feelings in words. We'll discuss in a little bit about how you can find more effective ways to communicate your feelings without resorting to negativity and hurting your spouse. In the meantime, know this: blaming and shaming are the worst things you can do to your spouse, especially to a man.

Rivka: What about for the perpetrator? How could verbal abuse be damaging to them? If anything, perhaps it would be *helpful* to vent! There used to be many in the field of psychology who actually thought it was productive to express anger instead of keeping it pent up inside. Keeping anger inside can be unhealthy and the hope of letting it all out would be that it would dissipate and that the real underlying emotional issues could be dealt with. Unfortunately, this can be downright abusive and even selfish if the recipient of the anger is present.



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The thought of helping one's self by hurting others is disturbing to say the least.

Rabbi: While it may still be true that releasing anger can be beneficial if it is done in a very safe way by a skilled professional, and without the recipient of the anger present, the jury is still out as to whether it will be helpful in the long run. The reason that it is questionable as to whether there are long-term benefits for releasing anger is that anger begets more anger.

We know from neuroscience that getting angry reinforces pathways of anger in our brain which enables us to be more angry. Think about yourself for a moment--do you get more angry when you express your anger or when you try to control it? As with anger, so it is true with any emotion, when you put a thought or feeling into words, you intensify those thoughts and feelings. By learning how to quiet yourself down when you are feeling angry as opposed to expressing it, you will see de-escalation, and become less angry in the long run.

Rivka: Anger is one of the most challenging issues to deal with in a relationship, yet it's essential to address in order to detox your relationship and make it safe. Unless one spouse can tolerate being a verbal punching bag for the duration of their marriage, relationships where one or both partners are prone to anger, does not facilitate a loving and connected marriage.

Because anger is such a powerful emotion, it is hard to eradicate it. You don't necessarily have to eliminate your angry thoughts or feelings, but it is necessary to not express that anger in a way that will compromise the safety of your relationship. There are simple tools you can learn to change your verbiage so that your words will no longer be abusive.

Rabbi: In order to be able to transform your anger into a more productive expression, it is crucial to understand what anger is. Anger is essentially a



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protest against lack of connection. Sounds like a funny way to express it but that is what anger is.

As human beings we are born into connection. Although as small children we begin to separate from our mother and become independent, we still crave connection with others and especially with the person who will become our life partner. You desperately desire to connect to your spouse and when you feel disconnected you let them know about it.

Rivka: It's a lot like a child having a tantrum. A child is not emotionally mature enough to express his or her needs through words. Instead, the child cries, screams, throws himself on the floor...you get the picture.

While you may have an adult body, you may very well be a child emotionally. I don't mean this to be condescending; we are all in a process of becoming emotionally more mature. We are all children learning how to grow up. The first step is to be conscious of this process.

Rabbi: The second step is to work to becoming more emotionally mature.

This is really important. Becoming emotionally mature means taking ownership for your feelings and asking for what you want instead of being a victim. Many of us spend our lives in victim mode. We focus on what the other is doing to us, how we have been wronged and how they are responsible for whatever pain we are experiencing in our lives.

As a little boy I loved reading biographies. If you read about the lives of successful people, you will see one common theme in their stories. They took personal responsibility for their situation. They didn't give up if they faced rejection in life. They didn't mope around like a victim. They picked themselves up and moved onward.



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Life is hard and it is easy to play the victim role. You may truly be a victim of injustice and unfair treatment. Unfortunately, most people don't care and won't help you. What can you do to take responsibility for your life and your relationship? How can you be the best you can be?

Rivka: Using your words is a powerful way to achieve emotional maturity and shift out of victim mode. Just as your words are powerful in terms of the damage they can do, they can empower you to take control of your life. Learn how to practice non-violent communication.

Replace the word "you" with "I". Instead of focusing on what your spouse is doing to you by berating them, "**You** always do this, or **you** are such a bad husband." Instead, share what you are feeling.

"When you didn't call me yesterday, **I** felt hurt." Using "I" statements takes the focus off your spouse and does not put them on the defensive. Using "I" allows your spouse to focus on you and your needs as opposed to what they are doing wrong. Instead of escalating the conflict, your spouse would be more likely to be responsive and meet your needs, which is ultimately what you want.

Rabbi: When communicating, begin to think about the end result. What is your goal? Do you want to punish your spouse for hurting you or do you want them to meet your needs? Learn to ask for what you want and you will be surprised that you may receive it.

Rivka: You may find yourself getting what you want if you nag or coerce your spouse, but this is a short sighted attempt to get your needs met. Coercion may get you what you want now but it won't get you a relationship.



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Rabbi: Just look at parenting. As long as you are bigger and stronger than your children, you will get your way. Once your children get big enough, you will find yourself powerless. That is why many young adults take a break from their parents when they realize how toxic their relationship is. The relationships that remain strong and where your opinion is respected are the ones where a strong connection is formed.

Rivka: Like in a marriage, the best way to get your long-term needs met is to express them in a respectful way.

Detoxing your marriage and learning non-violent communication can be a challenge for those who grew up in homes where respect was non-existent. Yelling and screaming, blaming and shaming, may have been hallmarks of daily life. That's why detoxing your marriage requires a conscious effort not to slip into default mode, back to old habits that may be second nature to you.

Rabbi: Detoxing your marriage means becoming an adult and maturing emotionally so that you begin to take responsibility for your words and your actions. You will see an immediate difference in how your spouse relates to you.

Even if your spouse is not interested in working on the relationship, if you work on the toxicity you may be bringing to your marriage, you will see a shift in his/her response to you. When we feel safe, we can give ourselves the permission to open up and be the loving and caring individuals we truly wish to be. Removing the toxicity from your relationship will allow for your relationship space to be clean and healthy and poised to achieve the next level of love and connection.