

MADE IN HEAVEN, SOMETIMES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Any man, should his wife go astray and commit a trespass against him...

Be'er Yosef: Our *parshah* deals in great detail with a marriage that has gone bad. Whether the woman was fully guilty of infidelity, or merely compromised the sacredness of marriage by arousing suspicion of infidelity, we are not treated to a picture of marriage at its best. On the other hand, we see the great value the Torah attaches to the peace and harmony that should prevail in a Jewish home. Hashem allows His Name to be erased when this can aid in restoring *shalom bayis* to the couple.

A good marriage ought to start with a good decision about the suitability of the husband and wife for each other. Even this is not such a simple matter. The *gemara*^[2] tells us that matching people to each other properly is as difficult as the splitting of the Sea of Reeds as our ancestors left Egypt.

Yet why should this be? The basis for a marriage is the most natural of things, as both men and women deeply desire to be married. *Tosafos Sens* come up with an unusual way of explaining the comparison between marriage and splitting of the sea. At the time of the latter, Hashem drowned some people (the Egyptians) for the good of other (the Bnei Yisrael). So it is with certain marriages. Hashem will sometimes take the lives of the spouses of a man and a woman so that the survivors will be able to wed each other! This, however, doesn't satisfy us fully. The *gemara* seems to tell us that it is marriage in general – not just the joining of particular couples – that flouts the laws of nature as much as the unnatural splitting of the sea.

We can explain by building upon an observation of Ramban.^[3] While it is true that throughout the animal kingdom males and females pair off, they do not enjoy the kind of relationship that humans do. The pairing of animals is a function of availability. The two do not cling to each other on the deepest level, as we do, where a husband, echoing the "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" of the *pasuk*, desires to become one with his wife, and longs for her constant company and companionship. The Torah writes that Chavah was created for Adam because "It is not good for Man to be alone."^[4] *Tur*^[5] explains that what was not good was for Man to remain alone and isolated even in the company of his mate. For this reason, Woman was created from Man, to allow the relationship between them to be an essential one, rather than an instrumental one.

Wonderful as this is, achieving this relationship is so fraught with difficulty, that it does indeed seem to conflict with other parts of our nature. We grow up with the deepest of love for our parents who

cared for and cherished us for many years. Marriage, however, requires that we reconfigure that strong familial bond. "Therefore will a man leave his father and mother and cling to his wife." [6] A woman who had been a stranger during all the years of closeness with parents and siblings now becomes, as Ramban puts it, "closer to him than they."

This is the reason why the *bas kol*/ heavenly voice announces forty days before the formation of fetus that a given man is destined to marry the often as-yet-unborn daughter of *Ploni*. That moment, i.e. the instant of conception, precedes any relationship between a person and his parents. The bond between the unborn child and his future spouse is both ordained in heaven and established, in a sense, earlier than the one that will unfold over the earlier years of his development. Heaven drops in a place marker, as it were, in the life of the new child. The familial relationship will be strong, but it will be contingent. When the time for marriage arrives, the space will already have been created for a spouse to step into the position and achieve an even stronger relationship.

As the same gemara concludes, however, this kind of Divine matchmaking describes only a person's first marriage. Any subsequent marriages do not benefit from this advantage. Taking two unrelated individuals and forging a successful marital bond is indeed as difficult as splitting the sea. In its natural state every drop of the sea connects as it should with the drops closest to it. Splitting it required artificially creating separation where there had previously been attachment. Precisely this happens in a second marriage. Not only must the couple come together in heart and soul, but they must supplant the earlier closeness of parents and kin to do so.

Meiri offers a different explanation of the "first" marriage of the gemara that is announced in heaven, and the "second," whose achievement is beset with natural difficulty. The gemara, argues Meiri, speaks of the ordinary and usual. A first marriage takes place when a person is still so young, that he has not yet punished for his misdeeds by the heavenly court. At this young age (meaning, likely, under the age of twenty), it can only be the edict of heaven as announced by the *bas kol* that dictates his appropriate spouse. One he is held fully accountable for his actions, the kind of person he will choose as a spouse will depend on his actions and his righteousness. By the time a person is ready for remarriage, he will generally be at the age in which his record of actions will count significantly.

This may very well be what Chazal intended when they wrote, "Eighteen is the age for marriage; twenty to pursue." [7] Some see the pursuit as the rat-race to provide sustenance. By age twenty, a person must devote considerable time and energy in the pursuit of a livelihood. Others explain the pursuit as that of the heavenly court, which now begins to retributively pursue him for his transgressions. According to the Meiri, however, we can understand the Mishnah differently – at least if we take the age of twenty to mean within the twentieth year, rather than at its conclusion. If the "first" *zivug* of a person is a product of Divine engineering that preceded his birth, it will not be as difficult to find it as the "second" *zivug*, which does not enjoy the benefit of this preordination. The *bas kol*'s announcement of a relatively easy match expires on a person's twentieth birthday, when

his spiritual state becomes a prominent factor. If a person marries young, he can walk – not run – to the *chupah*. Entering the twentieth year, a person should realize that he has only another twelve months to go the easier route. At this point, he had better start “pursuing” his preordained spouse-to-be before he squanders the advantage.

(The assumption that the age twenty of the Mishnah means within the twentieth year is based upon Rambam,^[8] who writes that a male becomes obligated in the mitzvah of reproduction when he reaches the age of seventeen. Clearly, Rambam understands the Mishnah's reference to eighteen as the age of marriage to mean within the eighteenth year, or past the seventeenth birthday. If so, the reference to age twenty for “pursuit” ought to mean the same, i.e. the period of time past the nineteenth birthday.)

A gemara^[9] tells us that Hashem waits for a person to marry till the age of twenty. After that, he says “May his bones swell.” Meiri's approach explains this enigmatic curse quite nicely. Only by marrying before the age of twenty does a person make use of the *zivug rishon* / “first” marriage announcement that preceded his formation. Utilizing it is his best strategy to identify the “bone of his bones,” and build a close, essential relationship. Turning twenty, he enters the *zivug sheni* / second marriage stage, at which point his indiscretions can get in the way, and deter him from finding the missing “bone.” If and when that happens, the bones that should have come together will become swollen, diseased, and unavailable for union.

^[1] Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 5:12

^[2] Sotah 2A

^[3] Bereishis 2:23

^[4] Bereishis 2:18

^[5] Introduction to Even Ha-Ezer

^[6] Bereishis 2:24

^[7] Avos 5:21

^[8] Ishus 15:2

^[9] Kiddushin 29