

## Five suggestions to help couples thrive this Passover

• By GERSHON SWIMMER

**M**azal tov, you have made it another year and now Passover season is upon you. The *hagim* are known for warmth, good food and fond memories – as well as for creating tension and conflict in couples, which can lead to arguments that can take some of the joy out of what should be a happy time for you and your family.

Here are five suggestions that can help couples reduce stress and create emotional balance this Passover.

### Make having a peaceful holiday your goal

Many fights couples experience, especially during the holidays, come as a result of not having eyes on the right goals. Make having a peaceful holiday your No. 1 goal this Passover and then use that as a starting point as you make your other plans for the holidays. A good idea may be to start by identifying activities that have potential for conflict. Plan how you're going to deal with those situations that might be problematic for you. You may not be able to avoid these events or activities entirely, but you can reduce the amount of conflict that results by keeping your No. 1 goal in mind.

One specific recommendation is to do a five-minute check-in with each other at the beginning and end of each day on how each of you is doing. This steady communication will help you to avoid potentially stressful interaction in the day ahead and voice any concerns or resentment that might have developed throughout the day. During these five-minute check-in sessions, always keep your new goal in mind and make sure your actions and plans are aligned with creating a peaceful holiday for you and your family.

### Don't be afraid to make a plan

The famous cliché “People don't plan to fail, they fail to plan” holds true for couples. Many couples look back at holidays past and realize that they need a better plan, yet never seem to find the time to develop one as each holiday comes and goes. Why is that?

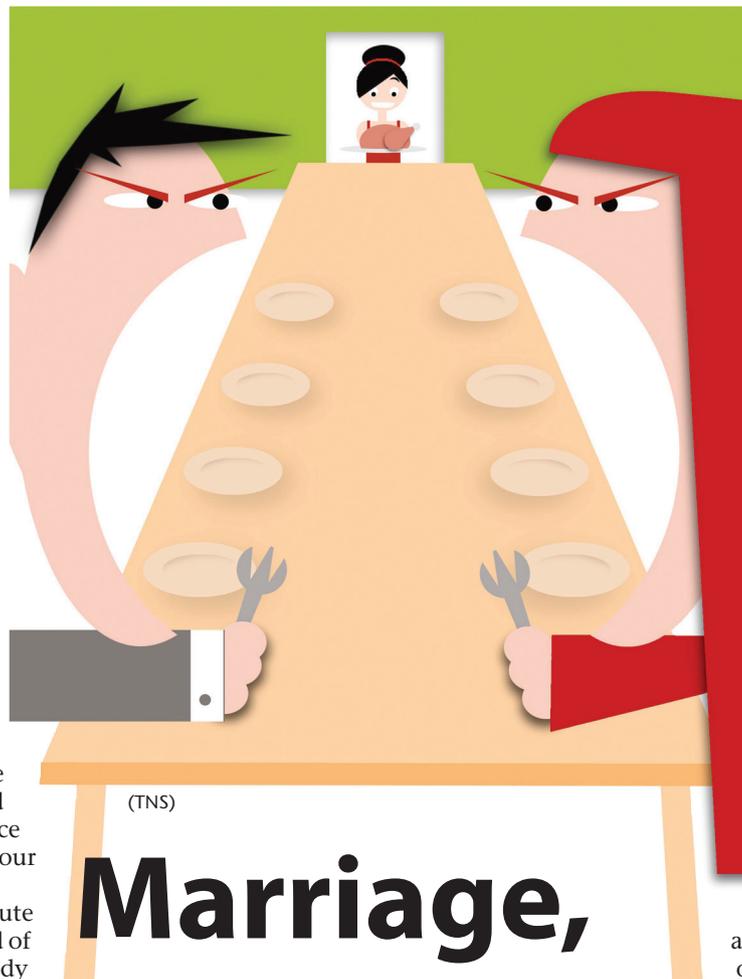
One reason may be that you fear disagreement. Conflict-avoidant people have discomfort with disagreement and would rather put off sitting down for a difficult discussion, because of fear of the conflict that might arise with their partner. The thought of the disagreement is more uncomfortable than the actual fight that usually develops later during the *hagim* when decisions have to be made. Choosing to put off a discussion can be easier in the short run, but usually ends up with each spouse looking at the other bewildered and wondering, “How did we get here again?”

So how can a couple learn to sit down and have talks that will be uncomfortable? Firstly, accept that the talk itself might be uncomfortable. Secondly, acknowledge to each other that fear of conflict is a problem and agree as a team to not let this pattern dominate your marriage. Many couples I work with say that once they sit down and start to discuss the topic they are avoiding, the discomfort goes away – even if they can't find a solution right away.

