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Walking with Life

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SINGLEHOOD

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INTRODUCTION

Writing about singlehood in Jewish life is nothing short of intimidating. To me, as somebody who has spent almost all of his life single and cares deeply for the building of inclusive and open Jewish communities, the tradition feels not only too silent on the matter, but often arouses feelings of deep frustration. How so?

In 2003, Rabbi Harold Schulweis wrote, “In our times the Jewish family is underinstitutionalized. It needs Jewish institutions to offer wisdom and therapy, to provide innovative vehicles to help the family bind itself in dramatically new circumstances.”¹ I would add to Rabbi Schulweis’ astute observation. In our times those who aren’t part of a ‘strict’ Jewish family are severely underinstitutionalized. Single people present a unique challenge for our religious and communal institutions. Somehow, the idea that a person who is single is different, is somehow lacking, is a problem to be fixed, seems to be indelibly ingrained in the Jewish psyche.

Many of us have experienced the pressure. Friends, family members, even those we have only just met for the first time offer their expert services in... matchmaking. “Oh, you’re a single? You have to meet so and so!” Several assumptions go into this phenomenon. 1. The individual is necessarily looking for a partner. 2. The individual is not content with his or her lot at that very moment. 3. The sexuality and gender of the individual fits into neat and clean boxes defined by thousands of years of ingrained social thinking. 4. The person is ready for a relationship and feels somehow unfulfilled by not being in one.

We need not always fault people for their well-intentioned advances. Many thousands of successful and happy partnerships are the consequence of someone who pushed a loved one or fellow into that first date with another. However, many are not interested in this pressure, and more can be hurt by it. Rather than try to shoehorn the Jewish world into happy couples, let us take a close and careful look at what our tradition says about the person who is single.

THE EARLY TRADITION

The Torah spends almost its entire first book creating its story around the nuclear family. There is an assumption (and this is not a value judgment) of traditional family: husband, wife, the desire for children. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel... and so forth. These treasured stories rarely describe the perfect family, but they do all assume just that: marriage and children and the implied hope of a happy ending.

The rabbinic period picks up this theme, but adds significantly stronger rhetoric to bolster the ‘ideal’ life choice. It is in the Talmud that we find some of Judaism’s strongest statements warning the Jew against a life without an intimate spouse. The rabbis left us observations such as, “A man who has no wife is no proper man, for it is stated: ‘male and female he [God] created them. [Genesis 1:27]’”² Or, “Any man without a wife endures life without joy, without blessing, and without enjoyment.”³

In fact, when the Talmud does entertain the idea that one may choose to remain unmarried it only does so as a temporary solution, in deference to scholarship, the quintessential rabbinic experience:

Our rabbis taught: If someone had to study the Torah and get married [ie, which comes first?]: let him study Torah and then get married. But if he can’t live without a wife, let him get married and then study the Torah. Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rabbi Samuel, “The law is: One marries a wife and then studies Torah.” Rabbi Yohanan said, “With a millstone around his neck is he going to study much Torah!”⁴

The view of marriage in this passage is negative in its tone, but this is still some way from providing an endorsement for a Jew who wishes to remain single. Marriage, we should note, is assumed – a forgone conclusion. The question is

¹ Rabbi Harold M Schulweis, *In God’s Mirror*, Ktav Publishing House, New York, 2003.

² Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 63a

³ *ibid.* 62b

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 29b



SINGLEHOOD

not *whether* one will get married, but *when*? Rabbi Yohanan's critique of the stated law makes a case for the preeminence of Torah study, an essential obligation for Jews, but we have to assume that in doing so he is only legislating away a significant threat to this obligation, rather than actively granting the permission to anyone to remain perennially single.

Torah scholars, in the early tradition, were male. As regards single women, the rabbis are even more direct. There is an assumption that women will do anything in order to be – and remain – married. A discussion between the rabbis about what women will put up with in order to be married culminates with the acid observation by Resh Lakish: *Tav l'metav tan du mil'metav armalu* – “better [for a woman] to live in grief than in widowhood.”⁵

The assumption of much of rabbinic literature, and as a result, much of the later tradition, is that being single necessarily implies being *alone* and *unfulfilled*, which, in turn, intimates that those who are in marriage and traditional families are de-facto happy. Yet we know this is not really the case, even if desired by many. We never really know who is happy and who isn't.

LOOKING FOR CLUES

It is not easy to make an argument against the nuclear family in Jewish life, nor am I attempting to do so. So much of what our tradition demands of us takes place in the home, amongst those whom we love and support, and who return those feelings toward us. Rituals of Jewish time and Jewish life passages, rituals surrounding Shabbat and *Hagim*, are often inextricably entwined with the Jewish family. These traditions are to be cherished, valued and striven for. That said, we simply cannot assume that the Jewish 'nuclear' family is the only context in which we can live meaningful Jewish lives. We have many members of our communities who for many very real reasons do not (and may not ever) fit neatly into that box. It behooves us, as a religion that values the notion that each and every one of us is created in God's image and infinitely valuable, to search deeply within ourselves and Judaism to create a model that may open up a new era of inclusivity and opportunity. Let us therefore look once again at the tradition, and see if we can discern another rabbinic stream of consciousness that may enable us to alter the drift of our conversation.

The starting point, I think, is to recognize what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has coined, “the dignity of difference.” In his words, “...the more passionately we feel our religious commitments, the more space we make for those not like us.”⁶ We must next realize that the sociological and historical circumstances in which we live no longer match the context out of which our formative texts arose. In antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages if you waited until the age of 20 to get married, it was getting very late! And finally, it is time to be frank about the many reasons people may be single. That means, most of all, listening openly to all members of our community.

Different people want different things. That is part of what it means to be human and unique. Part of the community's job is to meet each person where they are, and not where the community thinks they ought to be. An ideal community is one in which each member values the other for who they are in that moment, and is willing to engage them there. For me to truly hear you, and to be able to join you in the community, I need to be able to recognize that you might not want what I want. You may not *be* who I want to be. In fact, you may not be who the tradition, as it has been understood, wants you to be... and that has to be okay. If one party comes to another from a place of judgment, or even from a place of wanting to 'help' the other before they have a sense of what the other actually wants or needs, the power balance will be off, and the result will be a sense of alienation, if not worse.

LISTENING AND LEARNING

What might we find out in these open conversations with single members of our communities? We might discover that some people are indeed hunting for a perfect other to complete their lives and are open to any opportunity to achieve that goal, however risky or painful an endeavor that might prove to be. Others, though, are single because they *choose* to be single; they may have taken an active decision to give up looking for a something or a someone that has painfully

⁵ *Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 75a*

⁶ Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 2nd. ed., Continuum Publishing Group, 2002 p. xi



SINGLEHOOD

eluded them for so long. Instead of focusing on what they do not have they choose to focus on the gifts that they have been given, and those they have acquired for themselves. Our tradition teaches similarly (though not identically), “To acquire land, make haste. To pick a mate, deliberate slowly.”⁷

Still others choose to be single because they have always known that that is what they want. Knowing themselves more intimately than those with whom they surround themselves, they see the most potential for a fulfilling life in community with others, while not sharing every intimate detail with a specific partner. One of Judaism’s most famous dicta, found in *Pirkei Avot*, teaches us, “...Make for yourself a teacher and get for yourself a friend; and give every person the benefit of the doubt.”⁸ If this is a directive for leading a passionate and fulfilling Jewish life, it is auspiciously missing an element one might have expected... *choose a spouse*. Those choosing to live their lives single should take pride in the fact that their tradition offers deep meaning in Jewish mentorship, friendship and non-judgmental relationships.

Yet others are single after having been married or engaged, or in long-lasting monogamous relationships. They are divorcees and widows or widowers. They may have lost the person they loved most in the world; or they may have come to the painful recognition that the person they thought was their destined life partner is not, in fact, the right person for them to make that journey with. Or that decision may have been foisted upon them by the person with whom they had intended, in good faith, to spend the rest of their lives. And some may have realized, afterwards, that they prefer to spend their days, months, and years outside the context of a partner-centered duo.

The Torah teaches us, “You should not ill-treat any widow or orphan.”⁹ Rashi, the 11th century French luminary, comments that this is in fact the law for *all* people – ie, none should be ill-treated. The Torah specifies the widow and orphan because these are people who often find themselves on the edges of community, outside its normal frames of reference and lacking established mechanisms for support. This verse, then, offers the widow and the orphan as a paradigm for all those in a similar situation, and teaches us to be constantly vigilant to them and to their needs.

