

Writing

THE JEWISH VIEW OF MARRIAGE by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard
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In Israel, shortly after a man has been married, it is the custom to ask him, "Matza o Motze?" . If the man answers "Matza", everyone smiles and understands that the marriage is a success. If he answers, "Motze", they know the marriage is a failure. The word "Matza" is the first key word in a Biblical verse which begins, "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a great good and obtaineth favor of the Lord". The word "Motze" is the key word in a Biblical verse which runs, "And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets...whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her!".

This story is by way of indicating that Jews, like all peoples, have two ways of looking at marriage and at women, but there is what we might call a more standard Jewish view of marriage which we shall discuss.

If the Christian view of marriage is the view of Paul as he expresses it in the New Testament, then Christians believe that sexual relations fundamentally are undesirable, whether ~~in~~ within the marriage relationship or without. For Paul says in the seventh chapter of Corinthians, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman; nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife". Paul goes on to say "...I would that all men were even as I myself.. I say, therefore, to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I (i.e. unmarried), But if they cannot contain, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn ". If this be the Christian view of marriage, then the Jewish view is very much opposed to it.#

As reflected in the story of the "Beginning" in the Old Testament, Jews have always believed in the necessity, the importance, and the healthiness of marriage. There are, as some of you may know, two stories of the creation in Genesis. The first account reads, "So God created man in His image,...male and female created He them". Woman, in this story, is not created out of man, but simultaneously with him. Immediately after this account, the narrative reads, "And God blessed them, and He said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply... replenish the earth and subdue it". We have here expressed

(Contrary to Paul's view, modern Christians seem to incline towards the Old Testament view of marriage).

- 1. Proverbs 18:22
- 2. Ecclesiastes 7:26

the basic Jewish attitude towards marriage. Men and women are to marry that they might be fruitful, that they might participate in the creative process. That this participation is to be more than a physical reproduction is seen in the words, "subdue the world". Man and woman together are bidden to master the chaos of the world, to organize it, and to control it.

Let us think back to Paul's attitude towards marriage, and, then, look at the second version of creation in the Book of Genesis. In this version we are told that God said, "It is not good that man should be alone". Then, to demonstrate the fact that the married man and woman form a psychic unity, if not a physical unity, the narrative says that God formed Eve out of Adam's rib. And Adam said, (she is) "Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh". So inseparable was woman from man that she was considered as fashioned from man's very being.

The Midrash has still another interpretation of the creation which reflects the Jewish genius. In the Midrashic allegory the Rabbis say that originally man and woman were one creature, until God separated them. Since that day, runs the story, man and woman have been in search of each other in order that they might each fulfill his or her essential nature.

Not only Pauline Christianity but most of the great Far Eastern Religions tend to make an evil of the desires of the flesh. To them, the holy life is the life divorced from the desire for sexual relations and the taste of earthly goods. Standing over against this view of the duality of flesh and spirit is the Jewish view. The basic Jewish idea is that man is not divided into a body and a soul. His flesh and his spirit are combined into one essence known as his "nefesh" or his "being". The Biblical Hebrews, particularly, considered the well-being of the nefesh to hinge upon the satisfaction of the legitimate desires of the body. Accordingly, the Hebrews did not make a devil of the "yetzer ha-ra", the "evil inclination", which we might identify as lust or hunger in the broad sense and sex in the narrow sense.

The Talmud tells the story of a group of Rabbis who captured the "yetzer ha-ra" and bound it in prison. During all of the day that followed, they observed that the chickens laid no eggs, the flowers ceased to grow, the trees yielded no fruit, and no children were born. Consequently, they gladly released the misunderstood fellow. The moral lesson to be deduced is that the "Yetzer ha-ra" is not necessarily evil and can lead to the greatest good if properly channeled.

The Hebrews hoped to overcome the problems incident to the sexual drive by endorsing early marriages. The Talmud says that when a boy is thirteen he is ready for Bar Mitzvah, the accepting of the moral commandments; when he is eighteen, he is ready to be married. To make marriage possible at an early age, the Hebrews sought to supply the young couple with as much financial help as possible. The bride's parents usually came forward with a handsome dowry and usually took care of the couple in their own home for at least a year. When the

bride's parents were poor, the community fund undertook to supply the dowry.

