

Stories of Men and Women in the Talmud
Class 9 – Marriage, Principled Separation and Reunification
Melton Gesher at the JCC, December 12, 2012

Midrash Rabbah - The Song of Songs I:30

30. Another explanation: WE WILL BE GLAD AND REJOICE IN THEE (Song of Songs 1:4). We have learnt elsewhere: If a man has married a wife and lived with her ten years and she has not borne him a child, he is not at liberty to neglect the duty [of begetting children].

R. Idi said: It happened once that a woman in Sidon had lived ten years with her husband without bearing him a child. They came to R. Simeon b. Yohai and requested to be divorced from one another. He said to them: I adjure you, just as you got married (בְּנִדּוּיָתָם) with feasting and drinking, so you shall separate with feasting and drinking. They took his advice and kept holiday and made a great feast and she got him too drunk. When his sensibilities returned to him he said to her: 'My daughter, pick out any article you want in the house and take it with you to your father's house.' What did she do? When he was asleep she gave an order to her servants and handmaids to lift him up on the bed and take and carry him to her father's house. At midnight he awoke from his sleep, and when the effects of the wine passed from him he said: 'My daughter, where am I?' She replied: 'You are in my father's house.' 'And what am I doing in your father's house?' he said. She replied: did you not say to me last night, "Take any article you like from my house and go to your father's house"? There is nothing in the world I care for more than you.' They again went to R. Simeon b. Yohai and he went and prayed for them, and they were remembered.

1. Note the verse – about male female erotic love, while the halacha quoted is only about marriage for the sake of procreation
2. They came together to ask for divorce. They both wanted it, but it was for the sake of the man, so he could fulfill his mitzvah. She wanted the divorce for his sake, which means that the request was born of her love of him. But of course we can ask if she really truly wanted the divorce.
3. The halacha was indeed that they must divorce; the rabbi has little leeway here. But what could be the motivation for his request other than to strengthen the bonds of love between them such that they would not want to divorce? We feel here a tension between the halacha's understanding of marriage as solely a matter of procreation and on the other hand the sensibility of the rabbi that marriage is about companionship and erotic love as well.
4. Narrative illogic: She gets him too drunk and then his sensibilities return without anything happening in the interim. So why did she get him too drunk and what did happen? This could only be about seduction and erotic love! This is exactly the context of the verse.
5. Powerfully strong love between them was aroused, and out of that love he said to her – take anything! Who knows if that is not what the man hoped that she would do. Perhaps he does not want divorce but he cannot bring himself to contradict the halacha as he knows it. (Just like we found with the rabbi)
6. They returned to the rabbi and what did they say? Apparently that they changed their minds and no longer wish to get divorced. And what did he say? He did not

- try to change their minds, but rather tried to change God's mind. He let them stay together, and who knows how long passed until she became pregnant?
7. The miraculous pregnancy 'solves' the contradiction between the two paradigms of marriage, but what happens when there are no miracles? The fact is that the couple stayed together without knowing that a miracle would occur.

On this story see Boyarin, Carnal Israel pages 54 – 55

Midrash Tanhuma, Parshat Pikudei 9

"*These are the records (pikudei) of the Tabernacle*" (Exodus 38:21):
You find that when Israel were in harsh labor in Egypt, Pharaoh decreed (*gazar*) against them that they should not sleep at home nor have relations with their wives.

Rabbi Shimon bar Halafta said: What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the Nile, and the Holy One would prepare for them little fish in their buckets, and they would sell some, and cook some, so they could buy wine, and go to the field and feed their husbands as it is said, "*They embittered their lives with hard work in making mortar and bricks and in all the labor in the field.*" (Exodus 1:14).

When they had eaten and drunk, the women would take the mirrors and look into them with their husbands, and she would say, "I am more beautiful than you!" and he would say, "[No,] I am more beautiful than you." As a result, they would arouse in themselves desire, and they were fruitful and multiplied, and God visited them (*pakad*) [with fertility] immediately.

Some of our sages said, They bore two children at a time, others said, They bore six at a time, yet others said, They bore twelve at a time, and still others said, Six hundred thousand ... And all these numbers from the mirrors ... In the merit of those mirrors which they showed their husbands to accustom them to desire, from the midst of the harsh labor, they raised up all the hosts, as it is said, "*All the hosts (tzvaot) of God went out of the land of Egypt*" (Exodus 12:41) and it is said, "*God brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt in their hosts (tzvaot).*" (Exodus 12:51).

When God told Moses to make the Tabernacle, the whole people stood up and offered whatever they had - silver, gold, copper, precious stones. Everyone eagerly offered everything.

The women said, 'What have we to offer as a gift for the Tabernacle?'

So they stood and brought the mirrors and went to Moshe.

When Moses saw those mirrors, he was furious with them. He said to Israel: 'Take sticks and break their thighs! What do they need mirrors for?!'

Then God said to Moses, "Moses, these you despise!? These mirrors raised up all those hosts (*tzvaot*) in Egypt! Take them, and make of them a bronze laver (sink) and a bronze stand [for the priests to sanctify themselves] as it is said, "*He made the bronze laver ... from the mirrors of the women who flocked (tzovot) to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.*" (Exodus 38:8).

