

Carol and Mark met in high school. They were immediately smitten with each other, and were known as the “Barbie and Ken” of their town. They fit together so well, they could have never imagined what would happen later on in their “picture perfect” marriage. They were so young, had very little guidance and couldn’t even imagine the conflicts that having children would create.

Carol was raised Catholic and Mark, Jewish, neither of them having too many connections to their religions except for major holidays and life cycle events. Mark and Carol had successfully navigated the differences but when Jacob was born, everything changed. Carol, with her mother’s firm support, felt strongly about the baby being baptized, and Mark and his family knew a bris was a non-negotiable. The parents had never stepped in before but when it came to these very important rituals, they “had to” speak up. Mark and Carol were clueless as to how to solve this impasse, and at a loss as to how to appease two families committed to move in opposite directions. Even within the first few days after Jacob’s birth, they had to give up discussing it because they couldn’t do so without Mark yelling, Carol crying, and both of them more and more frustrated. The birth of their baby was, in this sense, a nightmare. Some therapists and advisors are adamant about non-negotiables, while others commend compromise as a necessary marital reality. But could Mark and Carol escape their impasse through a crash course in communications skills?

One major problem was that both Carol and Mark grew afraid to be honest with each other. As the normal deadlines for the bris and the baptism passed, they were forced to realize that although they didn’t want to fight, they just weren’t prepared to compromise in their hearts. Despite their deep love for each other, they resented the other, and the pressure their in-laws were exerting. Over time, embracing compromise can get one sided when people start to feel as if they are giving more and more and getting less and less. Finding common ground can end up feeling like dealing with the enemy, or finding oneself a stranger in the strange land of the partner’s family and culture.

Frequently, each partner has a different perception of the compromises being made. The husband may feel, “I give, and she takes,” and the wife, “No, I give and he takes.” What began as compromise becomes either sacrifice or victimization. And whenever we sacrifice to make the other person happy, or to simply prevent their going through pain, this creates a dynamic of enabling the other. And when one partner perceives they are being victimized, resentment cannot be avoided.

Often, spouses give in so their partner won’t be upset, angry, or disappointed. Sometimes spouses are made to feel sorry for the other and then accommodate so the partner can be comfortable and pleased. Sometimes people embrace suffering to spare their mate.

Then again, most of us easily fall into a sense of guilt. This can be a subtle form of control and we may even know we are being played. In such circumstances, people often calculate, “Can I live with this, and is it worth it? I really just need to keep the peace and not have him/her angry at me.”

Compromise and sacrifice are not the same thing. Compromise involves giving up something to get something else back. Sacrifice is completely letting go of something “for the sake of the good of others.” But this is not always the case. Sacrifice is only healthy when the person chooses to do so from their heart and not out of mere duty, compulsion, duress, or to avoid some sort of loss. Sacrifice must be chosen from a point of understanding and in service to a true greater good.

True sacrifice is made in freedom, and from the heart. We must always keep a sense of self and personal integrity intact. The sacrifice of the unwilling is the foundation of alienation, resentment and despair.