



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Step 4: Acknowledge the Other

Rabbi: You have committed to your relationship, sealed the exits to prevent energy from leaking out, and now you have detoxed your marriage so that there is a healthy space. Now it's time to finally get to know the person you are facing. This is Step 4: Acknowledging the Other.

Getting to know your spouse means making space for your spouse both when talking and listening. Let's first discuss about how you can acknowledge the other when you are talking as this may be more subtle. Even if you are talking and are the center of attention at the moment, you can still acknowledge your spouse when you are sharing.

Rivka: You have already learned in Step 3 that part of detoxing your marriage and creating a safe space is to change the way you talk to your spouse. You learned about the devastating effects that anger, rage, and verbal abuse can have on your partner. So Step 4, acknowledging the other when talking, means to recognize that you are talking to an "other" person. That "other" has feelings. In order to create a healthy relationship it is important to recognize that what you say has an effect on your spouse. Measure your words carefully.

Rabbi: The one general thought you can have in mind when sharing is to be **intentional**. When you are **intentional** you keep the **goal** in mind.

What do you hope to get out of this conversation? Do you want to inflict pain on your spouse, make them feel bad? Or do you want him/her to hear you and change? If you want your spouse to change or meet your unmet needs, which is what we really want, then we must express those needs in a way in which they will be received. Remember, what is your **goal**? How can I express myself in a way that the other will really get it and meet my



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

needs? That is what we mean when we say *remember that you are speaking to an "other"*.

Besides the actual words you use, your tone of voice, and your non-verbal cues, there is one prerequisite that must be fulfilled whenever you want to acknowledge the other when sharing. And that is...**make an appointment.**

Before you begin sharing with your spouse, ask, "Is now a good time?"

By checking in and asking if it is a good time to talk, you are acknowledging that there is an "other". Just because you have something you want to share, does not mean your spouse is available to hear you. Making an appointment shows that you are considerate of your spouse and their mental and emotional space. Making an appointment allows your spouse to be fully available to hear you.

Instead of dumping on them the moment your spouse walks in the door tired and hungry from a long day of work, find the time when they are fresh and can really show up and be present. This is especially helpful when you are sharing a frustration you have with your spouse or anything else that may trigger a defensive reaction.

Rivka: When you ask me if now is a good time to talk, I automatically shift focus and calm myself down so that I can hear what you have to say instead of react. You will be surprised that most people can listen to their spouse share things that they have never before been able to successfully listen to, and not get reactive, when they have made the decision to be present.

That is why it is so crucial to make an appointment. You want to catch your spouse when they are truly ready to hear you.

Rabbi: And they may not always be ready and that is ok. Don't force the issue but do take a rain check and set up a time within the next 24 hours. Failure to schedule a time to talk will often end up in resentment and the



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

feeling that you are being blown off. **Keep practicing making appointments and you will rewire your brain to be more sensitive and considerate of the other when you are ready to share.** I even have my clients make an appointment with each other before they share in the session just to get in the habit. Even though they made an appointment for the session, it is always good to reinforce this new way of being. You can even practice this with anyone you speak with.

How many times have you called someone and found them unfriendly or unresponsive? While I always say, don't answer your phone if you can't talk, try checking if now is a good time to talk, or ask when they are available. You will get a more responsive listener, and achieve better results.

You've just learned how to acknowledge the other when talking, now let's explore how you can acknowledge the other when listening. I have found acknowledging the other when listening to be one of the most transformative tools my clients learn. Couples who were ready to give up on their marriage were able to find new hope for their relationship when they felt their spouse was really learning to listen to them.

You may feel your spouse will never change. If that's the case, you may feel that nothing will work to improve the relationship. What I have found is that when we feel that our spouse is capable of listening, understanding us, and having compassion and when we are able to listen, understand, and have compassion for our spouse, our perspective immediately shifts. We begin to believe that our relationship can be different because we see in real time how it can be different.

I often tell couples to come for one session and experience this new way of being in a relationship where you both can acknowledge the other through



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

sharing and listening. Once you have seen that you can do it, you will know that your relationship can be different.

