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Like many other newly married couples, life became stressful for Rabbi Shlomo Slatkin and his wife Rivkah shortly after the birth of their first child. Shlomo, who was in the middle of getting his master’s degree in counseling while simultaneously studying for semichah, found himself unprepared for the typical challenges the marriage was facing. A friend recommended Imago therapy, and having vaguely heard about it before, the Slatkins decided to give it a try.

“We were amazed at how connected we felt after just a single one-and-a-half-hour session,” Rabbi Slatkin recalls. In fact, Rabbi Slatkin was so impressed by the efficacy of Imago therapy that he decided to learn more about it. Today, 11 years later, he is a certified Imago relationship therapist, using his skills to transform relationships in crisis. In a conversation with AmiLiving, the Baltimore-based counselor discusses the basic premises of this approach to therapy, and what makes it so unique.
DISCOVERING IMAGO

“It was interesting how it worked on a practical level,” Rabbi Slatkin says of that first Imago session. “Instead of arguing with each other, which we expected, we were able to discuss a difficult issue and actually connect to each other because of it. I was so inspired that I decided to pursue a specialty in working with couples, and enrolled in Imago training.”

Imago therapy distinguishes itself from other forms of marriage counseling by its distinct focus on the relationship as the “patient.” Because Imago views healing as taking place in the context of that relationship, Imago therapists will only see couples together and never separately.

“To me, it just made sense. I immediately sensed many parallels between the principles of Imago and Yiddishkeit. The therapy focuses on the original deep connection between husband and wife, and how that connection is never broken, no matter how disconnected they may feel. This is sort of like our relationship with Hashem, which can never be severed. I therefore saw Imago as a very spiritual and holistic way of dealing with relationships. Instead of focusing on the particular issues couples often get stuck in, we try to step back and look at the bigger picture of their connection to each other. Sometimes couples come to me in a last-ditch effort to salvage their marriage, and because of this broader view they are able to see that their conflict is actually an opportunity for growth, both individually and for the relationship.”

UNCONSCIOUS FACTORS AT WORK

Imago relationship therapy was developed in 1980 in Dallas, Texas, by Drs. Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt. Today there are over 1,200 trained practitioners using this therapeutic approach. Imago, which comes from the Latin word for image, is defined as “an idealized mental image of someone, especially a parent, which influences a person’s behavior.” Rabbi Slatkin explains that, according to Imago theory, people have an unconscious image of the opposite gender, based on their childhood experiences, and an unconscious image of what kind of spouse they are looking for. They are drawn to someone with both the positive and negative characteristics of their primary caregivers, forcing the new couple to deal with their respective unmet childhood needs—which we all have to some degree. Rabbi Slatkin points out that if given the correct tools, this can actually strengthen a couple’s relationship in a deeply meaningful way.

“We’re attracted to the familiar in order for us to be able to get it right this time around. Even if we had a good childhood, we still want to unconsciously recreate the circumstances in which we grew up. There’s a saying, ‘Marriage is the unfinished business of childhood,’ and that’s what we believe. For example, if you felt that you weren’t heard as a child, you might marry someone who makes you
feel the same way. This can come about in one of three ways: picking, projecting, or provoking.

“The first way is to marry a spouse who brings up these very same issues. What that means is that if a person wasn’t heard as a child, she’ll actually be pulled to someone who won’t listen to her now. Now, let’s say you didn’t marry someone who doesn’t listen to you; he actually does listen to you, but because you need to deal with this issue you convince yourself that your spouse is a bad listener. You project your own issue onto the other person. The last possibility has to do with provocation. You complain so much to your spouse that he isn’t listening to you that you provoke him into not even wanting to listen.