1. The Torah tells us that Pharaoh was greatly alarmed at the natural increase of the Israelites and that he tried to put a stop to it, and eventually ordered that the first born males be killed. The midrash builds on this theme and adds additional step that Pharaoh towards the same end.
2. The men according to the midrash accepted the decree, whereas the women did not and found a way to circumvent it.
3. The women found that they needed not only to circumvent the direct decree, and to make their way surreptitiously to the husbands in the fields, but they also had to arouse their husbands to intimacy. Pharaoh's decrees had succeeded in bringing the men to a state in which they were uninterested in sexuality and perhaps were even dead set against bearing children under such terrible circumstances.
4. Fish symbolize fruitfulness and procreation.
5. The women strengthened their husbands physically with food and also got them drunk in order to seduce them. The spouses played drunken games out in the open field and were aroused to intimacy.
6. In the mirrors they already saw more Israelites than there really were. They are already imagining victory of Pharaoh's decree.
7. God was very pleased with this. The verb *pakad* reminds us of the barren couple Avraham and Sara who were blessed by God with a child. It also is the verb used for God's promise to redeem the Israelites from slavery in Genesis 50:24. The same verb also connects these events to the Tabernacle, implicitly highlighting their holiness.
8. Note that every Israelite woman, and not just one, is a heroine. They all do the same thing, but each one with her own husband, which means that they all do it just a little bit differently, but all with the same holiness and the same result.
9. "600,000" – It is as if each woman gives birth to the whole Jewish People.
10. It was all accomplished through these copper mirrors: The mirrors are about seeing something else beyond reality. With the grime and grit of the back breaking labor, they had to imagine a beauty that was not readily apparent. They had to imagine goodness and freedom that was not readily apparent. The mirrors are about breaking out of the oppressive present and living with real hope for the future, hope which catalyzes action.
11. Moshe takes exception to these items of intimate sexual seduction being displayed in God's dwelling. . Mirrors are used by women for vanity and self adornment; they are used to deceive and to seduce. "Break their thighs," expresses anger at sexuality that transgresses boundaries.
12. God vindicates the mirror and its costuming function against Moses' predictable indignation. For the mirror is used against the *gezera*; when a couple gazes into it, it generates redemption.
13. Not only the Jewish People but also the Tabernacle is founded upon this holy sexuality. These mirrors are for the laver that allows entrance into the Tabernacle. See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate yoma page 54a "When Israel makes pilgrimage, the curtains of the ark are rolled back and they are shown the cherubs hugging, intertwined one in the other. They are told: Look at how beloved you are before the Holy One like the love of male for female".

R. Awira expounded: As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt. When they went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fishes should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fishes. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field, and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had intercourse with them among the sheepfolds, as it is said: When ye lie among the sheepfolds etc.⁴ As the reward for ‘When ye lie among the sheepfolds’, the Israelites merited the spoliation of the Egyptians, as it is said: As the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her pinions with yellow gold.⁵ After the women had conceived they returned to their homes; and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple-tree, as it is said: Under the apple-tree I caused thee to come forth [from thy mother's womb] etc.⁶ The Holy One, blessed be He, sent down someone from the high heavens who washed and straightened the limbs [of the babes] in the same manner that a midwife straightens the limbs of a child; as it is said: And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee.⁷ He also provided for them two cakes, one of oil and one of honey, as it is said: And He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil etc.⁸ When the Egyptians noticed them, they went to kill them; but a miracle occurred on their behalf so that they were swallowed in the ground, and [the Egyptians] brought oxen and ploughed over them, as it is said: The ploughers ploughed upon my back.⁹ After they had departed, [the Israelite women with their babes] broke through [the earth] and came forth like the herbage of the field, as it is said: I caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field;¹⁰ and when [the babes] had grown up, they came in flocks to their homes, as it is said: And thou didst increase and wax great and didst come with ornaments¹¹ — read not with ornaments [ba'adi ‘adayim] but in flocks [be'edre ‘adarim]. At the time the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself by the Red Sea, they recognised Him first, as it is said: This is my God and I will praise Him.¹²

(4) Ps. LXVIII, 14, E.V., 13.

(5) Ps. LXVIII, 14, E.V., 13. The dove is often used by the Rabbis as a symbol of Israel.

(6) Cant. VIII, 5. That is how the verb is interpreted here.

(7) Ezek. XVI, 4. There was no midwife present to cut the navel-string, nor was ordinary water used.

(8) Deut. XXXII, 13.

(9) Ps. CXXIX, 3.

(10) Ezek. XVI, 7.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ex. XV, 2. The word ‘this’ implies that He had been previously seen; therefore it must have been by the former babes.

And there went a man of the house of Levi.¹⁸ Where did he go? R. Judah b. Zebina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed ‘Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river’, he said: In vain do we labour. He arose and divorced his wife.¹⁹ All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced

their wives. His daughter said to him, 'Father, thy decree is more severe than Pharaoh's; because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas thou hast decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas thou hast decreed concerning this world and the World to Come.²⁰ In the case of the wicked Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in thy case, though thou art righteous, it is certain that thy decree will be fulfilled, as it is said: Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee!²¹ He arose and took his wife back; and they all arose and took their wives back.

(18) Ex. II, 1.

(19) Since all the male children to be born would be killed, and the primary object of marriage was the procreation of sons.

(20) The drowned babes would live again in the Hereafter; but unborn children are denied that bliss.

(21) Job XXII, 28.