Rivka: While improving your relationship will take work, once you can experience it being different, even momentarily, many of the issues we addressed in Step 1, with regards to commitment will be resolved. Once you know your relationship can be better, you will commit to put in the work to reach your goal. If acknowledging the

other through listening can provide newfound hope for couples on the brink of divorce, why aren't we all rushing to do it?

Rabbi: We are not all rushing to do it because it is not as easy as you think. Besides the fact that we may not know how to listen in a way that acknowledges the other (and we will share later on how to actually do that) we have one major obstacle getting in the way: our brain.

The brain is an amazing organ, one that enables us to connect in the deepest way with another but also disconnect in the most harshest manner. Neuroscientist Dr. Paul Mclean came up with a model in the 1960s called the *triune brain*.

He posited that the brain can be divided up into three parts: the neomamalian brain or cereberal neocortex, the paleomamallian brain or limbic system, and the reptilian brain or brain stem. For those of you that don't remember your anatomy, don't be scared off as this model can change the way you view yourself and how you react in your relationships.

Rivka: Basically the brain is divided up into a logical, emotional, and reactionary brain. When we are under stress, the brain's main mission is self-preservation. That means we go straight to our reptilian brain.



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Rabbi: In our reptilian brain, we experience danger and we either go into fight or flight. When we are in fight or flight mode, we are unable to fully process the situation with our emotional brain or our logic brain. We act on instinct and we want to protect ourselves above all else. In our stressful society, many of us spend a majority of our time in our reptilian brain.

Rivka: If you are listening to this program, you surely know how much harder it is to have marital

strife and parenting challenges on top of that. That is why it is essential to be able to learn tools to help you deal with stressors so that you can function on a whole brain level. Tools that can help you create safety and calm so you don't get stuck in panic mode. Here's a great story about how safety and calm can help us get unstuck.

Rabbi: A colleague of mine was once travelling for Thanksgiving Day weekend. As you may know, Thanksgiving weekend is the busiest travel time of the year in the United States.

My colleague was at the airport waiting for his flight and he noticed that his flight had been seriously delayed. This would mean that he could not catch his connecting flight, making it impossible for him to arrive for his family's Thanksgiving celebration. I'm sure many or most of you have experienced similar aggravation at the airport.

Naturally, many other passengers suffered a similar fate, and you can imagine they were quite annoyed. They approached the ticket counter and harassed the agent, aggressively pushing her to provide the latest updates or be transferred to another flight. After witnessing this behavior which ultimately proved unfruitful, my colleague approached the agent and with his inimitable southern drawl, showed concern for the agent.



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

“These people are really giving you a hard time,” He said. “It makes sense that you would be feeling really stressed out.” Suddenly, the frazzled airline agent perked up and took a deep breath. Instead of being harassed, she felt heard and validated by my colleague. A few minutes later the agent was able to find another flight for my colleague and he was able to arrive at his family’s Thanksgiving dinner in a timely manner. How is it possible that the agent was unable to help the other customers who had been

bothering her for the last thirty minutes and only now was she able to help my colleague?

Rivka: The answer is that when we are under stress, we are not able to access our full brain. When we are stuck in our reptilian brain, we can’t access the logic part of our brain, the part of our brain that allows us to be resourceful. It was only when the airline agent was able to achieve calm and thereby be able to get unstuck and access her full brain, that’s when she was able to be resourceful and do her job with utmost efficiency.

Rabbi: As a side note, when I work with corporations, I share with them this story. I stress, no pun intended, that a calm workplace will create the most efficient output. Similarly, in your relationship with your spouse, the more you can achieve calm in your home, the better working relationship you will develop with each other.

Rivka: In the meantime, as you are working towards achieving more calm, it is important to note how we typically react when we don’t feel safe.

Growing up as children, we learned how to adapt to our environment. While some of us grew up in what we may have deemed **normal** homes, others grew up amidst severe dysfunction and chaos. Regardless, we all learned ways to protect ourselves when we did not feel comfortable or safe. We either learned to maximize our energy or minimize our energy.



