

SPECIAL SECTION: SENIORS

You Say Tomato, I Say Tomöto

Couples therapist Dr. Beth Hedva helps us past the golden anniversary

BY MINDY SCHILLER

SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

Remember *When Harry Met Sally*? That classic 80's romantic comedy about male-female friendships? Remember the cute little documentary-style interviews they sprinkled between the plotlines—like this one, for instance?

MAN sits on a beige loveseat. He looks sweet and dapper, 75-ish. His **WIFE** sits next to him, very attentive.

MAN:

I was sitting with my friend, Arthur Cornblum, in a restaurant. It was a coin and dollar cafeteria, and then this beautiful girl walked in.

He motions to his wife, hitchhiker fashion, and she

smiles demurely.

WIFE nods emphatically. **MAN** pats his wife's knee and pauses for effect.

It's over 50 years later and we're still married.

Cute, right? But over 50 years later and still sweethearts? Does anyone else wonder if this couple is an anomaly? After all, with divorce rates in the U.S. at roughly 40 percent and a 2002 study from *DivorceMagazine.com* estimating

that only 5 percent of married couples

Hedva to ask her about long-term marriage—how to nourish it, sustain it and make it last well beyond that golden anniversary.

WJD: How does a couple make a marriage last into their senior years?

Beth Hedva (BH): The key to a happy, fulfilling life with your partner—for a 50-year anniversary mark, for example—requires a blend of personal autonomy and cooperative companionship. So for personal autonomy, the key is to discover our own personal happiness at some level. But then there's also the partnership. We're not just autonomous. It's how do we reawaken the dream of love way back when we were perhaps young and naive and even our children's age.

Fortunately for us, [in Jewish culture], we have this really deep and mystical tradition. We're living in an age now where the Kabbalah is coming off the shelf. Not just for men who are 40 years or older but for everyone and anyone who has a spiritual inclination. For many people, that connection with a deeper meaning or purpose in life, which is really what spirituality is about, [is] important as we age ... It doesn't necessarily have to be associated with a religious activity, but is fulfilling part of something larger than

reach their golden anniversary, it seems harder and harder to believe marriage can last a lifetime.

And yet, according to Dr. Beth Hedva, a couples and family therapist for 24 years and the author of "Betrayal, Trust, and Forgiveness: A Guide to Emotional Healing and Self-Renewal," older couples have a better chance at happiness than do younger ones—provided they know how to find it.

In an effort to help our readers do just that, WJD caught up with Dr. Hedva to ask her about long-term marriage—how to nourish it, sustain it and make it last well beyond that golden anniversary.

WJD: And what about the partnership? The "love" aspect of long-term happiness?

BH: Well, two attributes that I have found that make the biggest difference in my work with couples for the long term—the foundation for the rest—are good communication and really sharing appreciation. [For instance], verbal appreciation sets the stage. It's actually the 'foreplay.' [It] fills the sense of not only connection, but self-worth and self-esteem for one's partner ... [But] it's not just enough to say, 'Hey, nice dress.' Adding a few adjectives can help. For instance, 'Wow, you look gorgeous in that dress.' Or, 'Wow, you remind me of when we fist met when I see you in that color.'

What I recommend to clients is to make a list of five traits in their partner they really like [because] verbal appreciation is about living from a place of gratitude ... These kinds of appreciations give us a sense of generosity toward our partner when those things that are annoying show up, because they will show up. But there's a sense of generosity or appreciation and acknowledgment that yeah, we're all



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L03074537(exp0209)(IL)

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whole human beings. We all have wonderful traits and we all have annoying traits. That's part of being a humble human being.

The key to long-term happiness is [also] the releasing of the demands.

WJD: That could be a bumper sticker. But how do you release demands?

