

THE MARRIAGE METAPHOR

The three pilgrim festivals have many interpretations in Jewish life. Already in the Torah itself, we have two views on the three holidays. One concerns their natural significance, as occasions of harvest or first fruits. The other is the historical interpretation, when each holiday is seen as commemorating another great event in the life of the people.

This morning, I commend to your attention a marriage metaphor explaining the *שלוש רגלים*, as offered by R. Yehudah Leib Alter, the Rabbi of Gur, author of "*שפת אמת*." The three festivals, he maintains, symbolize different stages in the relations between God and Israel.

A consistent and persistent thread that runs through Scripture and Midrash and Kabbalah and the prayer book, is the formulation of this relationship as that between lovers, between husband and wife. God is depicted as the lover, and Israel as the beloved, as the faithful -- and sometimes unfaithful -- wife.

According to the Rabbi of Gur, each holiday is another step in the marriage process. Thus, Passover represents *קדושין*, the act of betrothal. As we know, a Jewish wedding consists of two parts, which were originally separated by about a year. The first part is the *קדושין* or betrothal; where a man gives a woman a gift and "sanctifies" her to himself, and they are thus considered married insofar as the rest of the world is concerned, but they do not yet live together. The second step is *נישואין*, or actual marriage, symbolized by coming together under the canopy (*חופה*) and then in a chamber together (*חדר*), from which time and on they live together completely as husband and wife. Now, the Biblical term for betrothal is *לקח*, or "taking," as in, *כי יקח איש אשה*, "If a man take a wife." This first step in relationships is symbolized by Passover, because the Exodus was announced by God in the words *ולקחת אתכם לי לעם*, "And I shall take you to Me for a people." Passover is thus an act of betrothal, *קדושין*, a metaphor reinforced by the fact that the Seder begins with *קדש*, the act of "sanctification."

The second step is represented by Shavuot, the commemoration of the giving of the Torah. The Torah, the Rabbi of Gur maintains, represents the Ketubah, the marriage contract which is read at every wedding. Just as a marriage contract contains the terms of the marriage, so the Torah contains the terms of the relationship between God and Israel. The Torah is the *ספר הברית*, the "Book of the Covenant," and a marriage too is called *ברית נשואין*, "the Covenant of Marriage."

The holiday of Sukkot symbolizes the second stage of marriage, the נישואין, because the booth or Sukkah reminds one of the canopy (חופה). The boughs or twigs on the top of the Sukkah are reminiscent of the covering which unites bride and groom.

Finally, the last day of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, may be said to suggest the modest meal that bride and groom partake of together at the occasion of חופה, in the private chamber, following the celebration at the חופה. As the Midrash says, this final festival is celebrated as if in response to God's request בשרו קטנה, after this long and beautiful holiday season, this celebration of a special relationship between us, "make Me one last meal" to seal our new relationship.

Such is the interpretation of the author of "שפת אמת." The question that occurs to me is: What of the seventh day of Passover? After all, the Torah does assign it some special significance as a full holiday at the end of the seven days of celebration. What does this signify?

I believe that, if we are to pursue the marriage metaphor, then it represents not another stage of but rather a new bundle of insights into marriage. The seventh day of Passover is that day on which the Red Sea was split, the day of קריעת ים סוף. Interestingly, the Sages used the event of קריעת ים סוף in their own marriage metaphor when they said: קשה זיווגו של אדם כק"ס, The marriage of a person is often as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea! What does this indicate?

Permit me to suggest three insights, which relate to both human marriage and to marriage as a metaphor for the special relationship between God and Israel. The first of these is, that of risk-taking. The Rabbis tell us that when the Children of Israel were gathered at the shores of the Red Sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, the Sea did not split until Nahshon ben Aminadav, the Prince of the tribe of Judah, jumped into the Sea, and the water reached his very nostrils. Only as a result of this heroic act of self-sacrifice and faith in the future, did the waters divide and the Children of Israel went through to safety. In Israel today, this has become part of idiomatic speech, and if one wants to speak about a heroic act of sacrifice and faithfulness, he speaks of קפיצה נחשיונית, "A Nahshonite leap."

Very few things in life are certain. At best we can have only a dim and vague perception of things to come. Marriage certainly seems to be one of the most uncertain of ventures. To enter into marriage is an act of faith -- and of awareness of all the risks attendant upon this decision. One who gets married without such an awareness, is performing a blind act. One who refuses to marry because he is afraid of the risks, and is waiting

for a "sure thing," will likely as not wait forever. Intelligent marriage is an act of faith in a state of high consciousness and alertness and awareness of the unknown, and yet a willingness to commit oneself because of a higher and deeper feeling, because of an intuition that it is worth the plunge into the Red Sea of problems and pleasure, dangers and delights.

This holds true, following the marriage metaphor, for religious life as well. We live in a tempestuous and convulsive age, in which we are beset by all kinds of demands, pulls, pressures, and tensions. Pure, absolute, and consistent faith is extremely difficult to come by. At best, our faith waxes and wanes. But if a person is going to wait until he is a hundred percent sure of every aspect of Judaism, until he understands everything and has no doubts left, he will spend his life in limbo and never achieve the greatness of faith. Religious commitment is, after all, fundamentally an act of faith and the willingness to embrace all the risks that commitment entails. Perhaps that is why contemporary writers often speak of the "leap of faith." Those who have been thinking of embarking upon the Jewish adventure, must wait until they are spiritually ready -- but it must come sooner rather than later, for complete certainty and absolute sureness rarely are achieved in the normal course of life. If anything, they are achieved after the commitment as an act of faith rather than before it!