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Much like fight or flight, maximizing or minimizing were ways to express our energy to protect ourselves.

Rabbi: In Imago therapy, this is called turtles and hailstorms. The turtle is the minimizer. Very often a man, when he does not feel safe, retreats into his shell, as does a turtle. As the hailstorm rains down hail on his shell to get his attention, the turtle retreats further and further until he can't take it anymore. He then becomes a snapping turtle and explodes.

Rivka: The hailstorm, often a woman, gets safe in a different way. Her biggest need is to be noticed and she will do whatever it takes to get the turtle to notice her. She may make a big scene to get the turtle's attention. She may nag or suffocate. When she notices that it does not work, she makes even more noise.

As you can see from the story, neither the turtle nor the hailstorm feels safe. In fact, what each one does to feel safe and protect themselves has the opposite effective on their spouse. The more the turtle retreats to protect himself, the more the hailstorm feels unsafe and attacks. The more the hailstorm tries to get noticed, the more the turtle feels unsafe and hides.

Rabbi: Take this typical example of a couple. A wife, her mother was an alcoholic and physically and verbally abusive. As a little girl, she learned to emotionally check out and avoid contact as it was unsafe. She would hide in her room to avoid her unpredictable mother. As an adult, when she experiences vitriol and anger from her husband, she does what she knows best to protect herself.

Of course, this triggers her spouse who has the opposite story. As a little boy, he experienced his parents as negligent. If he wanted to get his needs met, he learned to make a lot of noise, to fight and to nudge. This was how he survived. As an adult, when his wife checks out emotionally, he



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

becomes even more aggressive, making her feel more unsafe and leading her to pull away even more. They both trigger each other and get in a vicious cycle where no one gets their needs met and both feel hurt.

Rivka: How do we break this cycle? Ultimately, we all want safety but the ways that were effective for us as children, just don't work for us in a marriage. Creating safety in your relationship will help you not have to slip into these adaptations. We create safety by engaging in a

process that helps slow us down so that we don't function on auto-pilot.

When we engage in a process that slows us down and allows us to be more intentional, we will discover new realities about our situation. And we won't have to be labeled as a turtle or a hailstorm anymore.

Rabbi: Before we learn the step of the Imago dialogue process, there is one powerful rule to keep in mind that will forever change the way you look at your spouse. That rule is called the **90/10 rule**. The 90/10 rule posits that anything that really triggers us or pushes our buttons is 10% the actual current trigger and 90% past associations with this trigger.

Rivka: Did you ever wonder why it ticks you off when your husband can't listen to what you have to say but when you speak to your friend about the same issue she is not bothered by it?

While there are various behaviors that we may all find objectionable, if you notice yourself really worked up over something your spouse did or said, realize that something deeper might be going on here.

Rabbi: Take the couple we just mentioned. The wife checked out emotionally when she felt unsafe. The husband upped the ante in response. Once they were able to understand why they triggered each other, they were able to approach the situation from a more neutral perspective.



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

By understanding his wife's troubled past, he was able to make sense of why she wanted to check out when she felt unsafe. Instead of allowing that to trigger him and fight back, he realized that it would be better to share his feelings in a calm manner.

Rivka: Conversely, she was able to realize that when he was nudging her and being outspoken, he was not her mother. He was her loving husband. Instead of disengaging,

she was able to make herself feel safe enough to entertain the notion that her marriage was not her childhood.

Our childhood, for better or for worse, shapes who we are. While it does not necessary limit us or damn us to a reality we would rather not re-experience, if we don't become conscious, we can't make the conscious choice to live life differently.

Rabbi: The 90/10 rule helps us become conscious. It helps us get out of our reptilian brain and to see the big picture. When we are in our reptilian brain, time does not exist. We can't distinguish between past, present, and future, so that when we **do** get triggered, we experience the present as if we are right back in that painful childhood experience.

As we create safety, this enables us to make the distinction between the past and the present and be open to the possibility that the future can be strikingly different.

