

The First Meeting

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The couple's first meeting; the sweet moments they can later go back to and recall, smile about, tease each other fondly, and also, the moment they will later think of as so telling: 'from the beginning, he was so caring', 'I love the way she listens, how she tilts her head attentively', as well as 'how could I not see how self centered s/he is? I remember our first meeting... now I see...'

Let's travel back and unpack the details of the very first meeting of the very first couple, a story all too familiar and therefore often lost, and from there, learn some lessons for our own relationships.

"And G-d said: it is not good for man to be alone. I will make him an *ezer kenegdo*" (Genesis 2:18). Thus begins the narrative of the first couple's life.

On that first day of a very special creation, so tell us the midrash and other ancient Jewish sources, Adam sat around watching the animals parade two by two, each with its matching companion. Funny, how a day might seem quiet and "normal" in its beginning, giving us no hint on what's up ahead! Adam, still new to the world, was lonely. Indeed, the Creator was his close companion, but that was too esoteric and definitely didn't give him anyone to hug at night, or argue with near the bathroom sink. He wanted a partner, someone with whom he can share his physical, human earthly plight. According to some, Adam even tried to mate with all the animals but none was a good fit and none felt right. According to others, God, seeing Adam's loneliness, took pity on him, and scooped another identical handful of dirt to form another identical being, just like He did in the first human's creation. That second being was Lilith, who was just like Adam, being made like her man, except with "female" sexual organ so they can mate.

We, the wise readers, already know Lilith didn't work out but why? The sages tell us that she insisted on enjoying "equal" footing with Adam in the Garden, sharing the labor and its reward, working side by side to tend the growing environment entrusted into their care. Also in the way of love making between a man and a woman, Lilith wished to share "equally", sometimes lying on top of her lover and sometimes below him, for they were full partner in creation.

To be clear, "man" and "woman" are "equal"; equal, but not "identical". This is a critical distinction. Therefore, we must note that even very traditional commentaries agree that, at the right place and time, a man and a woman can do pretty much everything they wish (sexually), including her "being on top". But the rabbis are not dealing with a Kama-Sutra kind of positions. They are looking at essence and thus, roles. As we shall see, they tell us this whole story to shed

light on the fact that man and woman are different yet complimentary in their essence. Having another man who was a woman with him was too much for Adam to bear, and he complained to God saying “Is this why I have been created to share everything with her? This is not what I meant when I asked for a companion!” Lilith disappeared, and Adam once again cried to God, bring so lonely and longing for a partner. God once again had compassion on him/ this time God had something else in mind: not merely an identical twin with different plumbing but an “ezer kenegdo”. We’ll leave it in the Hebrew for another moment so we can explore the concept more carefully.

“It is not good for man to be alone”. Five Hebrew words, easily translated, quoted and misused. What do they mean? Is it not “good” for anyone to be alone, or is it purposely the male form of the word “man” over the female? And, actually, what does the word “good” mean here? Is it moral, ethical, kind??

Current studies show the emotional and psychological harm of social isolation. Indeed, the text implies that it is possible to be alone, but nevertheless, not “good”. What is good? If I give a homeless person stranded in a busy intersection an piece of bread, did I do something “good”? And is that the same good the text is talking about here?

Zoe, my Golden Retriever approaches the table where I sit after I fed her, and lies down quietly, her head on the wooden floor, her soft tail wagging gently. I pat her and tell her, she’s a “good dog”. We’re both happy. But if she started barking or grabbed a piece of bread from the table, I would say, “no Zoe”, and “stop it”. I might even add the non-politically correct phrase, “bad dog”. What I would mean, in this case, by “good” and “bad” is related to how well she functions - as a dog, and how she fulfills her role – as a dog.

When the biblical text says, “it is not good for man to be alone”, it’s telling us that while we *can* function, we won’t be fulfilling our potential capabilities as human beings – alone. The sages have taught that when a man is alone, he dwells without joy, without blessings, without goodness and without atonement (for who will tell him all the things he’s done wrong, like leaving the toilet seat up, and the dishes *near* the sink rather than *in* it?).

Physiological studies of the 20th century echoed the same idea, describing the emotional, social and spiritual harm that comes when living in isolation. And yet, while it is not “good for man to be alone” (and yes, the sages, though most were men, thought that men handle loneliness much worse than women, and that women naturally usually seek more social engagements), not every company is better than nothing. Adam found that out in his experiment, just as many of us do in ours, even if not as dramatic. Adam needed an “ezer kenegdo”, loosely translated as a “help meet against him”, since *ezer* comes from the root “help, assist” and *keneged* – mean from the other side, opposite, against.