“That’s why very often something that bothers you about your spouse wouldn’t bother someone else at all. Let’s say my wife does something that irritates me, but my friend wouldn’t care in the least if his wife did the same thing. That’s why you unconsciously married this person, but now as an adult in this relationship you can go back, so to speak, and fix the underlying problem. With the imago approach the couple can try to solve the deeper issues that actually drew them to each other—the real issues that lie beneath the pettier ones that seem to be separating them. The Imago therapist is there to facilitate that connection and to provide a safe environment in which to explore these issues.

“From the Imago perspective, that initial attraction is what gets us to marry each other. In Yiddishkeit we believe in meshichas halev (literally “a drawing of the heart”), which is why even if everything makes sense on paper, if there is no spark drawing two people together they will not choose to marry. There’s something in our unconscious that draws us to another person and helps us decide to spend the rest of our lives with him or her.

“A person can go on a lot of dates and have a great time, but be pulled toward only one person. What typically happens is that this meshichas halev is rather blinding, causing one to overlook all the other person’s potential issues. It’s sort of like anesthesia, covering up all the negatives. Then, after a commitment has been made, problems may arise and the person will say, ‘Who is this person? That’s not whom I wanted to marry!’ But by working together, the couple is able to recreate that original connection in a real and meaningful way.

“In my book, entitled The Jewish Marriage Book, I draw a parallel between our interpersonal relationships and our relationship with Hashem on Pesach, during sefirah, and on Shavuos. On Pesach there is this sudden burst of love between Hashem and the Jewish people, but after the commitment has been made, problems show up. Through the process of sefirah we are able to reach a higher and deeper connection: that of Shavuos.”

I ask him if this same initial “spark” always manifests itself, even among those whose custom is for the couple to meet for only a short period of time before deciding whether or not to marry.

“Of course. Because the decision is an unconscious one, it really doesn’t make that much of a difference how much time the couple spends ‘dating.’ Our unconscious is looking for a meshichas halev, and when we do decide to marry, it’s because we have a deep, underlying connection with the other individual.”

**CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT**

Because Imago therapy focuses on the relationship rather than the individual, creating a safe environment in which a couple can discuss the problems that are driving them apart is a priority for Rabbi Slatkin.

“Imago is very structured, which actually helps create that safe environment,” he explains. “In a typical session the couple will come in and after we do a few exercises they initiate a dialogue. Let’s say the wife wants to discuss something specific; she must first ask her husband if it’s a good time for them to talk about it, thereby inviting him to have a conversation. This allows her husband to be able to process her request and decide whether or not he has the strength and focus to engage with her. This kind of heads-up is very important because now he’s not being taken by surprise, and it’s also very helpful when couples apply this method at home. Instead of communicating on different wavelengths and maybe even breaking down and shouting, they are now both prepared to have this conversation.

“The next step is for the spouse to invite the other
into her ‘world.’ After the husband agrees, they move their chairs to face each other and the wife starts speaking. The husband will then mirror what his wife has just said—mirror, not respond—and repeat back what she said. This can continue for as long as the wife wishes to speak. I will sit there, but they talk to each other, not to me. I will occasionally try to steer the conversation or help them express themselves by throwing in key words or phrases, but they are the ones doing the talking. One person is inviting the other to look at things from her perspective. Because the dialogue is so structured they are able to interact differently; instead of chaos there is a sense of calm.

“They learn to listen and to understand the other’s point of view, which then enables them to reconnect on a deeper level. If the wife realizes that there’s a much deeper trigger behind what’s bothering her husband, she can truly understand where he’s coming from and they can work on it. It’s not just about dialogue. It’s an opportunity to open up and share oneself. The dialogue is just the vehicle for enabling that.”

THE COUPLE AS EXPERT

In Imago’s view, explains Rabbi Slatkin, the couple can solve their problems better than anyone else. The therapist is only there to help bring out their inherent wisdom and teach them effective tools to relate in a safe and healthy way.

“We always say that the couple knows what’s best for them.
I would never tell a couple to get divorced, because I'm there for the relationship. We believe in the intrinsic, underlying connection of the marriage.”