The second insight offered to us by the seventh day of Passover, again refers to the splitting of the Red Sea. A Rabbinic writer has maintained that the true miracle of the Red Sea was not so much the parting of the waters -- after all, the Torah itself describes the miracle in "natural" ways, as an East wind blowing the waters apart -- but in their remaining that way, as a "wall to their right and to their left," until the Children of Israel passed through. The greatness of the Red Sea miracle was not in creating the phenomenon, but in sustaining it!

So it is with marriage. It is easy to get married, it is so hard to stay married. Weddings, despite all the complexity of arrangements, are simple and trivial when compared to the intricacies of and the sagacity required for the much longer and more fateful duration of the marriage. Real wisdom consists in preserving marriage, enhancing it, and enriching it.

This is true as well of the relationship between man and God. We live in a truly crazy age. Currents are met by counter-currents, trends by counter-trends. Some Jews opt out of the Jewish community and Jewish faith, many others are coming in. Those who come in usually do so as a result of some great inspiration and heroic decision. But they must learn that momentary inspiration and heroic urges alone are inadequate. Jewish life on the highest level -- and this holds true as well for those of us who were born religious

and stay that way -- requires constant care, ceaseless attention. No one can ever be sure of his children, of his spouse -- or of himself. One must never be overconfident. One must always labor at nourishing this delicate and precious flower of faith.

Third, is the element of happiness. This seventh day of Passover, on which the Red Sea split, is one on which we read the reaction of the Children of Israel: that of שירה, of song. I imagine that the Children of Israel were in no mood to sing, despite the miracle. Consider what they had gone through, how many of their family and compatriots had been lost during the Ten Plagues, how frightened they were, how overwhelmed they still must have been by the terrible tragedies which confronted them and which they so narrowly averted. It was a time, perhaps, to breathe a sigh of relief, but hardly one in which to sing. Yet that is precisely what they did! Perhaps this is what the Rabbis meant when they said that the marriage of a person is as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea -- that marriage, despite its problems and tensions, its difficulties and its demands, must be characterized by שירה, with song and joy. Sometimes people are fortunate, and the source of their felicity is external; it comes to them from without. At such a time, שמחה (happiness) just happens, and a family can erupt in שירה, song.

But that is not the usual case. Usually, a happy family is one that creates its own happiness. It sings -- and thereby evokes the happiness that it seeks.

This is not only a question of marriage, but of each individual as well. In the course of my counselling, I come across people who, so very often, complain that they are not happy. It does no good to try to describe their situation objectively and then compare it to those of other people who have greater difficulties and less advantages. Everyone has his own pain, and does not want to subject it to a relative evaluation. But it does make sense to point to other people who have less -- and yet manage to look upon life with a more sanguine attitude, with less bitterness, with more joy. It indicates an important idea: that happiness is not necessarily something that happens to a person, but something that he can create by an act of will. It can be induced internally as well as "happen" externally. A distinguished psychiatrist, Albert Ellis, once drew up a list of "irrational ideas" that many rational and brilliant people entertain without realizing it. One of them is, "Human happiness is externally caused and people have little or no ability to control their sorrows and disturbances." But this is patently untrue as well as irrational. We are not necessarily at the mercy of passing moods who are our undisputed masters. We are not passive pawns who can be moved about from red to black and back again on the chessboard of life without protest, depending upon outside circumstances or the activity of our adrenal glands.

If we are human beings, if we possess a modicum of dignity, then we can take our lives in our own hands, and at least to a large extent determine whether we shall be happy or miserable.

The Rabbis noticed that most of the Psalms of David began with the superscription *תִּירוּם דָּוִד*, "A Psalm of David," There is at least one case, however, where the Psalm is introduced by the words *דָּוִד תִּירוּם*, "for David, a psalm." They interpreted this to mean that usually the muse came from without, the inspiration simply occurred to David, and then he began to sing. The felicity and joy and happiness and inspiration initially came from above, and thereafter David responded to it with his singing and his song. But that is not the whole story. If inspiration does not occur to David, then if David is really a David, he must somehow evoke that inspiration. *דָּוִד תִּירוּם* -- David must, by an act of will, by a sense of high and heroic resolve, create his own inspiration and begin to sing his holy song. It can be done!

That holds true for marriage and family as much as for individuals. A person has a right to expect happiness from marriage. But he has no right to expect that good fortune will be his or hers at every step, while he passively rides on the crest of euphoria. It is his and her task and obligation to get and give happiness, even if it has to be fabricated selectively out of the raw material of experience and circumstance.

The same holds true for the relation of God and Israel. The marriage metaphor teaches us to carry over this teaching of the seventh day of Passover into Jewish life. Even in times that are difficult and tense, we must be able to sing. Even, as in our days, when Jewish life seems threatened all over the world and the future does seem ominous, we have no right to fall into doubt and gloom and hesitation and despair. It is easy enough to be "proud to be a Jew" and identify yourself as such after June 1967, when the sudden victory of Israeli forces brought Jews who had remained anonymous all their lives out of the woodwork, and who loudly proclaimed their joy and pride. These same people were usually not to be found after October 1973. But that is a real test: to sing of your Jewishness even when you sing alone, to be content in your Jewishness even when the world is alienated from you, to laugh at despair and banish it from your life. To be a Jew means to sing.

In the words of Yehudah Halevi in his *דִּבְרֵי חַיִּים* which we recite on this seventh day of Passover, *וְשׁוּב, שְׂגִיתָ לְקִדְשִׁי וְאַל תִּסְקֶי לְגִרְשִׁי*
וְהַעֲלֵה אֶת שְׁמִי וְנִסִּי הַעֲלֵלִים
 "Do Thou betroth me once again, and banish me never again,
 Raise up my sun and let it shine, and let the clouds disperse."