What Commitment Means to Me

On November 30, 2008, when I was 23 years old, I wrote a short document that I saved on my computer: “This is a memoir.” Reading it now, more than 14 years later, was a heavy experience. It’s always a little cringe reading past writing, but this felt different. I felt sad and blessed reading it. I wanted to reach out and give my younger self a hug. This is how the document began:

> This is a memoir of failure. I am about to finish what seems to me to have been the hardest year of my life. All of my friends are married, I am not. I am lonely and embarrassed. I am not embarrassed just because I am not married. There is a lot more to my shame and embarrassment. Let me explain.

I was not wrong. Even with so much time separating me, I still look back on this moment as one of the most difficult points in my life. I was reeling from the pain of loneliness, depression, and angst. A door had just been shut by the one person I thought I could marry. I had just left yeshiva, Ner Yisroel, and was enrolled in Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school. But more than anything I felt single, alone, unloved, and undeserving of love.

I think it is fair to ask why this weighed so heavily on me. I was only 23—incredibly young. Had I known I would be married in six years (I got engaged on my 29th birthday), surely I would not have been so panicked. Had I just been able to see how, or even when, my life would unfold and not be trapped in the mystery of the present, it would have been much, much easier.

But this of course is not the case. Which is why I think the topic of relationships and commitment is about so much more than dating and shidduchim (though those obviously stand at the center). It is about our very humanity—how we deal with doubt, make decisions, and find and build healthy relationships in our lives.

I believe there are four factors that make commitment and decision-making so difficult and so painful, particularly (though not exclusively) when it comes to dating.

I. The Existential Pain of Decisions

There is a book I constantly recommend called *Love's Executioner* by Irvin Yalom. Well, not the whole book (some of it is kind of strange). But I found the introduction absolutely profound. I quote it constantly. In the introduction, Dr. Yalom discusses the "four givens" particularly relevant to psychology. One of those givens is "the freedom to make our lives as we will." And part of the pain of freedom comes from the difficulty of making decisions. He writes:

> Decisions are difficult. Decision invariably involves renunciation: for every yes there is a no, each decision eliminating or killing other options. The root of the word decide means "slay", as in homicide or suicide.

It's a morbid idea, though I think it is incredibly profound. Commitment can feel painful because in the process we feel like we are shutting doors on so many other possibilities. Whether it is in our romantic lives, our professional lives, or really virtually any decision, each "yes" invariably contains a "no." That makes commitment feel suffocating to many.

And I think there are two types of pain associated with the decision to commit: the fear of saying "yes" and the fear of saying "no."

The fear of saying “yes” means locking yourself into a specific course, a specific person, or a specific approach. This fear is the fear of all of the alternatives—other people you could have married, other jobs you could have had, other communities you could have chosen. We can find ourselves unwilling to commit to our present timeline and instead find our minds drifting to all of the possible alternative histories that other decisions and commitments would have yielded. This is our fascination with asking “what if?” As Gavriel Rosenthal writes in the introduction to the book, *What Ifs of Jewish History: From Abraham to Zionism*:

> …perhaps the primary reason why we ask “what if?” lies in the broader area of human psychology. It is in our very nature as human beings to wonder “what if?” At various junctures in our lives, we may speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in our past: what if we had lived in a different place, attended a different school, taken a different job, married a different spouse? When we ask such questions, we are really expressing our feelings about the present. We are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently.

Making a commitment creates an alternative timeline that may now live and fester in the back of our minds. The alternative history of our very selves can serve as a barrier to being able to say yes. So instead we remain paralyzed, and the possibility of all decisions and all timelines—at least theoretically in our minds—remain equally viable. But a decision, as Yalom reminds, destroys possibilities. It is also true in Hebrew—the word “*bachar*,” meaning choose, has the same letters as “*charav*,” meaning destroy. Every choice, every commitment, creates that pain. And instead of the pain of paralysis, we need to develop the capacity to create the catharsis of commitment.

