

THE CHALLENGE TO THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

A Holy Day Sermon, 1982-5743
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As long ago as twenty years, I began to notice changes in the normal frequency of marriages performed at Beth Am. At that time, I began to talk about changes in life styles that could be dangerous to the future of American Jewry. Over the years since then, I have tried to point out the special dangers to the Jewish community if we accepted the new sexual mores, or if we accepted the new attitude towards divorce, or the new attitude towards the having of children.

No one is in a better position than a rabbi or a minister, unless it is a psychologist or psychiatrist, to see what is happening on the broad scene of American life. The many small and large tragedies come our way every day. They all add up to one thing - the individual in America is increasingly isolated, and the normal support groups like the family are steadily being weakened. The two developments are really tied together. In search of increasing self-fulfillment, the individual has severed his ties to the group and now finds himself unable to sustain himself by his own powers. All of us need group support, and we have to find our way back to the group.

In order to help you understand the lamentable state of things, I propose this morning to let you listen to some of the things which I hear about, as a Rabbi, every day. Taken all together, the stories and bits of information that I am about to give you will make the point all too well. First, an item from a newspaper. Last year, the Associated Press reported on a study that had been made of two hundred young women who had graduated from the best colleges in New England four years prior to this study. Of the two hundred women, four plus years out of college, only three had had a child. Needless to say, the habits of the graduates of the best New England schools are the habits of our best Jewish young ladies. Following the new trend, our girls have decided to be careerists and not mothers. As a result, the Jewish birth rate has plummeted, and our already small numbers are steadily decreasing.

Several years ago, I tried to organize what has now become the very successful Beth Am singles group known as "A New Beginning." I began by calling six fine ladies to a meeting. They all came. I also called six fine Jewish gentlemen. Only two came. The other four gentlemen, all of whom were unmarried, reported that they were "in residence." For those of you who are not as exposed to what is going on as a rabbi, that means they were living with someone. Since their sexual needs were being fulfilled, what need did they have for joining a singles group where they might possibly meet a nice Jewish lady, chalilah, with marital intentions.

Last year, a divorced woman came to my office to present me with a "sh'alah," a question. "Rabbi," she said, "I have a teenage daughter and my former husband wants to take her away on a vacation with his mistress. Shall I let her go?" Taki, if you were the rabbi, what would you answer? Actually, I did not give the lady an answer. I called the former husband and discussed the matter with him. I began our discussion with this question to him, "What are you trying to teach your daughter? Don't you know that children learn best from what we do, not from what we say?" The man said he hadn't thought about the problem.

Increasingly, we Rabbis have to serve as referees to the Bar Mitzvah families on Saturday morning. The time was when a husband and wife would face this ceremony together as a culminating joyous moment in their marriage, but in all too many situations, this is not true today. Because of the high divorce rate, many children come to their Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony in a state of severe tension. Their parents may force them into extremely difficult decisions which pit one parent against another. Sometimes the child has to decide which parent's Bar Mitzvah party he is going to attend. One father got so irate at his wife's social maneuverings that he came to my office and announced, "I'm pulling my son out of this ceremony. He is not going to be Bar Mitzvah!" I must tell you that your Rabbi lost his cool, and I proceeded to tell this father that I would not let him make a mistake that he would blame himself for the rest of his life. I invited the father to leave my office and to come back to discuss the matter in half an hour. When he came back, the father was grateful for my refusal to go along with a decision he had made in great anger and in great frustration.

Then again, your Rabbis have to discuss with many of our Bar Mitzvah parents the crucial question concerning who is to sit on the pulpit, the father of blood, now divorced, or the newly acquired father. (The Religious Committee has come up with a Solomonic solution to that problem which we will be announcing in a few weeks.)

The painful stirrings within the American community shows up at every point of synagogue life. Couples get divorced and forget to provide for the religious training of the children. The synagogue then has to raise extra funds to provide for these children. Controversy arises over who is to stand beside the youngster under the marriage ceremony, the father, the mother, or neither. Often, the bitterness knows no bounds and seeps into the life of the child at every point.