Rivka: How much of your complaints about your spouse are really about your spouse, and how much are about your reaction based on your past? When you take ownership for your role and your reactivity, you can do your part to de-escalate the conflict you may be experiencing in your relationship.



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Rabbi: When I work with couples, I teach them the Imago dialogue process as I feel that it is the most simple and effective way for them to create safety, get conscious, and take ownership for their relationship. The dialogue slows the conversation down so that we are less likely to react.

Rivka: It is a very structured process that can feel rather annoying in the beginning.

Rabbi: While it is an artificial way of relating, it retrains couples how to be in a relationship safely, how to understand each other and most importantly, how to connect.

Rivka: Sounds great right?

Rabbi: Let's explain how the process works and then Rivka and I will do a demo so that you can hear what it sounds like.

Every dialogue has a sender and a receiver. The sender is the one who shares. As we mentioned before, acknowledge the other by making sure it is a good time. If it is a good time, begin talking.

Rivka: The receiver's job is to listen and not respond. Instead of remaining silent, the receiver has a very important role and that is of a mirror. The receiver mirrors back what the sender says, repeating as close as possible what was shared without interjecting or disagreeing. After mirroring, the receiver will ask the sender, "Did I get you?"

Rabbi: "Did I get you?" is what we ask to make sure we mirrored back accurately. If the answer is no, the sender should say, "What I would like you to get is..."



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

If the answer is yes, the receiver proceeds to ask, “Is there more?” showing curiosity that we really want to hear what our spouse has to share. Try to get curious and understand the other and not take it personally.

Rivka: Mirroring helps us self-regulate and achieve a place of calm within so that we don’t need to respond or take it personally as we would normally do. Mirroring helps us acknowledge the other and recognize that there is an “other”

way different than ours that is equally as valid.

When there is no more, the receiver summarizes everything the sender shared. Once that is accurate and there is no more, the receiver proceeds to validate the sender. The simplest way to validate is to say the following: “What you’re saying makes sense and you make sense.”

Rabbi: Many couples have a hard time saying this as they think it means that they are agreeing. Making sense does not necessitate agreeing.

Making sense means that you validate the right of your spouse to have a different perspective, a different reality, a different world if you will.

Rivka: Now you don’t want to say “it makes sense in **your** world,” implicitly saying that you disagree. Keep it simple, picture yourself in your spouse’s shoes and really let them know that “what you’re saying makes sense and **you** make sense.”

Once you are done validating, it is time for empathy. Guess two emotions that your spouse may be feeling about the situation they shared.

Rabbi: I imagined you may be feeling sad, mad, glad, scared. Really try to feel what it must be like in your spouse’s world and have compassion for their story. Check and see, “Is that what you’re feeling?”



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

If the answer is yes, you are done. If no, the sender should say what they are feeling. When I work with couples, I guide them to explore the 90% of the 10% that they are sharing. I ask them what this reminds them of in their childhood. This may be dangerous to do to your spouse as they may feel that you are trying to play psychologist. If you are both committed to learning this process together, try to share on your own what this situation may bring up for you. If you and your spouse are feeling safe enough, you

may want to ask if this is a familiar feeling from childhood.

Rivka: Even if you don't explore the childhood piece together, you may be able to make the connection based on what you know about your spouse's upbringing. Even if the connection is not apparent, you can at least still have compassion by recognizing that there is probably a deeper trigger than what appears on the surface.

Rabbi: Take a look at the example in my book about the dry cleaning story. It will help you see the power of the dialogue process. In the meantime, Rivka and I will model for you the process so you can get a better feel for how it works:

Rivka: Shlomo, I'd like to invite you into my world to share something, is now a good time?

Shlomo: Sure.

Rivka: When I am trying to straighten up the house and ask you for your help, I get frustrated when you don't always respond right away.

Shlomo: What I heard you say is that when you are trying to straighten up the house and you ask me for help, you get frustrated when I don't always respond right away. Did I get you?



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Rivka: Yes.

Shlomo: Is there more?