There is, however, another type of pain with decisions and that is the fear of saying “no.” Sometimes we know that this relationship is not healthy, that this is not working, but we think of all of the time we have already invested in whatever path lays before us, and it feels scary starting from scratch again. In behavioral economics, this is known as the sunk-cost fallacy. We don’t want to start again. Instead, we become attached, sometimes unhealthily so, to the path we currently occupy. Thinking back, I think I suffered from this a great deal. I was fixated on one resolution, one person. I didn’t want to start from scratch. And though I was only 23, when I finally got that “no,” I felt like I did not have the strength to start over, so instead, for years I remained fixated on “what if”s, closure that never would fully materialize, and a past that didn’t unfold as I so desperately wanted.

II. Consumer Mindset vs. Covenantal Mindset

I once heard an incredibly profound idea from Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, president of Yeshiva University. He said, I think it was at a commencement address, that when he was a pulpit rabbi, he would often advise people who were dating, people who arrived with a long checklist detailing what they were looking for in a spouse—how they hoped they dressed, held religious sensitivities, had professional aspirations. Of course, for many people, a list is a healthy way to clarify basic priorities and compatibility issues, but a checklist will never capture or succeed as an essential guide in building a relationship with another person. Consumerism is fundamentally different than forming a relationship.

When you purchase an item, the key is mitigating all risks. Your knowledge of the item precedes the commitment. So you check Amazon reviews, you might try on the item, save the receipt, or double-check the warranty before making a commitment, but that only works when you are a consumer. In a covenantal relationship, in our romantic lives and also in our religious lives, the commitment creates the relationship. More bluntly: The relationship does not fully exist until there is a commitment. So while you can check for basic compatibility, the true knowledge of the relationship remains a mystery until you are in it.

Howard Stern was once interviewing comedian Aziz Ansari, whose parents are Indian immigrants who were set up by matchmakers. Howard Stern was astonished at how they managed to have a healthy marriage. Aziz responded that they both knew that the commitment of marriage was the *beginning* of the relationship, rather than the *culmination*. That is what made it work. It is why, as I once wrote, the *kesubah* features so prominently in Jewish weddings.

A book that helped me appreciate this distinction is *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It's a wonderful short book. It won't even take a full Shabbos to read. But at the heart of the book is how to make the other in a relationship special. *The Little Prince* spends the entire book thinking a certain rose is special because it is one of a kind until he discovers, to his chagrin, that there are many other similar roses in the world. He is crestfallen, until he speaks with a fox, and the fox explains that relationships are made special because of commitments.

We don't commit because we find something that doesn't exist anywhere else, rather it's the commitment itself that transforms the relationship and imbues it with its uniqueness. Consumers are transactions; relationships are transformational.

I advise people who are dating to keep very short lists, if any at all. I think you really need only three things: (1) find one another attractive, (2) no irreconcilable religious differences, and (3) enjoy spending long, unstructured time together. It's not about finding a perfect person and convincing yourself that there is no risk or mystery before the commitment. There always will be.

III. Misunderstanding the Shidduch System

I teach a class in public policy at Yeshiva University. One of the most intriguing theories is the concept of information asymmetries, developed by George Akerlof. In his classic paper, "The Market for Lemons: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism," he discusses how parties create a trustworthy marketplace with imperfect information. For example, when it comes to used cars, it is hard to tell the difference between a "lemon"—a poor, used car— versus a peace—a car in pretty great shape.

That information asymmetry devalues cars because of the concern that the purchaser may be buying a lemon. Of course, as we mentioned, relationships are quite different than consumers, but there is a really instructive point in his theory. One of the ways we build trust is through a concept called signaling. We signal our true value to dismiss concerns of being a lemon.

I think a lot of shidduch dating comes down to figuring out how to decipher the signals within each system. The main goal, of course, is to create a committed relationship that transcends any signals, but the entire dating process is a series of signals that each side tries to interpret to figure out if there is, in fact, enough compatibility for a commitment. And unfortunately, no matter what process or system you use for dating, there are so many instances of misinterpreted signals.