BH: [Well, for instance], the person who is listening listens for the sake of the person speaking. When a person is making a demand, [it's about a] deeper need or vulnerability. If we can cut through the talking and beliefs of what we think is really going on and get down to the deeper need, then we're able to connect in a very sincere, intimate and humane way. When we recognize our own human-ness, and can also acknowledge and recognize our partner's humanness, we are then able to extend the passion, empathy and humanity to our partner. That's how we overcome the demand. That's the soul-work. That takes maturity.

WJD: What if a couple has had to 'shelve' their relationship for a long time because they had to focus so much on their kids? What happens now that the kids are gone? It seems they've been 'shelving' their relationship for longer than they haven't been shelving it.

BH: Passion's flame comes from an eternal spark of love. If that fire was very hot when we met and we, on occasion, threw a log on the fire throughout those 18 years [that the kids were home], that's a fire where we kind of can bank the embers, you know, overnight, and then you can start the fire again in the morning. So those embers can certainly be rekindled.

[One way to do that is through Shabbes.] If we [celebrate Shabbes] with intent every Friday night, the husband and wife connect with all that was good that was created in the last week, and all of the attachments that we can now let go of, and you know what, there's only you and me here, and let's feel that divine presence, that beauty of hanging out in the present moment with each other, and not talk about work and not talk about problems, and sing songs and dance, and enjoy a good meal and be with each other. And if we make love today, gosh, it's even a mitzvah!—that's Jewish Tantra. Making the couple relationship a sacred relationship and acknowledging the erotic nature is also sacred.

And so, you know, how to be able to respond to what's really going on, on the emotional level, which can then rebuild a sense of closeness emotionally, which then opens the gates to being physically close. That's kind of like the key [to a long, healthy marriage].

WJD: If everything goes well—that is, if the couple does everything right—what should the ideal older marriage look like?

BH: This idea that you do everything right is too high of an expectation. Instead of perfection, it's more about being in the process of the marriage together. We recognize that we all have good days and bad days, and show compassion to each other when those difficult days show up. [But a good relationship will probably have] more appreciation and quality time together, a sense of

being connected to something larger, good communication and strong commitment, and being able to handle crises. For those couples as they age, there's shared activity—whether it's season tickets to symphony or theater, for example—and a sense of community, both within family and a social circle of peers.

WJD: Every stage in marriage has different obstacles, but do you think it's a more difficult obstacle to deal with, say, health issues and aging issues?

BH: Absolutely. I would say that the other challenges we face—with children or our own family members—prepare us for that ultimate challenge of reconciling the paradox that we have these immortal spirits where we have enthusiasm or drive or interest, but our bodies can only do so much. Dealing with that contradiction—arthritis, a heart condition, whatever the limitation—[we can] still connect at a very deep, person-to-person way to have a very high quality of life. Physical affection and touch is very important at absolutely every age. The erotic sexual component is still there.

WJD: What about people who remarry later in life? A widow remarrying, for instance—do the same rules apply to her second relationship? How does she know where to place her feelings of loyalty? Or do you find that sometimes older people are just looking for companionship and not really true love?

BH: One woman I know had an amazing story. She

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was a Holocaust survivor and her first husband was actually her liberator in Europe. They had a very long marriage and were certainly sweethearts. [After her husband died, she became friends with someone in her husband's circle of friends.] They struck up a friendship that was, again, an expression of true love.

This experience of the love of a good friend who knows you, who knows your history, where you don't have to explain everything all over again, who can walk through life with you ... they decided to get married. The way she described it is, she was fortunate enough to go from love to love.

[So] it doesn't necessarily have to be a conflict of loyalties. When we touch another person in our soul, our souls can't help but meet. This romantic notion that there's one soul mate is a misconception. The truth is, when our souls meet, they meet. And that sense of connection is so profound. It can take many forms of expression. We expect that we should have an erotic, passionate love. But we don't always. Every relationship has its own purpose. We experience that sense of desirability with that person. And it doesn't matter which expressions [of true love] that may be ... that sense of *beshert*, that this person and I are here in service much greater than either one of us ... Relationships are definitely best.

Mindy Schiller is the assistant editor at World Jewish Digest.