Rivka: Yes, you tell me to write you a list of things instead of reminding and interrupting you every few minutes to do something else.

Shlomo: So you said that I tell you to write you a list of things instead of asking me every few minutes and interrupting and reminding me to do something else. Did I get you?

Rivka: Yes.

Shlomo: Is there more?

Rivka: Yes, I don't want to write a list. I want it done when I ask.

Shlomo: You said that you don't want to write a list, you want me to do it when you ask me. Did I get you?

Rivka: Yes.

Shlomo: Is there more?

Rivka: Yes. I am afraid that if you don't do it when I ask, it's never going to get done.

Shlomo: S you said that you are afraid that if I don't do it when you ask, it's never going to get done. Did I get you?

Rivka: Yes.

Shlomo: Is there more?



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Rivka: No.

Shlomo: So, in summary what I heard you say is that it frustrates you when you want me to get things done around the house and instead of doing them right away, I ask you to write everything down. You want it done when you ask as you are afraid that if you write a list I will never get around to doing it. Was that a good summary?

Rivka: Yes.

Shlomo: Is there more?

Rivka: No.

Shlomo: What you're saying makes sense and you make sense. I imagine you are feeling scared. Is that what you are feeling?

Rivka: Yes.

Shlomo: Is there more that you are feeling?

Rivka: No. Thanks for joining me in my world.

Shlomo: You're welcome.

While there may be a deeper fear or frustration that Rivka is feeling, we will not explore that now. Think about how this dialogue went and how a similar conversation may go without using the dialogue.

Rivka: You could have gotten defensive and explained why you needed a list or how unfair it felt to be expected to do something the moment I ask, regardless of what you are doing.



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

Shlomo: That is how I normally would have responded if not for this structure. It helped me be present with your reality and your feelings and enabled me to put mine aside for the time being.

Rivka: While we all know that it feels nice to feel heard without a defensive response, many people ask... now what? How does this actually go beyond a nice conversation and lead to change in the relationship?

Shlomo: While we discuss this in the 5 step action plan book, let's review briefly some of the ways that this process brings about real change.

First of all, I believe you really want to meet your spouse's needs if you could. The problem is that you are too scared. When we feel unsafe, we are afraid to give as we are worried we will not receive anything in return or will be taken advantage of.

Rivka: In a safe relationship, we don't need to keep up the walls that protect us from getting hurt. The dialogue creates safety. This safety helps both the sender and the receiver. It helps the sender and the receiver feel connected.

Rabbi: The root of most issues in a relationship is lack of connection. When we feel connected to our spouse, some of the seemingly trivial issues which become big issues are no longer as important. Instead of approaching the situation from a defensive posture, both sides can be more flexible with their position.

Rivka: If I heard your story and your feelings about this, I may be more sensitive to your needs for a list and less nagging.

Shlomo: And I could be more sensitive to the anxiety you may be feeling and be less judgmental about feeling that you are bossing me around. So



MARRIAGE
Mastery
SCHOOL FOR
SUCCESS

one or both of us can change by hearing each other. That change is often small steps that we like to call *stretches*.

Rivka: Stretches are conscious acts for the sake of the relationship that we undertake as we become more sensitive to what each other wants and needs.

Finally, as we get safe and leave our reptilian brain, we are able to come up with solutions together that are a win-win, where both of us get our

needs met.

Rabbi: So to recap, change occurs from the dialogue process in the following ways:

- 1) When we feel heard, the issue often goes away on its own.
- 2) When we hear our spouse, we stretch and respond accordingly.
- 3) We become resourceful and solve the issue on our own or together.

Rivka: Don't get discouraged if you have trouble at first with the dialogue process. Like learning any new skill it takes practice and patience. But it will be worth the effort you invest because when you learn to acknowledge the other through sharing and listening, you will notice a dramatic change in your relationship.

You will once again be able to experience the other as a friend, as someone you can appreciate for being who they are.

Rabbi: More importantly, you will have new-found hope that you truly have a partner that you can work with and enjoy a healthy relationship together.