In other words, the Hebrews taught: 1) It is good to marry, and 2) It is good to marry young. In the marriage relationship, they understood that the sexual drive would be satisfied, but they emphasized the fact that the primary goal of the marriage was children. The Jewish desire to have many children indicates more than a simple desire to re-produce one's kind. The Jewish concern for children reflects: 1) Their optimism concerning the worthwhileness of facing life with all of its rigors, and 2) Their belief that Judaism, as a way of life, must have many protagonists if it is to survive in the world. Seen in this light, the Jewish marriage is a strong indication of the virility and power of Judaism through the ages. Certainly, the Jews had every right to be discouraged by the trend of events against them, but they optimistically ^{obeyed} ~~repeated~~ the command of God to the first man and woman, "Be fruitful and multiply".

One of the Ten Commandments which Jews have mediated to the world is the command, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother". Yet the Jew taught that this honor was not one which was automatically due to the parent. It was something which must be constantly solicited. If a man is a father, taught the Jew, he must also be a teacher. (Indeed, the Hebrew word for parent and teacher is identical (moreh)). A parent who fails in his responsibility to transmit the basic values of his culture and the tools of survival to his children fails in the duty of a parent and forfeits his authority in the family as well as the respect due him. This is the view of ~~Liberal~~ Judaism today, and it is a view to which the Talmud obtained over a thousand years ago. We believe firmly today that the parent who does not transmit to his children the determination and the technique for living an ethical life has failed his children and betrayed the marriage covenant.

We have said that unlike Pauline Christianity, the Jewish tradition taught: 1) It was good to marry; 2) It was good to marry young; 3) It was good to have many children; and 4) Father and mother had the responsibility for equipping the children with the tools for creative living. We have said little, so far, of the relationship between husband and wife. For thousands of years, Jews have called the marriage ceremony by the name "Kiddushin," "Sanctification", the act of making holy. The marriage vow pledges both husband and wife to exalt and reverence his partner. Then, in the ceremony, each participant drinks of the wine and pledges himself to the act of creation, both physical and spiritual. The seven blessings are then recited which remind the bride and groom that each of them is in the image of divinity with a personality to be respected and not violated. Wine is the symbol of fruitfulness and reproduction, but, says the Bible, "Love is better than wine". The Jewish marriage is based on more than the desire for physical survival.

The Jewish family has been monogamous ~~by~~ by legal decree for a thousand years and monogamous by custom for 2500 years. Even in the time of Abraham, most Hebrews had only one wife, even though polygamy

was tolerated. To re-inforce the fact that the Jewish marriage must be based on respect and affection, the Jews made it relatively easy for a man and woman to be divorced. # The Talmud says that a man and woman who remain married, although not in love, are living in adultery. This attitude is in sharp contrast with the basic Christian attitude that divorce is to be tolerated only in the case of ~~Yag/Y~~ adultery, in its legal connotations. Not law was the foundation of the Jewish home, but love. A classical example of the affection of a husband for a wife is the case of Jacob laboring in the fields of his father-in-law fourteen years to acquire Rachel for his wife. The dignity of the position of the Jewish woman in the household is reflected in Sarah, Rachel, Leah, and Rebecca. The Bible lets us know that these women were not mere attendants to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They stand out as strong and dominant personalities. The place of honor held by the woman in the Jewish household is borne out by the Talmudic dictum, "If your wife is short, bend down to get her advice".

Jews were always aware of the sexual, economic, and social purposes which a marriage served. Nevertheless, they understood that a marriage must satisfy human needs beyond this bare minimum. Not only must a marriage produce children, it must prepare these children to face the rigors of life in an optimistic and dynamic way. It must provide these children with values and means of imposing these values on the world. Parents were not only to give love and bread to their children, they were to be teachers of ethics and culture. Children were not only to honor their parents but to be students seeking to ascend to the level of the parent's learning and wisdom. Man and woman were not only to maintain each other economically and sexually, they were also to render one another, in the words of the marriage ceremony, "sa-son v'simchah" (joy and happiness), "ah'vah" (love), "ra-ut" (companionship), "V'sshalom" (the opportunity for self-fulfillment). *

#- The Talmud teaches, "Thy wife has been given to thee in order that thou mayest realize with her life's great plan; she is not thine to vex or grieve. Vex her not, for God notes her tears." While it is true that only a ~~w~~man could obtain a divorce, the woman could sue in the courts to force her husband to divorce her. Divorce in practice was rare. "When a man divorces his wife", said the Rabbis, "the altar sheds tears".

* The Hebrew word shalom means more than "peace", as it is usually interpreted. Its root means to complete or to fulfill, to make whole.

Note 1. for Page-2

The narrative in Genesis 2: 24 further reads, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh."