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דרכיה דרכי נעם

LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT

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“*Tov...tov...tov...tov...tov...tov...tov me’od.*”

INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter of Genesis, God uses the word *tov* (“good”) six times, followed by a *tov me’od* (“very good”). How striking the contrast then in the very next chapter when God suddenly says for the first time that something is *lo tov* – not good: “And God said: It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make for him an *ezer k’negdo*, a helpmate.”

It is not good to be alone. Our Jewish story sets this out from the beginning. Not only is loneliness undesirable, but being alone actually upsets the fundamental goodness of the world that God has created. No doubt that this sentiment has shaped the Jewish emphasis on relationships since our very inception. Jews cannot practice their religion in isolation. Rather, Jews are meant to be in relationship: with each other, with God, and with the world.

Since God makes it so clear that human beings are not meant to be alone, it is therefore not surprising that some midrashim in our tradition even claim that men and women were created as a single being which only later was divided into separate genders. Commenting on the word *tzela* (“side” but usually translated as “rib”), these midrashim develop the idea that the first human being was one body with two faces, male and female. When God realized that being alone was “not good,” this hermaphroditic proto-human being was separated into two by taking the “side” off. Now there were two complementary beings, each one dependent on the relationship with the other for wholeness.

What this midrash points to is a fundamental assumption that human beings are incomplete outside of relationship. We as Jews therefore hold relationships at the very core of our way of life. Classically, Jews divide relationship into two categories: *bein adam l’makom* (between people and God) and *bein adam l’havero* (between people and other people). In the former category, the relationship is usually referred to as *brit* or Covenant. In the latter, the relationship is more varied and includes friendship, marriage, family and community.

The Tanakh uses the verb “to love” to apply to both the human/divine relationship and the relationship between human beings. While the Torah is unequivocal that we, the Jewish people, can love only one God, there is no such prohibition in terms of our love for other human beings. (Interestingly, the Torah is silent about God’s ability to love more than one people, but that remains a distinct possibility and one which is very much part of my own theology.)

In terms of human relationships, Jewish tradition embraces several kinds: exclusive (marriage) and non-exclusive (friendship and family), ones that we choose (partners and friends) and ones that we are born into (parents, children, and siblings). The Torah uses the word “love” for all of these different kinds of human relationships and does not express a preference for one over another, thus suggesting that they are all of equal importance to human existence and well-being. This essay on relationships will therefore explore both marriage and friendship as essential elements of our lives about which Judaism is concerned.

KIDDUSHIN – MARRIAGE

Since the 10th century when the *takanah* (decree) of Rabbenu Gershom outlawed polygamy, marriage in Judaism is a covenant between two people who pledge to commit to one another exclusively. The verb *q-d-sh*, the root of the term ‘kiddushin’ can be translated not only as ‘holy’, as it usually is, but also as ‘special’ or ‘different’. Marriage is a particular relationship between two adult human beings who commit to an exclusive covenant which is enacted through particular rituals which have built up around it.

Interestingly, Judaism has never made an assumption of love prior to marriage. In fact, there are commentaries which draw upon the order of the verbs in Genesis 24:67 to claim that not only does love not necessarily precede marriage, it can even be a causal result of marriage: “And Isaac brought her [Rebekah] into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.”¹

¹ Genesis 24:67



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KETUBAH

Marriage therefore is not necessarily about love. That explains why the text of the *Ketubah* – the Jewish marriage agreement - does not talk of the couple’s feelings for each other. Rather, it is an outline of the obligations they have to one another. (Traditionally, these were obligations of the man to the woman, but some contemporary egalitarian *ketubot* make these obligations consensual.) The *ketubah* traditionally articulates the groom’s commitments to provide food, clothing and sexual companionship to the bride. In addition, it states the financial consequences of not providing these. Because it is a legal document, there are no poetic statements about love or feelings. Rather, the *ketubah* is purely about the commitment and obligations of a husband and wife.

