

PARSHAS BEREISHIS - THE GOOD SPOUSE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Good Spouse¹

Hashem Elokim said, "It is not good for Man to be alone. I will make for him a helper opposite him.

Do opposites attract - or detract? How we regard the inevitable male-female differences between spouses may very well depend on how focused we are on self-improvement.

What was "not good" about Adam's condition without Chava that led to her creation? Our first reaction assumes that Adam desperately needed Chava, because without her, he could not continue humankind beyond his own lifetime. It was "not good" that he found himself unable to reproduce. It is impossible, however, that the Torah meant that Chava was created to allow Man to procreate. Why would Man have been created any differently from any other animal species, whose reproductive capacity was assured with its creation?

The Torah must mean something quite different. The females of other species make themselves available to mate, but not for anything substantially more. They do not enter into a life-long identification with a single male.

This state of affairs was "not good." Hashem therefore announces that He would make the human female different from the female of other species. Woman will be at Man's side throughout his life.

This turns out to be a complex change from the prevailing model in the animal kingdom, and not a simple one. Man carries within him many capacities which vary enormously between individuals. No single skill set would enable Woman to complement Man, to help him in all his pursuits, at all junctures of his life. Woman was therefore given flexibility and plasticity. She would be able to partner with her mate in whatever he pursued. Standing "opposite him" is a perfect way of expressing this. She would not fill a particular need or group of needs, but would round out his activity and personality in myriad ways. "Opposite him" is not a vague description of assigned role, but testimony to her possession of many talents.

The midrashic explanation of our verse moves beyond this presentation of the plain meaning. The midrash, cited by Rashi, famously relates that if a person merits, his wife will be a "helper;" if not, she will be opposite him. This does not mean that the undeserving are punished with wives who

constantly battle them, in the sense of the opposition offered by an enemy or competitor. Nothing in the text supports or demands such an explanation. Rather, it means that she was created to be opposite him, to offer a different voice and perspective from his, particularly when he acts out on some deficiency.

A person whose behavior at a given moment is shaped by some character flaw might enjoy and appreciate the full support of his wife. This, of course, is short-sighted and counterproductive. His real interests are much better served by a wife who is critical of him, when her criticism is delivered for a constructive purpose. He won't learn unless someone is there to point out his errors and deficiencies. He might wince in pain at her opposition, but by preventing him from acting inappropriately, she acts as his true helper. Her opposition is the best assistance he can receive; it is no genuine opposition at all.

This is precisely what Chazal mean. If he merits, her opposition itself will help him. If he does not merit the good wife, she will not oppose his baser behavior, but go along with all he does, including activities that are harmful to him. The cheerful assistance of the yes-woman may bring a short-sighted smile to his face, but it gets him nowhere in the long run. Her apparent help and assistance are inconsistent with his best interests.

She is the wife who is truly "opposite" him.

1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Bereishis 2:18