How can someone be a helper and be against the one helped? Again, we're challenged by a two words - "help" and "against". Our society commonly understands "help" to mean someone inferior, thus we're quick to conclude that the Bible prescribes that the woman is inferior to the man, and we therefore, have nothing further to do here. The image of a lady and her maid, or a king and his servant comes to mind. However, while there are other situations where the helper is superior to the helped person, such as when we go to the doctor to seek medical advice and services. The one providing the service "helps" the patient, but also sets the rules, the treatment is often unpleasant and upon leaving the office, pay is expected as well as appreciative words of thanks. Clearly, the "helper" is on the higher level.

But this isn't the case here either. Rather - picture a see-saw: if you're up, the other person's weight is "helping" you to be high. If you weigh nothing, you'll fly off. If you're too heavy in comparison to the other, you'll stay on the ground. And vice versa. You're "helping" each other while maintaining opposite, yet complimentary positions.

In the Midrash we find: a "help-meet against him", how can that be? When he deserves it, she is his helpmate and when he doesn't - she is against him. It is possible to turn "help" into something that is against you; it is also possible to turn someone who is "against" you, into help for your own benefit.

But why would Adam need "help" in the first place? After all, he lived in the Garden of Eden and everything was provided for him. Thousands of years have passed and hundreds of generations, and the question still seems puzzling. The sages were probably familiar with the daily challenges of livelihood, health and general well-being themselves. But those are not the areas for this "help". They point out that the areas Adam, the human being, required help with primarily were in the spiritual realm, and conclude that when both husband and wife strive toward spiritual growth, they will work in harmony. Yet, when they strive to accomplish selfish goals that do not foster spiritual growth, their relationship will be antagonistic and fraught with strife.

"Imagine a plane that must have two pilots, or pilot and navigator", I tried this theory in one of my classes. Each can do the other's work if absolutely necessary, but for most of the time, wouldn't it better for their joint flight if they decide on the joint destination and each contributed from their area of expertise"? "Well, yes", laughed one student butchering my metaphor, "expect modern planes can be operated quite well with one pilot alone".

Nice for modernity. Or not. Only time will tell. For the Bible, "it is not good for man to be alone" because this means we can't be fully who we are. Having another human being to give to, understand and care for, allowed Adam - as it allows us - a greater opportunity to express who he is, and how he is made in "God's image". The woman helped him realize his limitations,

usually in direct opposition to his own self-perception. He was reminded that he is not like God who has no second, nor is he the sole ruler of the earth in the same way God is the ruler of heaven. When all is good and well, they can teach each other humility while encouraging each other's growth, usually in the areas they need it most and likewise, often where they resent it most. We'll come back to that just a little later.

The "rib"

"And God caused man to sleep and he took one of his *tzla'ot*... and he built it... into a woman" (Genesis 2:21-22). We are told that the first man and woman were one creature which had one body and two faces. Such an androgynous had no challenge in achieving "oneness". There was no opportunity for giving and sharing; no opportunity to disagree, argue and make up or make out. And there was great loneliness. Accordingly, God created the woman by separating one of the man's "tzla'ot" into a distinct human being. The Hebrew word that, lucky for us, can have more than one translation: it can indeed be a "rib". It can also be a "side" as we find later when the same word is used elsewhere in the construction of the mobile Tabernacle in the desert, describing each "side" of the structure, which was made out of a variety of materials but no bones and no ribs.

The sages, in their usual way, accepted both ways of understanding the word precisely because it allowed them (and us) the opportunity to learn more about the complex world of relationship. So while they did not necessarily perceive *tzela* in the common translation of "rib", they did note that the woman was created from a bone in the center of the man's body. They said: 'she was not created from his head for she might not be too haughty for him; or from the eye, for she might be too curious; or from the mouth so she might be too talkative; or from the ear for she might be too obedient (yes, they did not want her too obedient!); or from the heart for she might be too jealous; or from the hand for she might be too greedy, and not from the leg for she might be too lowly, too independent, and too out-going. While we can smile at the fact that the sages did not want their women "too" obedient, I like this list of qualities with the "too" in front of all of them. It tells me, they liked their wives to be talkative, and even a little jealous and definitely independent. They just saw that, like all qualities, too much can be harmful and a balance is needed. Instead, they taught, God create the woman from a modest place within him, so she would be not too high or low, close to his heart, in his center – equal but different.