### Commit to having a “good enough” Passover

It sounds almost blasphemous to say or even think about having a Passover that might not resemble a Hallmark card. However, many times in trying to make a perfect Passover, we end up doing just the opposite, ruining it for the whole family, or at least ourselves.

The key to a “good enough” Passover is to rein in those unrealistic expectations for the holiday and



(TNS)

# Marriage, stress and the 'hagim'

remember that it doesn't need to be perfect in order to be good! By letting go of the desire/need for perfection, being in the moment, you might actually end up making it a more memorable Passover. How can that be? By relaxing your expectations, you lower your disappointment when things inevitably don't go according to plan. Not being in a state of disappointment allows you and your partner to be more adaptive to changes rather than getting upset by them; adaptive couples tend to be the happiest couples.

This holiday, when you recognize yourself starting to feel disappointed, remember that Passover is a holiday when the Jewish people go from slavery to freedom. What better way to celebrate this Passover than to stop being a slave to your expectations? Freedom is knowing that at the end of the day, it doesn't have to go according to plan/perfectly for your holiday to be good and for you and your spouse to be happy.

### Accept that just like eating matza is part of Passover, so is having stress

With the arrival of the holiday season, great anticipation reawakens in Jewish homes everywhere, along with a heightened atmosphere of tension. Accept that the holiday might be stressful for you and your partner, that it's normal to feel this way, that if you didn't, you probably wouldn't be human. There are special foods to be bought in crowded stores, additional cleaning, added financial burdens, and social obligations that can make ordinarily stable marriages appear rocky. It may seem defeatist at first, but by choosing not to fight and to

accept that which cannot be changed, we loosen our resistance and feel more empowered, which in turn lowers stress. By learning to accept, you actually win!

Also, try to avoid using the “just trying to make it till Passover” tactic in the days before *yom tov*. The misconception in that strategy is the idea that everything will be relaxed and easy when Passover arrives. Guess what? When Passover arrives it probably will not be as relaxed and calm as you might have thought, and now you will have come into the holiday stressed and tired, which can lead to disagreements. Remember, in the days leading up to the holiday, it's important to not reserve all your relaxation time till Passover comes.

One practical recommendation as a couple is to work together to help each other find time for yourselves. Being supportive of each other's needs is a bonding experience, and with so much happening, you might not realize that you need time to decompress, get away from the “to do” list and clear your mind. Even spending as little as 20 minutes alone taking a walk around the block can make a world of difference. Having some “me time” helps maintain emotional balance, as you juggle family obligations and other preparations for the holiday.

### Attempt to reconnect early by making a peace offering

OK, you have read this article and committed to trying the suggestions. Does this mean you are not going to have any disagreements this Passover? Probably not! We cannot always prevent ourselves from making mistakes or saying things that we shouldn't, but we do always have the ability to go back and make attempts to reconnect to keep those arguments from spiraling out of control.

One way to help end a disagreement early and reconnect is to make a peace offering. Many times a small incident grows into a nasty fight or isolation because one partner or the other refused to say, “I'm sorry.” It's not always easy after you have been hurt, but swallowing your pride is one of the most effective ways to end a disagreement and reconnect. Ask yourself how important this will really be in 10 years' time. When looking back over previous arguments, has it turned out that what you had been fighting about was a misunderstanding that could have been avoided by being less reactive with your spouse?

Equally as important as making a peace offering is to reconnecting early, so is accepting one. You may think your spouse should apologize, and yet when they do, you reject them with a snitty attitude. Or maybe it's you that is approaching them, and they are being cold and non-responsive. How many times has a fight re-escalated by you or your spouse feeling rejected? I'm sure you have a legitimate reason to be angry, but this Passover, for the sake of the relationship, be humble and accept a peace offering. Swallowing pride and being humble go hand in hand to keep what is usually a regrettable incident from growing into an unnecessary fight. When you make attempts and accept offers to reconnect early, you change the direction of your disagreements and create a more positive holiday for you and your family.

As we head into Passover, keep in mind that the holidays are an opportunity to practice strategies and skills that will help our relationships thrive all year. The difference between couples who thrive and those who don't is less about the number of conflicts they face and more about how they respond to and learn from them.

*Hag sameah!*

*The writer, who holds an MSc., is an individual and couples therapist, lecturer and writer residing in Jerusalem. gershonswimmer@gmail.com.*