We send out religious signals based on how we dressed, and we send out personality signals based on our profile or resume descriptions ("ambitious," "bubbly," "growth-oriented," "life of the party"). And we, our friends, and our potential romantic partners try to figure out if these are the right signals. My general advice is to keep it simple. Given that there is so much room for misinterpretation, it is best to stick to objective metrics (i.e. whether they plan to live in Israel), rather than more subjective ones (i.e. if they're bubbly), that are best sorted out in person on a date. Each dating world—apps, yeshiva shidduchim, YU Connects, Saw You At Sinai—has different signals and interpretations, but the closer you get to actual in-person interactions and focus on the issues that really matter, the less distracted the actual decision for commitment will be.

IV. Loneliness and Vulnerability

The Jewish community is built around families. There is something quite beautiful about that, but for those who are not in a familial relationships, it can come at a painful cost. People who are single, divorced, struggling with infertility, all have very real issues within close-knit, family-oriented communities. There is a lot our communities could do to address this issue without undermining an iota of the importance that is rightfully placed on the family unit.

I remember once participating on a "singles Shabbaton" in a major Jewish community. I felt like I was in an exhibit at the Bronx Zoo. When the rabbi announced to the shul that we were there, I half expected him to remind everyone not to stick their fingers in the cages or feed any of the animals. I felt like a nebuch. It was really hard. Back then, I wrote an article about the experience initially under a pen name. (I only appended my actual name after I got married, cause, y'know, could be bad for shidduchim.)

In the article, entitled "A Polite Request for Basic Sensitivity," I imagined what it would be like if our community approached other issues the same way we inappropriately talk to people who are single—the unsolicited advise, speculation, proclamations that "it's a *beracha*," and of course the dreaded "*im yirtzeh Hashem*, soon by you." It wasn't such a revolutionary request, but it just was a plea for applying basic sensitivity and dignity when we speak to people who are single.

Sadly, however, we can't always rely on others to have the requisite sensitivity to this matter. Even well-meaning people say things that can hurt. It's also important for single people—and anyone dealing with a setback or difficult in life—to build their own sense of self and adequacy so they avoid defining their lives on what they feel they are lacking at that moment.

I wasn't always very good at this. There was a long stretch of time that it was painful for me to even show up to shul. I have written about my relationship with the Yom Tov of Sukkos. In short, I hated it. My whole life felt like Sukkos—impermanent, transitory—I didn't need a holiday to remind me of life's impermanence.

> When I was single I really struggled with Sukkos.
>
> Struggle is a generous term. I hated it.
>
> My life already felt impermanent.
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> Every year new roommates. Every Shabbos scrambling for meals. Being with family, when I didn't have my own, was hard.
>
> My whole life was already Sukkos.
>
> — David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas) September 20, 2021

But through the process of dating, I also learned to become friends with myself. I became less afraid of being alone. I learned how to be honest *with* myself, *to* myself. I learned how to be vulnerable.

I once spent a Pesach seder by myself. I wrote about the experience, "Spending Passover Alone," for *Tablet Magazine* during the early stages of COVID-19 when people were dreading the notion of having a seder by themselves. It was familiar to me—I had been through this before in a way. As I wrote then:

Before I was married, I would make sure to project a sense of confidence and assuredness that internally I really didn't have. I was nervous, I was confused, I was lost, but I never allowed myself to show it. I may have even convinced myself. Alone, drinking four glasses of that "heady wine," I could finally be honest. I could finally be vulnerable. Questions I took great care in avoiding the rest of the year—my career aspirations, my desire for a family—could finally be articulated. This night was different because I was finally asking different questions.

An hour into my Seder my solitude grew more comfortable and natural. For moments I even forgot I was alone. *And God took us out of Egypt, not through an angel and not through a seraph and not through a messenger, but the Holy One himself*. God had redeemed alone—my lonely redemption felt more natural. My Seder was almost over. *Who knows one?* I looked around, I knew one. *Chad Gadya, one kid goat*. I smiled. My Seder ended singing about a lone goat, finally redeemed.

It was really hard to learn how to contend with my own loneliness and vulnerability. I grew increasingly impatient with being single as a defining characteristic of life. I had to learn how to be patient with myself even when I knew I was falling short of so many expectations.

