



“Flesh of My Flesh” or “Male and Female He Created Them?”

Two Models of Marriage and Partnership

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Parashat Bereishit raises fundamental questions about the nature, characteristics, and essence of humanity's existence. My focus in this essay is the nature of the bond between two partners. Parashat Bereishit opens with two different descriptions of creation, descriptions that assume corollary models of partnership. Genesis 1 declares: “Male and female God created them.” This description of the creation of the first man and woman introduces a model of partnership wherein the two partners are two distinct entities, both equally individual and unique, images of God, who, when combined, create a complex being.

Genesis 2, on the other hand, describes a different model: “The Lord God caused a deep sleep to overcome Adam and he slept. He took one of his ribs and enclosed it with flesh. God built up the rib that He took from Adam into a woman and brought her to Adam. Adam said, “This time it is bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh! This will be called woman because she was taken from man.”” Here the woman is described as created from the man's own body. The model of partnership here is no longer one of an entity composed of two equal parts, but rather a connection approaching unity, a unity that completes anew one of the partners who was previously lacking. These two models, partnership as the completion of one who is lacking and partnership as the creation of a new, hybrid entity, composed of two people who are of equal value, can also be found in a discussion developed in Massekhet Kiddushin in the Babylonian Talmud.

The opening Mishnah of Massekhet Kiddushin describes the different ways that marriage (*kiddushin*) can be constructed and dismantled: “The woman is acquired in three ways and acquires herself in two ways.” This opening raises two questions: First, the language of acquisition used here sounds dissonant and harsh to contemporary readers; this is not how we generally talk about the bond of marriage. Second, the passiveness of the woman in the construction of the bond is equally grating. It appears that the Mishnah considers ‘the woman’ to be an object: She “is acquired” and is not an active subject who is responsible for her life.

This dissonance is not an entirely modern phenomenon. Even the Talmudic discussion which appears to be asking questions about diction and syntax, can be seen as responding to this fundamental question: Why are two people getting married described as a woman being acquired by a man?

R. Shimon addresses the question of the woman’s passivity by saying that the Mishnah’s language reflects reality:

“It is taught: R. Shimon says, Why does the Torah say, ‘when a man takes a woman’ and doesn’t say ‘when a woman takes a man?’ Because is it the way of a man to pursue a woman and it is not the way of a woman to pursue a man.”

R. Shimon argues that it is “the way of the world” for an active man to pursue a passive woman. This behavior is described by the verses in the Torah, it is reflected in the language of the Mishnah, and this is, according to him, the natural course of human life. The Mishnah uses the word *derekh* to describe the “way” a woman can be acquired in marriage and R. Shimon uses the same word in his phrase “the way of the world.” This is to say that the reality in which a man pursues a woman is an undisputed given, “the way that people behave.”

R. Shimon's words do not conclude with the claim that "this is the way of the world." He continues to explain this point by using a parable:

"It is analogous to a person who lost an object. Who pursues whom? The person who lost his object pursues it."

Rashi explains simply that the lost object is "one of his ribs." Marriage is thus a kind of repair, a completion of what is missing, a case of an object being returned to its owner. The human behavior described by R. Shimon is substantiated by the story of Creation itself. Ostensibly, the Talmudic discussion could have ended with this point. Marriage is described as reuniting a lost object with its owner something lacking has been completely restored. The social order is thus presented and explained—a man pursues his wife like a person who pursues his lost object, in this case, his rib. At the moment of marriage the one who is lacking—the ribless man—reverts to being the one, the original, the Edenic, as is described by the second chapter of Genesis in the verses we saw above.

However, people are complex and different from one another. The Talmud's awareness of this point is part of its greatness. And indeed, the Talmudic discussion doesn't end with this point wherein R. Shimon's "way of the world" is presented as the one sole possibility. To the contrary! Slowly, a description arises which suggests the opposite of this description of partnership, and maybe of relationships in general, a change according to which relationships exhibit entirely different characteristics.

Furthermore, the very way the first model is presented hints at a subversive critique of the model itself. R. Shimon's words open with an ostensibly neutral verse that describes marriage: "when a man takes a woman." But it is hard to ignore the continuation of the verse, "when a man takes a woman and comes unto her and subsequently despises her and puts forth an allegation against her." The verse describes a type of partnership that lacks trust and accord. Choosing this verse to describe marriage and partnership—specifically a

model of partnership that connects the partners to the point of complete unity—ought to inspire our curiosity. The use of this verse implicitly presents a subtle, but sharp critique of this first model of marriage.

Let’s turn then to the way that the second model of marriage is presented along with its characteristics. We saw how R. Shimon used the term *derekh*/way to describe the dynamics of marriage and how the Mishnah also uses the word *derakhim*/ways to describe the ways in which a marriage can be formalized. The Talmud’s conversation then proceeds to contrast the Mishnah’s use of the term *derakhim*/ways, with its use in other places of the similar-looking word *devarim*/things. The Talmud concludes that when the Mishnah uses the word *derakhim*, where it might have used *devarim*, it points to the presence of complexity. In the language of the Talmud: “Wherever there is (legal) complexity to the person or object being discussed, the Mishnah will use *derakhim*. Wherever there is no complexity, the Mishnah will use *devarim*” (Kiddushin 3a; see also Rashi there). In other words wherever there is distinction, complexity, or a mixing of categories, the Mishnah used the language of *derakhim*/ways. Wherever there are no distinctions and there is no complexity, the Mishnah uses the language of *devarim*/things.

The conclusion that emerges from the Talmudic discussion is thus both fascinating and touching. The use of the word *derakhim* itself testifies to a different perspective regarding the topic under discussion- in our case, marriage or partnership. Partnership, according to this understanding is, in fact, a *derekh*, in the sense that it is a compound. Its fruit has the characteristics of both of its components. Its characteristics stem from its multiple parts. This type of partnership isn’t the story of one incomplete person who is made whole, an entity comprised of characteristics that flow from one unitary source. Rather, it is a story of combining and grafting, a process of creating a new entity characterized by the components of its different parts. This type of partnership emerged from the description of humanity in Genesis 1, “God created Adam in His image, in the image of God He made him, male and female He created them. God blessed them. God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply,

and fill the earth.” Before us we have two people; both of them are the image of God. There is no primary one out of which the second was created. The encounter between two people is thus not the result of one partner’s lack that the other one fills. There is no one who serves or completes the other. This is an encounter between two who are separate and equal. This encounter is not meant to return one partner to its original perfect state, but rather to forge two unique individuals into a new creation, combined and composite. Indeed, the verses echo and say that this encounter generates new entities, “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” The blessing inheres in the combination of two, both of them are the image of God, both of them are distinct from one another. Each has independent value. When they meet fruitfulness is created, a fruit that is not a faithful copy but something entirely new, a combination of two who are separate and different into a fruit that is itself distinct.