LOOKING FORWARD

What are we left with? For our leadership, this new analysis of singlehood may mean rethinking how we program. Instead of simply creating singles events that center around making social connections that could lead to (mixed dancing) romance, let’s talk to a variety of singles from the community and ask *them* what they need. Some may want special programming while others may be interested in talking to other groups about how to feel more connected. Some may not want special treatment of any kind, but wish, instead, to feel more integrated into the life of the wider community. Simply stated, we don’t know until we ask...and until we listen. At the very least, we must encourage our members to be constantly active in making everyone feel a part of the community. While it is tempting to always congregate with those who are ‘like’ us, what often emerges is a class of people that feel left out.

For our singles who want to find a special someone, our tradition offers you strength while as you continue on your journey. Ultimately, none of us is alone. Finding yourself immersed in the Jewish religion is finding yourself nestled between prophets, sages and luminaries that span over 2,000 years. Most of all – you are always privileged to walk side-by-side with God, if you are willing to open yourself up to that unending presence.

For our singles by choice: You have chosen a path that your tradition has barely recognized for as long as it has been around. While that may not make finding a spiritual community that you can fully enter feel any less challenging, know that this conversation is only just beginning. 2,500 years is not easy to reverse in an instant. Your voice – your unique voice - needs to be heard.

⁷ *Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 63a*

⁸ *Mishnah Avot 1:6*

⁹ *Exodus 22:21*



SINGLEHOOD – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ו:א

אמר רבין בר רב אדא אמר רבי יצחק: מנין שהקדוש ברוך הוא מצוי בבית הכנסת? שנאמר: (תהלים פ"ב) אלהים נצב בעדת-אל. ומנין לעשרה שמתפללין ששכינה עמהם? - שנאמר: אלהים נצב בעדת-אל. ומנין לשלשה שיושבין בדין ששכינה עמהם? - שנאמר: (תהלים פ"ב) בקרב אלהים ישפט. ומנין לשנים שיושבין ועוסקין בתורה ששכינה עמהם? - שנאמר: (מלאכי ג') אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל רעהו ויקשב ה' וגו'... ומנין שאפילו אחד שיושב ועוסק בתורה ששכינה עמו? - שנאמר: (שמות כ') בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתך.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *BERAKHOT* 6A

Rabin bar Rav Ada said that Rabbi Yitzhak taught: How do we know that the Holy Blessing One is present in the synagogue? Because it says [Psalms 80:2], "God stands in the assembly of God." And how do we know that when ten people pray together the *Shekhinah* is present with them? Because it says, "God stands in the assembly of God." And how do we know that when three people sit as judges the *Shekhinah* is present with them? Because it says [Psalms 80:2], "Among the judges God will judge." And how do we know that when two people sit and engage themselves with Torah the *Shekhinah* is present with them? Because it says [Malakhi 3:16], "Then those who fear God will speak with one another, and God will listen, etc." And how do we know that the *Shekhinah* is present when even a single person who sits and engages themselves with Torah? Because it says [Exodus 20:24], "In every place I cause My name to be mentioned I shall come to you and bless you."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the significance of the Shekhinah being present in each context?
- Why do the rabbis link study of Torah to the Shekhinah's presence for the single person?
- Might the Shekhinah be present for a single person at other times? When?
- What does this text teach us about single people?



SINGLEHOOD – TEXT 2

בראשית רבה יד:ט

חמשה שמות נקראו לה - נפש, רוח, נשמה, יחידה, חיה. נפש זה הדם, שנאמר [דברים יב:כג]: כי הדם הוא הנפש. רוח - שהיא עולה ויורדת, שנאמר [קהלת ג:כא]: מי יודע רוח בני האדם העלה היא למעלה. נשמה זו האופיא, דבריתא אמרין: האופיתא טבא. חיה - שכל האברים מתים והיא חיה בגוף. יחידה - שכל האברים משונים שונים, והיא יחידה בגוף.

