

THE 'WE' RELATIONSHIP

by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

One out of every two marriages in North America ends in divorce. Of those that survive, some should not: The relationships have deteriorated to the point that dissolution is the only way to relieve the misery. Thus, the majority of North American marriages are failures. The explanation for this enormous human suffering is not easy to see, especially since the statistics for the best educated, most sophisticated and least inhibited segment of the population are just as bad.

BIBLICAL MARRIAGES

When the patriarch Isaac met his future wife Rebecca he "...took her into the tent of his mother Sarah, married her, and loved her, and was comforted from (the loss of) his mother" (Genesis 24:67). From a Western perspective, the sequence of events is puzzling: Shouldn't love come before marriage? And why is the development of their relationship bracketed by Isaac's concern for his mother?

Our Sages tell us (Bereishis Rabbah) that during Sarah's lifetime, her tent -- which was Isaac's home -- experienced open manifestations of God's presence. With her death, these signs disappeared. Isaac's criterion for a spouse was the ability to recreate the Divine environment he experienced in his mother's home. It was her proof of this ability that determined Isaac's decision to marry Rebecca. Love for her was the outcome of the marriage commitment based on that foundation. Note that the love which grew between them is not unimportant: The fact that the Torah mentions it shows that love is one of the goals of marriage.[1]

However, far from being the prerequisite for marriage, love is a consequence of marriage based upon a common vision and goal of life, and the perception that the partners are suited to achieving that goal together. Only when Isaac found a partner for such a marriage and experienced the resulting love -- only when the divine environment was recreated -- could Isaac be comforted for

the loss of his mother. (Of course, some emotional bond must be created during the testing period before a commitment is made to marry. This is included in the "perception that the partners are suited to one another." How to characterize the required bond exactly requires investigation.)

The following generation gives what appears at first glance to be a contrasting paradigm for love and marriage. Jacob meets Rachel at the well and immediately kisses her. Within thirty days he loves her so completely that he is prepared to work seven years for the right to marry her. Here Jacob's love explicitly precedes marriage, and in fact develops so rapidly that it appears to be almost "love at first sight" -- the very antithesis of his parents' example. But this appearance is immediately dispelled by a closer look at the verses and the supplementary comments of Our Sages.

(a) When he meets Rachel at the well, Jacob first waters the sheep, then kisses her, and then weeps. This behavior is not typical of infatuation!

(b) The offer to work for her for such a long period, and the choice of seven years in particular, needs to be explained.

(c) The Torah's description of the passage of the seven years "...as but a few days in his eyes due to his love of her" like a beautifully romantic sentiment -- until we reflect that while waiting for a longed-for event, time passes slowly, not quickly.[2] His love for her should have made the seven years feel like a hundred!

(d) When the time is finally up, Jacob requests the promised marriage with the words: 'Give me my wife that I may go in unto her.' Such a statement seems gross in the extreme.[3] How can we imagine Jacob making it?

A COMMON GOAL OF PEOPLEHOOD

The key to the whole story lies in the answer to the last question. Our Sages explain that Jacob saw his marriage to Rachel as the instrument for bringing the Jewish people into existence. Since the Jewish people is the goal and the justification of the whole of creation, and the Creator made marital relations the only means of procreation, those marital relations achieve the pinnacle of holiness. As Adam and Eve before him, Jacob saw no embarrassment in that process when dedicated to such a goal.[4] His statement "...that I may go in unto her..." expressed the height of sanctity which he achieved.

Understanding that the creation of the Jewish people was Jacob's goal in marrying Rachel, we can

answer questions (a)-(c) as well. He used the seven years as a period of preparation for such an awesome task.[5] The choice of the time period is not arbitrary: seven units of time connote a complete time-cycle, and a period of purification.[6]

When one is preparing for a challenge which will test all one's abilities, whose outcome is of enormous importance, and which requires the meticulous strengthening and training of all one's talents and abilities, how does the time pass during the preparation period? Quickly![7] His love for her was predicated on such a challenge, therefore, the seven years "...were as but a few days in his eyes."

