

Nightly Music

“Rabbi Hoffman called me again,” my husband tells me one evening, as I wrap my hands around a mug of steaming tea.

I blow on my drink. “I don’t know why he keeps on asking you,” I say. “What did you tell him?”

“Thanks but no thanks.”

“Good.” I relax. That’s final, then. I can sink into a good night’s sleep.

Later, in the moonless predawn silence, my newborn wails and I stir from sleep. I lift his tiny body from the crib. His cries stop and I hear another sound. Music. Coming from the dining room. The lilting singsong of my husband’s learning as he plumbs the age-old words. I relax, my bundle of life in my arms, the song of life flowing over me in all its melodious sweetness.

It is not a surprise to hear him. He grew up on the dictum: “Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” Soon he will return to bed for a short catnap before Shacharis, but he will have cashed in on the clarity and freshness offered by the early morning hours. *That is why they want him to join*, I tell myself as I drift back into dreamland. *He appreciates what learning at this hour does!*

Ever since Rabbi Nechemia Hoffman, the founder of Kollel Chatzos, learned about my

husband’s nocturnal habits, he’d been inviting him to join the group of *kollel yungeleit* learning throughout the night.

Everything inside me had protested: He’s not going! He’s not going to spend the night away from home!

Several weeks later my husband bumps into Rabbi Hoffman. “Just try it. Try it for a week,” he says. “After that, I’ll never pressure you again if you aren’t interested.”

Though we are honored that he’s thinking of us, we can find no compelling reason to take him up on his offer. But something stops my husband from refusing point blank. “I’ll try it. Once,” he concedes.

He does. The next morning he walks through the door lit up from within. I can see that he’s hooked.

That doesn’t mean that I am, however.

“Don’t worry,” my husband says. “I won’t commit to anything without your consent, but if you’re okay with it I’d really like to go again. Perhaps twice a week. Can we try that for a while?”

I cannot, in good conscience, refuse. There is no way to refute the fact that he comes home energized and invigorated despite his lack of sleep. I don’t believe in saying no simply because it isn’t the norm.

Pasting a smile onto my face, I say, “Sure.” But there’s an unsettling feeling I cannot rid myself of.

I’m a working mother and wife, leaving early in the morning and arriving home late afternoon together with my children, who need immediate attention. My husband gets home an hour after me, eats supper, plays and reads with the kids, and then helps me put them to bed. After that we clean the kitchen together while catching up on each other’s day. Then, while he’s learning with his *chavrusa*, I finish cleaning the house and prepare snacks and meals for the next day.

When Kollel Chatzos becomes a part of our lives, most of our daily schedule remains the way it had been. The difference lies in what comes after putting the kids to bed; on Kollel Chatzos nights my husband puts himself to sleep as well, so he’ll be well rested for the nighttime learning.

I go back into the kitchen, feeling so... alone. I discover that I’ve always enjoyed my housework because I’d had a companion. Now, I am more focused and the work goes a lot quicker, but the work has become so mundane, almost painful.

This is it! I tell myself. *The last night! He’s not going back again!* But the next morning, when he walks in with contentment emanating from every fiber of his being, my resolution of the night before dissolves. It means too much to him. And he means too much to me.

When my husband expresses his desire to

become a full-time Kollel Chatzos member we sit down to talk. “I’m only going forward if you’re fully okay with it,” my husband says.

I want to say *Of course I am. I’m behind you all the way*. What I say instead is: “But... but we never get to spend time together... I get home from work totally zonked. The kids need my attention right away. Before I know it, before I’ve gotten a chance to catch my breath from the long workday I’ve had, or to ask you about yours, you’ve put the kids and yourself to bed.”

“If we do this long-term we’re going to figure out a better way,” he says.

We bounce different ideas off each other, figuring out how we could shift our schedule. Eventually, we decide that I’ll cut my work hours so I’m home earlier in the day and am relaxed enough to enjoy my husband’s company when he gets home. He’ll be coming home a bit earlier as well.

“What about the kids?” he says. “I honestly don’t think they know the difference. Am I right, or just blinded because I want to believe so?”

He’s right. They’re asleep before their Tatty leaves, and he’s back home by the time they awaken. “For now they don’t,” I admit. “We’ll have to reevaluate when they’re older.”

I can’t believe I said that. Do I believe he’s going to be there for years? Until the kids are older?

I have one last concern. A health concern. “When are you planning to sleep? As long as it’s only been twice a week, you were able to juggle it. But five nights a week... isn’t it too much?”

“Once I start coming home earlier, I’ll have a bit more time to sleep. I also believe that my body will adjust to the changes. It’s inconsistency that can turn a person inside out. If I ever start suffering from fatigue, we’ll check it out with a doctor.”

So starts our foray into this new life. Everyone takes well to the new schedule, and my husband has never seemed happier.

Then trial number one appears. The baby hasn’t been well all week, and is up all night — or so it seems. Lying in bed,

exhausted, I barely have the strength to grope for my glasses. I wish there were another adult present, to be able to ask my husband to *please* take the baby. I can barely move.

But his bed is empty. The only noise is the sound of the baby’s incessant moaning. The sound of my loneliness. It could last for hours, this crying jag, and through the fog in my brain I try to remember the last time I gave her medication, try to calculate whether or not she is due for another dose. There’s no one to ask, no one to hunt for a syringe, no one to soothe the baby — or me.

I remember my husband making me promise I’ll call him. Even for silly stuff. Even if I just get lonely.

“I’ll be home in no time. You’ll get more benefit from me than from a husband who can’t disconnect from his bed,” he’d said.

The baby’s moans turn into cries.

I reach for the phone.

He’s home within minutes. He scoops up the baby, and tells me to rest. Until morning arrives, I’m oblivious to the world. It feels good to know that my husband is available for emergencies. And even just difficult moments. This existence isn’t quite as lonely as I’d thought it to be.

There are family members who are skeptical, not trusting our thought-out decisions. There are friends who think they need to praise me when all I wish is that they wouldn’t turn me into the martyr and *tzadeikes* I am not. And of course there are those people who can’t keep from telling us what they think about “this whole crazy business.”

An evening is arranged for us Kollel Chatzos wives. We talk and connect and find out how very, very *normal* we are.

But it’s been three years now and I’ve learned that it’s better not to try to explain. Because what words can possibly capture the sanctified silence that blankets the family as I sleep? And what words can describe how the silence of midnight contains a secret song, an ageless melody that soothes and comforts and fills my home with joy. ☺