There are many causes contributing to what has become a pervading American tragedy where the institution of marriage is concerned, but I don't have time this morning to analyze those causes. I am hopeful that by describing the prevailing chaos, some of you will back away from joining the crowd in its turmoil.

Let me illustrate how mad the whole thing has become. A few years ago, we interviewed a young man for the post of Assistant Rabbi. Our committee chose to hire another young man, so the Rabbi not chosen went instead to a small congregation in California, as its only Rabbi. A few months ago, there was a major crisis in that congregation. It seems that the female Cantor, officially ordained, became involved in a sexual relationship with a member of the congregation. The problem was compounded by the fact that both the Cantor and her extra marital partner were married to other people. The young Rabbi responded to the urgings of many of his irate members by requesting that the Cantor be relieved of her pulpit duties. A mass congregational meeting was held. The feeling was high. The vote was close. The final decision came on the wings of an eloquent appeal by one of the members; "What are we talking about? This is California. Who among us has not been in a similar situation? How can we condemn our Cantor when so many of us are guilty?" To make a long story short, the Cantor remains with the congregation, and the Rabbi had to leave. Such has Judaism become, California style.

Of course, we Jews don't have a lock on this kind of behavior. A short while ago, one of our most self-righteous, hell-fire preaching Christian clergymen in South Miami ran off with a nurse at South Miami Hospital, leaving behind a trusting wife and two children. The mania is inter-denominational and is a sign of our times. It has affected Americans at all levels.

A Rabbi has many chances to cry these days. Short weeks ago, a child about seven or eight years old was in my office pouring his heart out. "Rabbi," he said, "last night I heard my mother and father yelling at each other. I know my father packed his clothes. I'm afraid they are going to get a divorce. Don't let them, Rabbi. Don't let them."

Years ago, I tried to counsel a couple on the verge of divorce. Both husband and wife were good people. The husband's main complaint was that his wife was not a good mother. He seemed to have a natural instinct for motherhood. She didn't. She knew that she had problems. She pleaded for her husband's help. He didn't seem to want to help her to the point where she could raise the children better. He wanted to get a divorce and fight for the control of the children, so that he could raise them away from her. The divorce came; but, not content with the divorce, the husband proceed to try to win the affections of the children one by one, trying to take them away from her, stirring them up against her. When I learned what was happening, I called the husband into my office, and we discussed what he was doing. He spoke about his tremendous concern for the children, and he was quite convincing. "You know, Harry," I said (of course his name wasn't Harry), "you are filled with compassion for everyone but your wife. You are brimming with compassion, but none for her! Why can't you send a little compassion her way? Why can't you try to help her just as you want to help the children?" So many of us are able to respond to a child's suffering, but we don't seem to understand that an adult can suffer too, and an adult often is more in need of help than the child.

Sometimes you can tell that a child is troubled because he will start to do prohibited things just to catch your attention. We know that a bad child is only a troubled child. So it is with an adult. An adult who seems to be angry and vindictive is only a troubled adult and in need of help. The problem, of course, is how to help the adult, if indeed the adult is willing to be helped. The problem is how to see the destructive behavior not merely as evil but as a cry of desperation.

Now, whenever I give a sermon of this type, I like to make it clear that I am not an Essene. I believe with Moses that divorce ought to be a legitimate alternative to a destructive marriage. What I am concerned about is a tendency obviously present today to treat any marriage that is not perfect as a failure. I am concerned about the tendency to belittle the significance of marriage, and to make it just another one of many things to be lightly discarded when it has lost its pleasure value. I am concerned about the desanctification of marriage - its loss of the quality of holiness.