BETROTHAL

The obligations outlined in the *ketubah* assume that the couple will be in an exclusive relationship. That exclusivity is established during the betrothal ceremony, called the *erusin* or *kiddushin*, which consists of a blessing followed by the groom giving something of value to the bride (traditionally a ring) and declaring: “Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel.” (Again, in modern ceremonies, many couples exchange rings and the betrothal becomes mutual.) At this point, the bride is dedicated (*mekudeshet*) exclusively to the groom and is no longer permitted to another man. However, the wedding is not complete until the second part of the ceremony, the *nisuin*, takes place.

Interestingly, if at some point between the betrothal ceremony and the wedding ceremony, the couple suddenly decided not to continue with the wedding, they would need a Jewish divorce (*a get*) in order to once again be permitted to another person. Thus, the significance of the betrothal ceremony is far more than an announcement of intentions to wed, and is therefore not comparable to the modern secular institution of “engagement.” Rather, the betrothal ceremony obligates the bride and groom to an exclusive relationship. If they were to break that commitment, that would need to be formalized through the ritual of divorce.

SHEVA BERAKHOT

Assuming the couple continues with the ceremony, the betrothal is followed by the reading of the *Ketubah*. At this point, the wedding ceremony shifts emphasis from the individual couple to the larger picture of how this union fits within a larger communal context. The marriage ceremony itself is called the *nisuin*, and consists of seven blessings said over a second cup of wine. These blessings celebrate the covenant of this couple within the context of the community of humankind, hardly mentioning this specific bride and groom. Thus the Jewish preoccupation with relationship is not limited to this exclusive relationship of the bride to the groom. As a unit, they will continue to be in relationship to the larger Jewish community and to God.

SAME SEX COMMITMENT CEREMONIES

In recent years, questions have arisen as to how individuals of the same sex might sanctify or celebrate their exclusive commitment to one another. As this is an emerging ritual, no definitive guidelines yet exist. However, Rachel Adler has outlined a thought-provoking notion of the *Brit Ahuvim*, the Lovers’ Covenant. This ceremony evokes imagery of the exclusive notion of covenant between God and Israel, as well as the exclusivity of the traditional betrothal ceremony. As individual couples use and develop this (and other) models for same-sex ceremonies, this area of ritual will no doubt develop further. It remains to be seen whether it takes on the same imagery of the traditional marriage ceremony or develops into a different kind of commitment based on some of the intense same-sex friendships outlined in our tradition.

HAVRUTA – FRIENDSHIP

That brings us to the subject of friendship, about which the Biblical tradition says very little directly, but does offer several narrative examples. In contrast to marriage, love is the starting point for friendship. For example, the story of



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the friendship of David and Jonathan expresses an intensely close relationship of love. In fact, *Pirkei Avot* 5:16 even uses that relationship to epitomize selfless love:

Whenever love depends upon something and it passes, then the love passes away too. But if love does not depend on some ulterior interest then the love will never pass away. . .

...And what is an example of the love which did not depend upon some ulterior interest? That of David and Jonathan.²

Just as David and Jonathan exemplify intense male friendship, their female Biblical counterparts would be Naomi and Ruth, whose affection and devotion to each other is epitomized in the famous verse where Ruth says, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”³ This statement demonstrates intense caring and companionship outside of a marital relationship, so much so that it becomes the prototype not only for friendship, but for conversion and joining the Jewish people.

The importance of friendship particularly arises in traditional Jewish texts in the classical method by which Talmud is studied. Enormous value is placed upon finding a study partner, known as a *havruta*, the Aramaic term for friend or partner. This relationship is given such value that the Mishnah claims: “If two people sit and engage themselves with Torah, the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) is present with them.”⁴ This statement is comparable to the claim made in the Talmud that the Divine Presence is present with a married couple: “If husband and wife are meritorious, the *Shekhinah* dwells between them.”⁵ Thus, the Divine Presence can be present not only in the relationship between a married couple but also in the relationship between a *havruta*. This perhaps explains the statement at the end of the story of Honi the Circle-Drawer, where he awoke from a 70 year slumber to find that everyone he knew or could study with was gone. The tragic last words to this episode, a comment from Rava, are: “*O havruta o mituta*” – “Either friendship or death.”⁶ Life without companionship is simply not worth living.