MIDRASH RABBAH BEREISHIT 14:9

It [the soul] is called by five names – *Nefesh*, *Ruah*, *Neshamah*, *Yehidah*, *Hayyah*. *Nefesh* is the blood, as it says [Deuteronomy 12:23], “For the blood is the soul.” *Ruah* – because it ascends and descends, as it says [Ecclesiastes 3:21], “Who knows the soul of man that ascends upwards?” *Neshamah* is the character, as people say: “Good character.” *Hayyah* – because all of the limbs die, but it lives on in the body. *Yehidah* – all the limbs are paired one with another [or: complement one another], but it is unique in the body.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why do you think the rabbis understood the soul as having five names?
- What qualities of the soul the rabbis are trying to describe here? Do you think any are missing?
- Why do you think the rabbis conclude that part of the soul is unique?
- What does this text teach us about single people?



SINGLEHOOD – TEXT 3

שמות כב:כא-כג

כא כָּל-אַלְמָנָה וְיָתוּם לֹא תַעֲנוּן: כב אִם-עֲנִיָּה תַעֲנֶנּוּ אֹתוֹ כִּי אִם-צָעֵק יִצְעַק אֵלַי שְׁמֹעַ אֲשִׁמַּע צַעֲקוֹתוֹ:
כג וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהָרַגְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּחֶרֶב וְהָיוּ נְשֵׁיכֶם אֲלֵמָנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יָתוּמִים:

Exodus 22:21-23

You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them and they do cry out to me, I shall surely hear their cry. Then My anger will be kindled and I shall kill you with the sword, so that your wives become widows and your children orphans.

רמב"ם הלכות דעות ו:י

חָיִב אָדָם לְהִזָּהֵר בִּיתוּמִים וְאַלְמָנוֹת מִפְּנֵי שֶׁנִּפְּשָׁן שֶׁפִּלָּה לְמַאֲד וְרוּחָם נְמוּכָה, אַע"פ שֶׁהוּן בְּעָלֵי מָמוֹן. אֲפִילוּ אֲלֵמָנָתוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ וִיתוּמָיו מוֹזְהָרִים אָנוּ עֲלֵיהֶן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כָּל-אַלְמָנָה וְיָתוּם לֹא תַעֲנוּן (שְׁמוֹת כב, כא). וְהֵיאָדָּ נֹחֲגִין עִמָּהֶן? לֹא יִדְבַר אֲלֵיהֶם אֶלָּא רַכּוֹת, וְלֹא יִנְהַג בָּהֶן אֶלָּא מִנְהַג כְּבוֹד, וְלֹא יִכְאִיב גּוּפָם בְּעִבּוּדָה וְלִבָּם בְּדַבָּרִים קָשִׁים, וְיִחּוּס עַל מָמוֹנָם יוֹתֵר מִמָּמוֹן עֲצָמוֹ. כָּל הַמְקַנִּיטֵן אוֹ מְכַעֲסֵן אוֹ הַכְּאִיב לָהֶן אוֹ רָדָה בָּהֶן אוֹ אֲבָד מָמוֹנָן הֲרִי זֶה עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה וְכָל שֶׁפָּן הַמַּכָּה אוֹתָם אוֹ הַמְקַלְלֵן...

MAIMONIDES *MISHNEH TORAH* RULES OF PROPER BEHAVIOR 6:10

A person must be particularly considerate of widows and orphans because their souls have been extremely humbled and their spirits brought low, even if they are well off. Even if they are the widow and orphans of a king, we are warned about our behavior towards them, as it says [Exodus 22:21]: "You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan." How should we behave towards them? We should not speak to them without tenderness. We should only behave respectfully towards them, and not hurt them physically with labor or hurt their feelings with harsh words, and we should take greater care for their property than our own. Anyone who irritates them, angers them or causes them pain, or who tyrannizes them, or who causes them financial loss, is guilty of breaching a prohibition. And all the more so for anyone who strikes them or curses them...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why are widows and orphans particularly vulnerable?
- Why is the punishment so extreme?
- In what other ways might we mistreat those who are alone?
- What do these texts teach us about single people?