The fact that the woman was created from a bone, if to benefit the "rib" translation, as opposed to man being created of the earth, didn't escape the sages' eyes. For example, they considered a man easier to seduce than a woman because his nature is like earth, which is

more porous and soaks up water, as opposed to a bone that does not absorb water, no matter how long it is soaked. They also read more into the verse: “and God built the *tzela*...” (in Genesis 2:22). The word used for “built” is the Hebrew “*vayiven*” which shares its root with the word *havana*, *tovana* and *bina* as well as *bana* and *banyan*. The first three meaning various forms of understanding, and the latter - building. Based on ancient language deduction laws, they deduced from this that just like understanding is in essence building on realizations from within, and women were built from in out, and the same root is used, that must imply that women were endowed with a greater measure of understanding, especially when it comes to people’s emotions and relationship (interior stuff). Yes, it’s a generalization therefore, has its limits; and yes, just because someone potential understanding, doesn’t yet mean that she knows how to use it well. None of us can get too haughty here; all tools and potential tools need regular sharpening.

Man & Woman – Ish & Isha

When Adam saw the complete creation of the woman, he must have been surprised. Nevertheless, he was impressed with the finished product and expressed his great joy: “this is a bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. She is called woman for she was taken from man” (Genesis 2:23). The first woman did not have a name. The name we often refer to her by, “Eve” or “Havah” was not given to her until much later.

There are many Biblical words used to describe a female (*nekeiva*), a woman of un-marriageable age (*alma*), a virgin (*betula*), a girl between the ages of 12 and 12 and a half (*na’ara*) and a young girl (*yalda*), but the text calls her “*isha*”, a woman who is mature and complete and has achieved spiritual greatness. A Midrash tell us that as a symbol of the necessary spirituality between them, God placed “his” letters in their name: Ish & Isha each contain the Hebrew letters of God’s name (yod and heh). Without these letters, all that is left would be alef and shin, making the word *esh* or fire. Of course, fire can be good as a source of light and warmth but it can easily get out of control. What is needed in order for two people not to get consumed by the fires of hate, jealousy and passion, is the added measure of spirituality. For the first man and woman there was no “religion” per-se but there is a clear implication that in order to sustain their relationship, a couple needs something beyond the grinding daily mundane routine of income, expenses, house chores, tiring bosses, laundry, dishes, traffic; something that unites them and lifts the soul.

“Therefore a man will (must) leave his father and his mother and cleave to his woman and they shall be come flesh” (Genesis 2:24). From this verse it would seem that a man cannot truly cleave to his woman nor establish another adult relationship as long as his mother and father support his needs, whether physical or emotional. The order of the sentence can hold a lesson too: first his father, then his mother. The double direct object “*et aviv ve’et eemo*” indicates

two separate departures, not merely leaving one's parents' home. Either way, he must be grown up physically and emotionally in order to earn his woman's companionship. Only then can he truly be one with her.

The sages also pointed out the careful term here "his woman", or "his wife", that is to say – not his friend's, not an animal. Another Talmudic reading into this reminds us that "there are three partners in creating a human: The father gives him the "whites" of his body: bones, semen and the white in the eye. The mother gives him the red in his body: flesh, blood and the color in the eye. The third partner, G-d gives one a soul. In conjunction with this verse, man's departure from home implies overcoming the physical and joining with a spiritual partner. This isn't what modern media teaches us through endless bombardment of happily ever-after and the message of how great it is to "fall" in love (how strange, to "fall"? how did we come to think it's a good thing to fall?). The Garden of Eden spoke of another level of being together.

Thus we come to the end of the last day of creation or sometime around there. It's been a long day. Seeing how alike they were and how naturally their hearts inclined towards each other, the two human beings felt in love and wished to be married. So G-d created a canopy of gold, pearls and precious stones, and personally adorned the couple for the wedding. G-d was the cantor and the angels – the choir, filling the heavens and earth with such sweet melodies that all the birds stopped their singing and listened and marveled. That's when G-d gave the new couple His special wedding gift – the piece of the divine name. After the couple had pronounced the holy words to each other, the angels rejoiced and drew the curtain of night over them. And the man and the woman embraced and became one flesh. This is how human love was born upon the earth. It was all set up for us to have a good chance.