This value placed on friendship originally focused on enabling Torah study, but could easily be extended beyond this to the companionship, support, challenge and comfort that we know friendships offer to us. Judaism’s focus on community is simply an extension of the emphasis on family and friendship, and completes the notion that relationships are central to Jewish life. Just because friendship is not an exclusive relationship the way that marriage is makes it no less valued in Jewish tradition.

QUESTIONS

This essay describes some of the traditional models of relationship and commitment within Jewish life. The sociological reality of modern life, however, challenges some of the assumptions underpinning them, and I will close with three questions that we need to grapple with in a changing world.

SEXUALITY WITHOUT A COMMITMENT CEREMONY

In the pre-modern age, sex either occurred within a recognized union or it was considered illicit. Today, there exist any number of reasons why a couple might live together without a commitment ceremony of some sort. They might feel they are too young to commit to a lifelong partnership (as many young people are postponing marriage until their late twenties, thirties or beyond). They might be divorced or widowed and hesitant to enter another marriage. Or they might be in retirement years and worried that an official wedding will damage their pension benefits in some way. Like it or not, sex is happening within the context of relationships outside of

² *Mishnah Avot* 5:19

³ *Ruth* 1:16

⁴ *Mishnah Avot* 3:2

⁵ *Babylonian Talmud Sotah* 17a

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud Ta’amit* 23a



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marriage. Does Judaism have anything to say about this? Should it? What guidance could Jewish tradition provide about whether or how to use sexuality to enhance a relationship that has not been sanctified by marriage?

GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY AND TECHNOLOGY

We live in a world where families and friendships are widely spread geographically. One might not live near the people one grew up with. At the same time, technology has provided tools which allow us to connect beyond geographical boundaries. Email, telephone, and social networking sites on the internet allow for new kinds of connections and staying in touch. Chat rooms allow people who have never even met to form connections and support groups around issues that matter to them. How does geographic mobility and technology impact our ability to enhance our relationships? What does Judaism have to contribute to this new sociological reality? In other words, what would allow the *Shekhinah* to dwell in the midst of a chat room?

JEWISH/NON-JEWISH RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIPS

We no longer live in a world where friendships and relationships between Jews and non-Jews are fraught with tension. On the contrary, many extended American families include both Jews and non-Jews, and few Jews live in a world where they have no relationships with non-Jews. Judaism has little historical experience with a world where the boundaries between Jew and non-Jew are so permeable and positive. What should be the Jewish attitude towards relationships and friendships between Jew and non-Jew? How does our attitude towards intermarriage and conversion impact our behaviours towards the other in general? In what way will this shape Judaism's future attitudes towards relationships with the non-Jewish world?

These are just some of the questions that we must grapple with if we are to continue to keep traditional Judaism relevant to contemporary Jews. We know it is not good to be alone. We have known that since the very beginning of Genesis. Our tradition has provided us with multiple ways of loving, and of overcoming loneliness: friendship, marriage, family and community. How we express that connection to the other is essential to our identity as Jews and to the future of the Jewish people. Let us endeavor to connect in ways that allow God to look upon those relationships and declare them *tov*.



LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT – TEXT 1

שיר השרים ח:ו-ז

ו שימני כחותם על-לבך כחותם על-זרועך כי-עזה כמות אהבה קשה כשאול קנאה רשפיה רשפי אש
שלהבתה: ז מים רבים לא יוכלו לכבות את האהבה ונהרות לא ישטפוה אם יתן איש את-כל-הון
ביתו באהבה בזו יבזו לו:

SONG OF SONGS 8:6-7

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm,
For love is as strong as death, passion as durable as the grave,
Its sparks are sparks of fire, the flame of God.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it –
If a person gave all the wealth of their house in exchange for love,
It would still be utterly despised.

