

Love

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have been dealing too much with politics of late. So to redress the balance I am going to deal with love. Of course it's a massive subject and far too complex to deal in one brief session. So be patient, please. More will follow. So here's the first step, focusing mainly on the origins of love in Judaism.

I cannot think of a more misused word than "love". The same word, Ahavah, is used in Biblical language to talk about loving one's neighbor, one's father and mother, one's children, one's master, one's friend, one's God, and of course one's spouse (in the case of King Solomon, hundreds of women). The Greeks distinguished between mental love, Platonic, and physical. Biblical Judaism did not. "Ahavah" derives from the root "Hav" which means "to bring" or "to give". Judaism simply spoke about a relationship in which one gives, brings something; one has obligations, rather than the modern idea of "what can I get out of it?"

The first human relationship in the Bible, of course, was that of Adam and Eve. They knew how to reproduce. Eve could not have been too worried about her husband straying. Adam was delighted to have found a companion, someone closer to him than the animals. In saying, "And that is why a man leaves his parents and stays closer to his wife", the Torah suggested a very intimate kind of relationship that would transcend (without necessarily replacing) that which one had with one's parents. The ribcage protects the heart, which symbolized love, as it still does today. Creating Eve out of the rib was another way of asserting the emotional link between the two, to supplement the physical. The word "love" is not used, but the symbolism is clear.

Abraham and Sarah appeared to have had an incredibly close relationship in which both of them tried to understand, if not anticipate, the needs of the other. The word "love" is not mentioned there. But according to the Midrash it was with Hagar, under the name of Keturah, that there was passion. It suggests she was so deeply in love with Avraham that she kept herself exclusively for him and waited until Sarah died in order to marry him. For the rabbis to have even thought of such a possibility means they were not only aware of romantic love, but actually admired it.

Throughout the Bible the actual word for marriage is not at all romantic. It is the transactional—"to take", to take as or for a wife. And the arrangement involved such issues as dowry and financial inducements. The idea of getting married for the first time without parental involvement would have struck them as inconceivable. Nevertheless, Biblical law insisted on the husband's having obligations to his wife; that was its way of talking about her rights. And yet it would be wrong to think of marriage simply as a transaction. Love played a very important part.

There is no explicit reference to love in marriage until Rebecca. But look at

the sequence of words. "And Isaac brought her [Rebecca] into the tent of Sarah, his mother, and he took her to be his wife and he loved her." It seems pretty clear that marriage as an arrangement came first and love came later. Contrast that, though, with Jacob. He fell in love with Rachel after just seeing her at the well. So there is a biblical precedent for that beautiful if rare madness of "love at first sight".

A very different example the Bible gives of love is the case of Shechem who first raped Dinah and then fell in love with her. How different that was from the other Biblical example of rape. Hundreds of years later Amnon, the son of King David, seemingly fell in love with his half-sister, Tamar. But he got her alone and raped her, and afterward all he felt was revulsion. Young hot love it seems comes in different forms.

The classical example of love in the Talmud is Rabbi Akivah, the poor and ignorant shepherd who falls in love with the daughter of one of the richest men in Judeah, Kalba Savua. And she indeed falls in love with him. The father is so angry he cuts his daughter off and they live in abject poverty until Akivah, after years of study, proves himself to be one of the greatest minds of those Jewish times.

The word "love" is not actually used in the text that tells the story, but Rabbi Akivah remarkably describes the "Song of Songs" as the holiest book of the Bible because its outward romantic language of passionate love is, he claimed, an analogy for the love humans should aspire to of God. How different to the Greek intellectual predilection for conceptualizing God and turning to proof rather than experience for validation. But doesn't it seem appropriate? That a man so overpowered by love for a woman should seek to transpose that passion onto the relationship with God? What does it say both about his attitude to human love and to the Divine? It worries me because if folie d'amour is used in religion, I fear it leads to abuse.

But do love and marriage necessarily go together? In ancient times and later, getting married involved a process of betrothal. Betrothal was a "right" of a parent that technically required the daughter's agreement at attaining majority—given the historical and social context, refusal must have been as rare as it was in non-Jewish societies. Certainly amongst the aristocracy, noblesse oblige required sons and daughters to marry to further the dynastic social and financial obligations of the family.

The popular Talmudic recommendation is that "one should love one's wife as much as one loves oneself and honor her even more." The combination of these two words, "love" and "honor" are the foundation of Jewish marriage, just as they are of one's relationship with one's parents, where identical words are used. Yet clearly the two are of a different order. After all, one cannot divorce one's parents, whereas halacha allows for divorcing a wife, if only to stop people hating each other.

Still the modern notion of romantic love determining one's marriage partner is clearly one that, although it might have always existed, has only become more the norm in recent times. However, just as a marriage based on love may end up loveless, there is just as much a chance as that a marriage initiated

by shared interests and obligations might result in love. And love can hurt ...
but that is for another time.