Looking back at that document I began with from November 2008, I ended with that very feeling of impatience and a plea to finally get to the next chapter of my life:

I want to have the strength to be happy for other people. I want the strength to show my parents show much I love them and how much they mean to me. I want to be able to thank all of my friends and for getting me to where I am. I want to get where I want am to be. But its been more than weeks or months its been years and Im till talking about the same stuff. Choshech, yeridah, michsholim. When will I have the opportunity speak about the good stuff? I want the good stuff. Now the anger seems to have passed and its just sad and lonely. I want to be happy and tell the whole world how great life once was and can be. Please Please Please let this end. I know life will always have its up and down, its nesyonos. But I want a new nisayon. Im sick and tired of this one. Im going to try to wake up tomm. Morning I hope I feel you there waiting for me cause without You waiting its hard to show up. See you then.

I am not sure what gave me the strength to keep going. But I did. Therapy definitely helped. I found a psychologist who helped me better understand what commitment was all about and how to foster love for others and love for myself. I remain eternally grateful to her. I finally made the decision to marry my wife in her office. While she has resisted my requests for appearing as a guest on 18Forty, she did send me a voice note (I played it on the first episode in this series) that outlined her basic approach to commitment. I don't know if others will find it all that helpful, but I know for me personally, it paved the way for my commitment for marriage and the enduring nature of commitment in my life. I found it helpful, so I transcribed what she shared and will end with her words that I found so illuminating in helping me find my new beginning:

Commitment Versus the Paradox of Choice

Love is not a commodity 'a magic charm 'that make us feel good, an emotional fix. Barry Schwartz expert on the paradox of choice highlights our consumer culture and that the abundance of options and the multitude of alternatives that leads to an illusion that there is perfection out there rather then building and deepening a connection through one's lifetime. This illusion leads to constant self appraisal and rumination–Am I happy? Am I in love ? How do I know that I'm feeling it? I look at the couples around us and they all seem happier then we are !!

Waiting for the ‘one right person ‘theory, Schwartz observes that “people walk starry-eyed looking not into the eyes of their romantic partner, but over their romantic partner’s shoulder, in case there might be somebody better walking by. than look into the eyes. In this context we are uncomfortable without 100 percent certainty, not willing to take responsibility for our own emotional well being thinking that love will give me what I need.

On the other hand, commitment leads to cultivating versus finding. It leads to effort, investment and resilience.Commitment helps us raise the threshold of staying in relationship, a reminder of what truly matters

We yearn for perfection in the context of being perfectly imperfect human beings. To be human is to be held together by scars and radiance. Real relationships takes audacity to dig deep into our own vulnerabilities which can feel daunting but if we don’t we live with the challenge of not feeling authentic and will have a hard time seeing ourselves with clarity. Real relationships involve some risky generosity to be able to celebrate greatness and to give the other person space and permission to be human.

Commitment enables us to affirm resilience in our love, to affirm that thousands of slights that everyday life can make us prone to have not reduced our capacity to deeply appreciate each other. We need to constantly renew our commitment to help jumpstart the potential of the relationship to make space,for ourselves and our partner, to keep our heart and mind open.

Yet it is important to not white wash serious issues, especially if one’s own deep values, feelings of self worth and agency are diminished .We can’t take a shortcut or a ‘spiritual bypass‘ of sorts where we prematurely ‘transcend‘ our human needs leaving personal values, and serious issues by the wayside. Self awareness and humility helps us to seek guidance from Rabamim and skillful professionals

Love begins where the movie ends. Building and deepening the connection is work that begins before marriage and continues for our lifetime. The ideals in relationships also develop over time . They evolve to incorporate new needs and changing challenges.

Love is an abilty to cultivate not just a feeling. Love is an action that involves care, commitment ,responsibility, respect, trust and playfulness, deep mercy and light touch.

Most relationships do not fulfill its potential for greatness, thriving or flourishing because not enough work has been invested. ‘Happily ever after ‘ is a privilege and blessing that comes with hard work ,life long intentionality ,and commitment.

It is the holiest work and the ongoing grace that comes along with it is a boundless gift.