SINGLEHOOD – TEXT 4

רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות דעות ו:א

דָּרָךְ בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם לְהִיּוֹת נִמְשָׁךְ בְּדַעוֹתָיו וּבְמַעֲשָׂיו אַחַר רַעֲיו וְחֻבְרָיו וְנוֹהֵג כְּמִנְהַג אַנְשֵׁי מְדִינָתוֹ, לְפִיכָךְ צָרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִתְחַבֵּר לְצַדִּיקִים וְלִישֵׁב אֶצֶל הַחֲכָמִים תָּמִיד כְּדֵי שְׂיִלְמֹד מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם, וְיִתְרַחֵק מִן הַרְשָׁעִים הַהוֹלְכִים בַּחֲשָׁךְ כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִלְמֹד מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם... וְכֵן אִם הִיא בְּמְדִינָה שֶׁמִּנְהַגוֹתֶיהָ רָעִים וְאִין אַנְשֵׁיהָ הוֹלְכִים בְּדָרָךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמָקוֹם שֶׁאַנְשֵׁיהָ צַדִּיקִים וְנוֹהֲגִים בְּדָרָךְ טוֹבִים, וְאִם הִיא כָּל הַמְּדִינוֹת שֶׁהִיא יוֹדְעֵן וְשׁוֹמֵעַ שְׂמוּעָתָן נוֹהֲגִים בְּדָרָךְ לֹא טוֹבָה כְּמוֹ זְמַנֵּינוּ, אוֹ שֶׁאִינוּ יְכוֹל לְלַכֵּת לְמְדִינָה שֶׁמִּנְהַגוֹתֶיהָ טוֹבִים מִפְּנֵי הַגִּיסוֹת אוֹ מִפְּנֵי הַחֻלִּי יִישֵׁב לְבַדּוֹ יְחִידִי כְּעֵנָן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (איכה ג כח) יִישֵׁב בְּדָד וַיִּדָּם וְאִם הִיא רָעִים וְחֲטָאִים שֶׁאִין מִנִּיחִים אוֹתוֹ לִישֵׁב בְּמְדִינָה אֲלֵא אִם כֵּן נִתְעַרְבַּ עִמָּהּ וְנוֹהֵג בְּמִנְהַגֵּם הָרַע יֵצֵא לְמַעְרוֹת וְלַחֲנוּחִים וְלַמְדַּבְּרוֹת, וְאֵל יִנְהִיג עֲצָמוֹ בְּדָרָךְ חֲטָאִים כְּעֵנָן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר(ירמיה ט א) מִי יִתְנַיֵּי בַּמִּדְבָּר מְלוֹן אוֹרְחִים.

MAIMONIDES *MISHNEH TORAH* RULES OF PROPER BEHAVIOR 6:1

It is human nature for people to be drawn, both in their intellects and in their behaviors, after their companions, and to behave according to the fashion of the place in which they live. For this reason a person should take care to befriend those who are righteous, and dwell among those who are intelligent, so as to learn from them; and a person should keep their distance from those who are wicked and go about in darkness, so as not to learn from them... And in the same way, if the whole country is doing evil things, and nobody there is behaving properly, a person should leave and go to a place whose people are righteous and behave well. But if all the places a person knows of or hears of are not behaving well (as is the case today) or if a person cannot get to a place where there is correct behavior because of forced mobilizations or illness, that person should dwell alone, as it says [Lamentations 3:28]: "He dwells alone and keeps silent." And if wicked people and sinners will not let him dwell in that place unless he mixes with them socially and behaves in the wicked way that they do - he should go and live in a cave, or out in the woods, or in the desert rather than conduct himself in the way of sinners, as it says [Jeremiah 9:1]: "O, that I had a travelers' lodging in the desert!"

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In what circumstances does Maimonides recommend living alone?
- What, according to Maimonides, are the benefits of living alone?
- Might there be other reasons for living alone?
- What does this text teach us about single people?



SINGLEHOOD – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

THE REAL ME

Do you have a solid self? Identity is partly a personal construction: We build our selves from bits of other people. We take this one's interest in sports, another's way of dressing, a third's love for animals. In time they become our own. How much of that is really me? Is there a real me?

The Kotzker Rebbe told his disciples, “If I am because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I, and you are not you. But if I am I because I am I and you are you because you are you, then I am I, and you are you.” This stands as the quintessential definition of what is now fashionably known as codependence: If your identity is entirely dependent on others, then it is not really yours.

God identifies himself to Moses at the burning bush as “I am that I am.” Human beings can never be so self-assured—or so self-defined. We constantly measure ourselves, pruning or expanding our characters in the light of others. But the Kotzker reminds us that fidelity to oneself is an important measure of integrity. As unique images of God, we honor God by becoming what in our uniqueness we were intended to be.

– Rabbi David Wolpe, *Floating Takes Faith: Ancient Wisdom For A Modern World*, Behrman House, 2004, p. 119





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