Finally, we must remember that when Jacob first saw Rachel he was already a prophet. A prophet by definition sees what the rest of us do not: Jacob saw in Rachel the mother of the Jewish people. His love for her and all his subsequent actions were consequences of this vision. Thus we see that Jacob and Rachel, instead of contrasting with Isaac and Rebecca, in fact exemplify the same principle: Love and marriage are consequences of a common vision and a goal of life and the perception that the partners are suited to achieving that goal together. This principle is one of the two pillars upon which Jewish marriage rests.

THE INTEGRATION OF TWO INTO ONE

The second pillar of Jewish marriages is found in the Talmudic dictum that Adam was (or was originally destined to be) androgynous, i.e., a being combining male and female characteristics in all human dimensions -- physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual.[8] What are we to learn from this piece of historical information? We are to learn that marriage is the context in which a man and a woman attempt to recreate or approximate the perfect male-female union represented by Adam. Let us examine this lesson in detail.

Human relationships differ in the quality of integration they achieve. On the lowest level is the pure business relationship: each partner enters the relationship solely for the personal gain he can achieve thereby.[9] Personal integration with the partner is nil. We may label this relationship "I plus I": Each partner is to himself a completely self-interested "I," but he recognizes that the cooperation with another "I" can profit him more than can his individual efforts.

On a higher level is the "We" relationship, in which individuals identify with the needs and goals of a group, and experience events in terms of their significance for the group. "We" replaces "I" in the thinking of the members of such a group, at

least during group activities. Anyone who has played on a well-knit sports team, performed with a music ensemble, or engaged in a similar activity has been part of a "We" relationship. A score by the opposing team is our loss; my successful play is our success; the notes I produce is a contribution to our sound; that is how the activity is experienced. In this context a new entity is formed; namely, the group. Individuals relating with one another in the "We" mode become members of this new entity and are integrated (partially) into it. Their individuality becomes subordinate to the group's needs and goals.

Although it is a significant improvement on the "I plus I" relationship, the "We" relationship does not embody complete integration. The group is an association of individuals each of whom retains his own identity. He merely plays the role of group member at certain times, and at these times accepts the group's goals as his own. This relationship does not affect his essence. Such a total integration, which transforms the essence of the individual to the extent that he is no longer truly an individual, is the highest form of human relationship. The new entity formed by this relationship is not a group, but rather an organic whole, of which the erstwhile individuals become parts (rather than members, as in a group). This relationship may be labeled "I," for two reasons. The singular pronoun indicates that the new entity does not have the multiplicity of a group, but rather is a single entity; and the use of "I" indicates that the new entity is a totally integrated individual, which supplants the individuality of those who stand in the relationship.

The husband and wife who achieve the "I" relationship do not form a two-membered group, but rather a new organically integrated whole. Compare, for example, the human body. It can be divided into head, trunk, arms and legs. Nevertheless, we do not say that each person is a group of six! The reason is that the head, trunk, etc. are parts of one whole, rather than individuals merely associating with one another. What makes the difference? Integrating functioning: Each of the parts is totally dependent upon its connection to the rest of the body for its life and ability to function. Similarly, the "I" relationship produces integrated functioning for the individuals who stand in that relationship.

UNIQUE, AND THEREFORE INTEGRATED

It must be emphasized that this integration does not compromise the uniqueness of those who

achieve it. That x and y function together as a unit does not imply that $x=y$. On the contrary integrated functioning usually presupposes crucial differences which are so related that the whole may vastly transcend its parts. Some examples: a violin and a piano playing together; forwards and guards in basketball; a surgeon and an anesthesiologist in the operating theater; Sanhedrin, King and prophet for the leadership of the Jewish nation. The uniqueness of the individuals forming the 'I' is the very foundation of the integration: It is because they are unique in precisely these ways that they can coordinate their functioning so as to form this integrated whole.