משנה ידים ג:

...אמר רבי עקיבא, חס ושלום, לא נחלק אדם מישראל על שיר השירים שלא תטמא את הידים,
שאין כל העולם בלו כדאי כיום שנתן בו שיר השירים לישראל, שכל הכתובים קדש, ושיר השירים
קדש קדשים.

MISHNAH YADAYIM 3:5

...Rabbi Akiva said: it would be scandalous for anyone to dispute about the holy status of the Song of Songs – the whole world itself is not equal to the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel! For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies!

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What do we learn about love from reading the first passage?
- What kind of relationships are characterized by this kind of love?
- Why do you think Rabbi Akiva declared the Song of Songs to be the Holy of Holies?
- Are there modern equivalents to the first passage? What are they?

¹ This could also be understood as referring to the man.

² This is a loose translation. Literally, the Hebrew talks of the Song of Songs as 'making the hands impure.' If the hands are made impure by something it means it should not be casually handled. In this discussion the term is extended to apply to whether some of the Writings are sacred, and appropriate to be included within the canon of the Tanakh - or not. Rabbi Akiva is the most emphatic in declaring the sacred status of the Song of Songs.



LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT – TEXT 2

משנה אבות א:ו

ו יהושע בן פרחיה ונתאי הארבל קבלו מהם. יהושע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חבר, ויהי דן את כל האדם לךף זכות:

MISHNAH AVOT 1:6

Yehoshua ben Perahiyah and Nittai the Arbelite received it [the tradition] from those who came before them. Yehoshua ben Perahiyah used to say: Make for yourself a teacher and get yourself a friend [*haver*]; and give every person the benefit of the doubt.

אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא א פרק ח

וקנה לך חבר כיצד? מלמד שיקנה אדם חבר לעצמו שיאכל עמו וישתה עמו ויקרא עמו וישנה עמו וישן עמו ויגלה לו כל סתריו סתרי תורה וסתרי דרך ארץ.

AVOT D'RABBI NATAN (A)8

Get yourself a friend. This teaches that a person should get a companion to eat with, to drink with, to study Bible with, to study Mishnah with, to sleep next to, to confide in all one's secrets, both secrets of Torah and secrets of worldly things.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How are the three elements of Yehoshua ben Perahiyah's teaching related?
- How do these three elements relate to the transmission of the tradition?
- What does the commentary from Avot d'Rabbi Natan add to the definition of friendship?
- Are there other elements of friendship that you would add to that definition? What are they?



LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי סוטה ב:א

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר ר' יוחנן: וקשין לזיוגן בקריעת ים סוף, שנאמר: (תהלים סח) אלהים מושב יחידים ביתה מוציא אסירים בכושרות. איני? והא אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד, בת קול יוצאת ואומרת: בת פלוני לפלוני בית פלוני לפלוני שדה פלוני לפלוני. לא קשיא: הא בזוג ראשון, הא בזוג שני.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *SOTAH* 2A

Raba bar Hana said that Rabbi Yohanan taught: it is as hard to match couples as it was for God to split the Red Sea, as it says [Psalms 68:7] “God settles individuals into a home; God brings the prisoners out to prosperity.” Really? But [elsewhere], hasn’t Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Forty days before the creation of a child, a heavenly voice proclaims [that] the daughter of so-and-so shall be for so-and-so; the house of so-and-so shall be for so-and-so; the field of so-and-so shall be for so-and so -?! There is no contradiction [between the teachings of Rabbi Yohanan and Rav]. One [Rav’s] refers to a first marriage; the other [Rabbi Yohanan’s] refers to a second marriage.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the difference between Rabbi Yohanan’s teaching and Rav’s?
- What can we learn about marriage from that difference?
- Do you agree with Rabbi Yohanan’s teaching, or with Rav’s? Why?
- Do you think that the suggestion about first/second marriage resolves the contradiction?



LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT – TEXT 4

שמואל א:יח:א-ד

א ויהי ככלתו לדבר אל-שאול ונפש יהונתן נקשרה בנפש דוד ויאָהבו [וַיֵּאָהֲבוּ] יהונתן כנפשו:
ב ויקחהו שאול ביום ההוא ולא נתנו לשוב בית אביו: ג ויכרת יהונתן ודוד ברית באהבתו אתו
כנפשו: ד ויתפשט את-המעיל אשר עליו ויתנהו לדוד ומדיו ועד-חרבו ועד-קשתו ועד-חגרו:

I SAMUEL 18:1-3

The moment Jonathan finished speaking to Saul, his soul was bound to the soul of David, and he loved him like his own soul. Saul took him [David] on that day and would not let him go back to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And he stripped off the coat he was wearing and gave it to David, and his sword and his bow and his belt as well.

שמואל א:כ:מב

מב ויאמר יהונתן לדוד לך לשלום אשר נשבֵּענו שְׁיִנִּי אֲנַחְנוּ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה לֵאמֹר יְהוָה יְהִיָּה | בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ
וּבֵין זַרְעֵי וּבֵין זַרְעֶךָ עַד-עוֹלָם:

I SAMUEL 20:42

And Jonathan said to David: “Go in peace, for both of us have sworn in the name of the Holy One, saying, “The Holy One shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does Jonathan manifest his love towards David?
- What does the covenant in the second text add to their friendship?
- What does it mean to love your friend as you love your own soul?
- Are there people in your life for whom you feel this deep friendship?



LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

TRADITIONAL ARAMAIC *KETUBAH* TEXT WITH LIEBERMAN CLAUSE

We testify that on the _____ day of the week, the _____ day of the month of _____, in the year five thousand seven hundred _____, here in _____, the groom _____ said to the bride _____,

"Be my wife according to the laws and traditions of Moses and the Jewish people. I will work on your behalf, and honor, sustain and support you according to the practice of Jewish men who faithfully work on behalf of their wives and honor, sustain and support them. I obligate myself to give you the sum of _____ zuzim as the money for your ketubah to which you are entitled according to _____ law. I will provide your food, clothing and necessities and I will live with you in marital relations according to universal custom."

The bride, _____, agreed to these terms and to become his wife, to participate together with him in establishing their home in love, harmony, peace and companionship, according to the practice of Jewish women.

The groom, _____, accepted responsibility for the full dowry that she brought from her _____ house, whether in silver, gold, jewelry, clothes or furnishings, amounting to the sum of _____ zuzim and agreed to increase this amount from his own assets with the sum of _____ zuzim, for a total of _____ zuzim.

The groom, _____, said: "I take upon myself, and my heirs after me, the obligation of this ketubah, the dowry and the additional sum, to be paid from the best part of my property, real and personal, that I now possess or may hereafter acquire. From this day forward, all my property, whatever it may be, even the mantle on my back, shall be mortgaged and liened for the payment of this ketubah, dowry and additional sum, whether during my lifetime or thereafter."

_____, the groom, took upon himself all the obligations and strictures of this ketubah, this dowry and this additional sum, as is customary with other ketubot made for Jewish women in accordance with the enactment of our sages, may their memory be for a blessing.

_____, the groom, and _____, the bride, further agreed that should either contemplate dissolution of their marriage in the civil courts, each may summon the other to the Bet Din of The Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Theological Seminary, or its representative, and that each will abide by its instructions so that throughout life each will be able to live according to the laws of the Torah.

This ketubah is not to be regarded as mere rhetoric or as a perfunctory legal form. We have performed the act which in Jewish law makes the obligations of this document legally binding on the part of _____, the groom, to _____, the bride, and on the part of _____, the bride, to _____, the groom, with an instrument fit for that purpose, in order to confirm that all that is stated and specified above, which shall be valid and immediately effective.

_____ Witness _____ Witness

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