The ancient Rabbis tried to teach us something about marriage by making a play on three Hebrew words. The word for man is composed of three letters, aleph, yod, shin, pronounced "ish." The word for woman is "ishah," alef, shin, hay. The word for fire is "esh," aleph, shin (two letters). Now, if you take the letter yod or "y" out of the word for man, and if you take the letter hay or "h" out of the word for woman, you have, in each case, the word "esh," fire. The letters "y" and "h", the letters we have removed from the words for man and woman, together form the word "yah," the word for "Lord." Without the presence of God in one's marriage, the Rabbis taught, there is only an all consuming fire. Let us be honest with ourselves. Too many of us have left the qualities we associate with God out of our marriage; there is so little compassion, so little understanding, so little justice, and what we have left is a consuming fire.

As some of you know, I always have a pre-wedding meeting with the couples I am about to marry. I tell them, you know, marriage is not a 50-50 proposition; it's a 100-100 proposition. Each partner has to give all that he can. If you're going to keep accounts and measure begrudgingly what each one of you contributes, you're not going to make it. A marriage succeeds only when each partner does all that he can, whenever he can. And that may mean that one of you will give more than the other in certain situations or in certain areas of your married life. You will give more because you have more to give, and because you are the more able to give. Not everyone is able to give in the same amounts or in the same areas. For example, one of you may have a great deal more common sense than the other, but the second may be warmer and more able to express his or her love. Of course, the other side of this axiom is that one partner cannot take advantage of the other. The giving may be in unequal amounts, but the effort and the commitment on both sides must be thorough.

Then, I tell the couple about my parents. My mother was a warm and loving person, thank God. My father was completely unable to express his affection, at least to his children. My mother recognized our need and tried to communicate to us what our father couldn't communicate. "You know," she said to me, "you are the apple of his eye." How did I know I was the apple of my father's eye? Only because my mother told me of his feelings. My mother tried to compensate for my father's problem, and so it is in any successful family. One party has to compensate for the other's weakness and to do so without a sense of being a martyr. One has to do what he can in order to make the marriage work, for a marriage is bigger than the sum of the individuals involved.

In the Jewish wedding ceremony, the couple is asked to imagine that they are Adam and Eve. As in the case of Adam and Eve, they are told, the fate of the human community depends on you. If a marriage is successful, the community is strengthened. If it is weak, the community is weak, and our Jewish community today is tottering because our family base for the first time in our history is weak. Our young people seem drawn more towards sexual experimentation than towards sexual fidelity. Our married couples are drawn more towards building their careers than towards having children, and couples with children frequently use the children as pawns in adult war games.

Let's face it, marriage today is more difficult than it used to be. If it is to work, we have to try harder. We have to do things that our parents didn't do. My parents didn't know anything about psychology. They just knew that they wanted their marriage to work, so they made it work. As I look back upon their relationship, I realize now that there was a jockeying for power, as there is in all marriages, but I can remember incidents where each of them surrendered a point in the interest of shalom. Neither of them felt that they had to win all the time. They knew where to stop an argument before it became seriously destructive. My parents related reasonably well out of instinct and common sense.

Today, we have the additional tool of psychology. We would be unwise not to use it. A marriage counsellor, if he is a good one, doesn't tell a couple what to do. He/she tries to help the couple discover what their real problems are. Most frequently, the real problem in a marriage is not what one or both of the parties think it is. Frequently, the problem is not "A" but "Z." It is possible and important to discover what the real problem is, and it is possible to learn the techniques for solving it.

A strong person is not afraid of getting objective professional help. All of us are a bissel mishugah, and all of us make mistakes. A strong person wants to discover his own mishagas, what he is negatively contributing to a marriage, and a strong person is willing to make reasonable changes. I have discovered that the most successful marriages are those where real problems have been worked on by each party, and the victory of watching those problems diminish is sweeter than the happiness of the honeymoon. Victories which come with hard work are the most lasting victories.

Unfortunately, I couldn't help that little child who came into my office to plead with me to keep his parents from getting a divorce. I couldn't help him - but maybe you can.