How is the "I" relationship expressed in the context of marriage? It is as if when Isaac says "I" and Rebecca says "I," instead of each referring to his/her own self, they both refer to the same new amalgam of which each is a part. If you write "I" on one occasion and speak "I" on another, we do not understand the written "I" as referring to your arm and the spoken "I" as referring to your lungs, larynx, mouth, etc. Although produced by different parts of your body, each refers to the whole. This is because "I" refers to the smallest whole encompassing the part which produces it. In the case of Isaac and Rebecca, neither of them individually is a whole any longer; thus the "I" produced by either refers to the whole of which each is a part.

The "I"-relationship marriage is experienced differently from other human relationships. Imagine that Leah is a social worker having difficulty convincing a client to get psychiatric help. Her husband Reuven encourages her and gives her advice, and the following day she succeeds. If Leah and Reuven are related as the "I plus I," the success is hers; he is at best an enabler, expecting her help in his projects as quid pro quo for his support of her. If they share a "We" relationship, the success is theirs, but it accrues to the pair (the two-membered group) through her action which she performs as an individual. If they form an "I," the very action itself is related to Reuven as well: The success was accomplished by a part of the very same whole of which he is a part.[10]

A second example: A husband and wife are together when one receives a gross insult from a third party. The spouse protests: "Your words affect me as well -- I take that insult personally." He responds "Don't talk nonsense: I didn't insult your person, I insulted your spouse's person." Is the protest nonsense? Not in the context of the "I" relationship. Just as any insult to my face is an insult to

me as a whole, so an insult to my spouse
is an insult to the whole of which I am a part.

This, then, is the lesson of androgynous Adam: Man and woman are created as incomplete parts of a larger organic whole which comprises both of them.

Their complementary gifts and needs enable them to integrate with each other on the pattern of that original whole. It is this which gives them the capacity to transcend the "I plus I" and "We" levels of human relationship, and at least approximate the integration of the single "I" of which Adam is the paradigm. The goal and challenge of marriage is to recreate Adam's wholeness to the extent possible for physically separate beings.

Love -- a deep and abiding attachment to and identification with one's spouse, coupled with the joy of that attachment -- is the result of forming the "I" relationship. Without this, there may be a temporary thrill, an infatuation, a mutually beneficial satisfaction of one another's needs (characteristic of even "I plus I" relationships), but not love. The "I" relationship, at once the challenge and the fulfillment of highest human integration, is the second pillar on which Jewish marriage rests.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The "I" relationship will not create itself. It must be actively pursued with intelligence and dedication. No matter how well-suited husband and wife are to one another when they marry, life's experiences work to drive them apart. No man has even a vague inkling of what it is to carry, birth and suckle a child. The loss of a parent cannot be fully experienced by the mourner's spouse.

Unless there is a commitment to rebuild lines of communication and modes of sharing, husband and wife will inevitably drift into private worlds, becoming less and less relevant to one another. Love cannot be strengthened, or even sustained under such conditions. This means that time, effort and resources must be dedicated to constantly renewing the relationship.

In my opinion, the failure to take responsibility for creating the "I" in marriage is the single most common factor in divorce. Western culture has evolved a passive attitude towards love and marriage: "Let's see if it works. If it does, fine; if not, why spend life chained to unhappiness?" "If it works" -- not "If I will work" -- and certainly not "It will work: I will make it work!"

How does one relate to other difficult and important life tasks -- a school exam, a musical performance, an athletic competition, a medical problem?

One undertakes to practice, study, train, prepare and strive to achieve (with God's help) the desired result. This is the attitude one should have in

marriage. A successful marriage is the personal achievement of the husband and wife who worked to create it. A failed marriage is often their

personal failure.

Adopting this attitude of responsibility towards building the "I" with one's spouse provides a new understanding of typical marital occurrences. For

example, it often happens that the wife (or husband) starts to tell the husband (or wife) an experience or feeling of hers which is immensely boring

to him. What should he do?