But what about a couple that really shouldn’t be together? What does he do in a situation like that?

“I’m not Hashem,” he replies. “It’s not up to me to decide if they’re meant to be together. If they both want to be in this relationship, I am there to help. If one half of the couple has already decided to check out, then there’s only so much that I can do. But I would still try to help.”

I ask where he draws the line. How does he determine that a couple is beyond help?

“A lot of people wouldn’t even entertain the idea of going to therapy. To me, just walking through my door says that there is still a part of the person that wants to reignite the connection, even in the most extreme cases. I run a two-day ‘Save Your Marriage’ intensive workshop for couples in real crisis, and for many it’s an eye-opener. Conflict is inevitable, but conflict, if understood properly, is an opportunity for growth. I have hope for every couple.”

OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Rabbi Slatkin edited and coauthored the Jewish version of *Couplehood as a Spiritual Path*, which is based on Dr. Hendrix’s teachings and is used as a curriculum for shuls. But what about other relationships? Can the same Imago principles be applied to them?

“Imago started out with married couples, but the concepts are applicable to many other situations. It’s all about interpersonal relationships and helping people develop deeper insights. I’ve counseled engaged couples as well as singles having trouble with *shidduchim*, and I find that the better they understand how relationships work, the better they are equipped to form them. I’ve even had sessions with married couples and their parents—the whole family!”

Is he alluding to someone having problems with his *shvigger*?

“Yes, absolutely! Having a bad relationship with in-laws can certainly add stress to a marriage and put a real strain on the family. Business relationships can also be very toxic, and I work with companies to help their employees understand each other. The relationship is obviously much more charged in a marriage, but we can still apply many of the same listening techniques.”

WHY IMAGO?

With so many forms of therapy out there, why would someone choose Imago?

“When a person goes to a medical professional with a specific problem, he goes to a specialist in that particular malady rather than a general practitioner. Similarly, if a person’s marriage is suffering, it’s crucial to go to a therapist who specializes in healing relationships. It is my belief that Imago’s theories and techniques have proven to be successful.
“The structure of Imago therapy provides an element of safety, which most couples seeking help are lacking in their relationships. In addition, the deeper understanding of conflict and the hope it affords couples, even amidst the most difficult challenges, makes Imago compelling.”

**TODAY’S WORLD**

Relationship experts are often asked what seems to have changed in contemporary society, in that so many people are having difficulty in their relationships. Why are so many marriages falling apart? And now that this worrying trend has taken hold, is there anything we can do to reverse it?

“There’s a theory in psychology called Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which basically lists a person’s most vital and basic requirements in order of importance. At the foundation of the pyramid are things like food, water and the ability to breathe. Love is at the very top. Throughout the generations, we’ve always had to deal with basic survival. But in modern times many of those immediate fears have fallen away, and as we no longer have to worry about them, the higher items on the list, like love, are becoming more primary. That is one reason we are seeing a greater focus on and need for satisfying and loving relationships.

“Another factor is that we live in a disposable society. We are constantly upgrading our computers and phones. There’s less commitment in relationships, and we don’t feel the need to work on them. So while we have all these devices, which are all about becoming more and more connected, our interpersonal connections still need to be worked on. The root of a happy home is a healthy relationship.”

I ask if he recommends premarital counseling in order to prepare for potential problems.

“I know that a lot of rabbanim already require some form of premarital counseling before agreeing to be mesader kiddushin for a couple. But it has to be done with a healthy approach. The purpose isn’t to bring out all the negatives. At the same time, the more work you do in advance, the better. An ounce of prevention is the best medicine.

“I ultimately believe that this is the work we have to do before Mashiach’s arrival: reconnecting on a deeper level in all of our relationships, whether between man and G-d, man and his fellow man, and man and wife.”

To learn more about Rabbi Slatkin and Imago Therapy, you can visit http://www.therelationshiprabbi.com/.