

## The Power of Attachment Templates

“Every day I think of him. It’s a deep pain in my heart. Tortured by the ‘what-ifs.’ What if I hadn’t let him go?”

Chani is 54 years old. She was married for 25 years. Three years after her divorce, she met Daniel. Right off the bat, Chani determined that she was not going to marry Daniel. He did not fit into her paradigm of a suitable mate. Chani grew up with a father who had a highly developed public persona as a charismatic leader. In his private life, however, he was often preoccupied and distant. At 22 years old, she married, and she describes what ensued as a living hell. Her husband was a rabbi. Rather than living his life according to Jewish law, he privately did whatever was convenient for him, twisting or ignoring the laws altogether. He distanced her from her friends and family, claiming the former were using her and the latter betraying her. He dismissed her feelings as being reflective of emotional instability. He insisted that she host for his congregants, which she did, but then never acknowledged her support of him; rather, he claimed that everything she did was for herself. Through it all, Chani kept trying to connect with him emotionally and be a supportive rabbi’s wife.

Chani was describing life with a narcissist. A narcissist is incapable of empathy and has a distinct way of twisting reality to suit his or her own needs, with the result of making their partner feel like they are going crazy. After 25 years of marriage, her husband one day picked up and walked out of their home, claiming that the demise of their marriage was all Chani’s fault. With their divorce, Chani felt freed.

Chani, newly divorced, met Daniel. Daniel was a nice man; described by others as “what you see is what you get.” He loved her. He was giving to her. And she reciprocated the loving feelings. She referred to him as her best friend, but could not see herself married to him. What Chani was up against was her unconscious paradigm of what made a man attractive. Based on what she experienced growing up with her father and, later, living with her husband, Chani was not used to being seen or feeling loved. What Chani experienced with Daniel was new and unfamiliar.

One day Chani met a man who was brilliant and successful. A rush of euphoric feelings coursed through her. Chani thought she had found The One and they dated. Unfortunately, he was also emotionally distant and often preoccupied. Eventually, he proposed marriage and invited her to go on a trip with him. On that trip she realized her mistake. “My dime, my time,” he responded whenever she expressed an interest in doing a specific activity, communicating that he would decide where they would go. In other ways, too, he was dismissive of her needs and wants. She had done it again—fallen for a narcissist.

Heartbroken, Chani called up Daniel. He told her he was seeing someone and it was serious. She was deeply pained. She refused to accept that it would actually work out with this new woman. She waited, but they got engaged. Still, you never know. She waited, but they got

married. She has had no contact with him since, but every day she has thought of him. Tortured by the ruminations of her mind, and with her friends having lost patience listening to her regrets, Chani decided she would try psychotherapy to better understand her pain and identify and break her unhealthy relationship patterns.

Chani's work in therapy consisted of understanding her early attachment to her father. The "dance" had been set up: she had to work very hard to get his attention and never quite felt seen by him for who she was. This dance played out remarkably similarly with her narcissistic husband. With him, too, she kept trying to connect emotionally and tried to find ways to get him to appreciate her. Without better understanding her attachment template it was going to be difficult for Chani to create a healthy relationship.

We develop a template, often unconscious, of how relationships ought to feel based on the relationship we experienced with our primary caregivers. We are attracted to what's familiar. According to Harville Hendrix, founder of Imago therapy, we look to repair the early hurt left by a parent, thereby seeking out a partner with similar qualities. "Inevitably, the project of self completion gets taken to our adult relationships. We present our wounds and burdens to our intimate others and expect them to undo the damage created by deficient nurturing. 'Hi honey,' we say, 'I'm home. It's your job to make everything all right'" (p. 53 of "Keeping the Love You Find," Harville Hendrix). Unfortunately, that usually doesn't bode well for a relationship. Self-awareness, good communication tools and the ability to self-soothe make for a much better relationship recipe.

Chani was struggling to forgive herself. Growing up with an authoritative father and hearing from her husband that she was responsible for everything that had gone wrong in her marriage made it difficult for Chani to forgive herself for having hurt Daniel and herself. The therapy work made Chani more aware of her internalized "harsh critic" voice—the one that gave her no peace and that was constantly informing her of what she'd done wrong, again. Her awareness allowed room for a counter voice—a more loving, empathic voice. This new voice understood that it is human to make mistakes. She had done the best she could with the skills and the awareness that she had at the time. Therapy meant nurturing an inner voice that expressed loving acceptance and consolation.

Chani moved into grief work. She cried bitter tears as she described missing Daniel—his love, humor, moments of deep insight. It was a lot to lose. Chani slowly grappled with acknowledging the blessing of Daniel and appreciating that he gave her a taste of a new relationship paradigm. He helped her move to a new plateau in relation to appreciating herself.

And then there was the loneliness—the profound loneliness that comes with not knowing whether in fact she will ever meet a partner and create a loving, satisfying relationship. Chani's loneliness is an uncomfortable creature, but with work can translate to a calmer aloneness. Aloneness need not be a painful state. Aloneness opens up space to encounter ourselves, others and G-d differently in an ongoing process.

Our attraction templates are important to examine and understand. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it."

Healing the original hurt and working to create a healthy attachment template, enables us to engage more fully in consciously choosing a mate with whom we can build a healthy, satisfying relationship.

We had been working together for many months. At one point Chani was sitting quietly on the couch, not saying anything but looking at me with sad eyes.

"What are you thinking?" I gently ask.

"All these regrets I've been carrying inside, mixed with the longing to have a do-over, have been so hard. I have a sense now of how I want to feel in a relationship with a man. Different than before. I think it's time," she says.

"Time for what?" I inquire.

"Time to say goodbye to Daniel."

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