There are two common schools of thought. (1) Marriage is based on kindness: He should listen anyway as a favor to the wife. (2) Marriage is based on

honesty: He should tell her frankly that the subject is boring to him and expect her to respect his feelings.

From the vantage point of building the "I," both approaches miss the crucial point: He should not be listening to the story, but to her. The story is

boring; if he saw it in a newspaper or heard it from an acquaintance, he might immediately put down the paper or change the subject. But this

communication from his wife indicates her present state of mind, her present feelings. He wants to know where she is so that he and she can continue

to build their whole together.

A second example, consider the adage: It is easier to give than to receive. Why is this so? Because receiving often implies weakness, insufficiency,

dependency and failure on the recipient's part, while giving implies strength, surplus, independence, success, and also magnanimity. The ego-impact

of giving is positive, of receiving, negative. If so, one of the greatest gifts is to provide another with the opportunity to give.^[11] Often one

spouse will not share problems with the other "in order not to burden her/him with my problems." The effect is to deny the other a chance to help and

thereby confirm her/his own self-worth. (And the cause is often an attempt to save one's own self-image.)

After a disagreement we are willing to forgive, but are we willing to ask for forgiveness? Forgiving, as a form of giving, is easy: It implies that we were right and the other party was guilty! Asking for forgiveness allows the other to be charitable in excusing our fault.

It is hoped that these brief examples will indicate how the goal of creating the "I" provides a new perspective on marital experiences. Consistent application of this perspective yields a new integrative approach which helps cement the marital bond even as life's vicissitudes assail that bond.

We need to strengthen ourselves against the tide of marital misery which surrounds us and threatens to undermine our marriages as well. Classes, books, counseling (before and after marriage) and group discussions are needed to help us construct our marriages in the image of the Talmudic vision of Adam, and thus fulfill the destiny for which we were created.[12] [13]

FOOTNOTES:

1. This gives the lie to the Fiddler on the Roof slander of Jewish marriage as a love-less relationship.
2. See, for example, the discussion of Sefiras HaOmer while waiting for Mattan Torah in Sefer HaChinuch.
3. Cf. Yalkut Shimoni.
4. Cf. Iggeres HaKodesh of the Ramban.
5. This task is what distinguishes Jacob from Abraham and Isaac, and makes him "bechir she'b'avos": They each had non-Jewish children and thus were only ancestors of the Jewish people. Jacob and his family were the Jewish people in microcosm.
6. The week, shemittah, yovel, Pesach, Shavuot and sefiras ha'omer illustrate time periods composed of seven units of time. Tumas mes, yoledes, zav and zavah illustrate seven units of time as a purification process. The Zohar HaKadosh says explicitly that Jacob used the seven years to prepare himself for the union with Rachel
7. Think of preparing for an exam, a performance, etc.

8. Eruvin 11a.

9. Of course, many business relationships become more than purely business.

10. When my hand imprints my name on a check, it is I, the whole person, who signs the check; the action accrues the whole even though only a part is in motion

11. See Michtav MeEliyahu, v. 1, Kuntres HaChessed, chap. 12 where Rabbi Dessler distinguishes between notail and mekabel, the taker and the giver. Much of the description of the "I" is derived from Kuntres HaChessed.

12. Some will worry that expenditure of time and effort will deplete our resources for other necessary goals. For example, men learning full time will regret lost hours of Talmud Torah. This view is shortsighted: Much more time will be lost (not to mention qualitative deterioration) from learning in the long run due to the consequences of lost integration and communication than is needed to prevent that loss. Compare Rashi's explanation of Rabbi Yishmael's "minhag derech eretz" (Berachos 35b): "for if you become dependent upon charity, in the end you will be prevented from (learning) Torah." Rashi sees a regular job as the most efficient way to maximize hours of Talmud Torah; the same applies to investment in marriage.

13. I am deeply indebted to my wife, who introduced me to many of the ideas expressed in this article.

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