

# Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Beha'alozecha

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

21 Sivan, 5783

The Fax of Life

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June 10, 2023

**GOOD MORNING!** For the last fifty years the institution of marriage has been under attack (or at least under siege). There are many reasons for this, such as: changing societal values regarding the fulfillment of individualistic needs or desires; living in a society with high divorce rates leading to a reconsideration of the long-term viability of marriage; redefining what constitutes a marriage; and rising cohabitation and non-traditional living arrangements.

**The seriousness** of the first reason is perhaps best exemplified by recent data out of China. The Chinese National Census, released in May, indicates a looming population crisis as the fertility rate fell to 1.3 children per woman in 2020. A rate below 2.1 usually heralds a population decline. 1.3 is a catastrophic number for Chinese society. The report also noted that, as the fertility rate in China's major metropolitan cities is only about 0.7-0.9, an increasingly urbanized young population could drag the national fertility rate down to 1.0.

**There** are a number of reasons for this low fertility rate, including many decades of the government regulated one-child policy (increased to two in 2016 and three in 2021). Additionally, the culture's view of the primacy of males over females led many families to choose to have a male child. Today, in China's Gen Z population of 220 million, there is a huge gender imbalance; there are almost 19 million more men than women. To even more severely compound the issue, in a survey of some 3,000 women between the ages 18-26, almost 44% said they will probably never marry or have children.

**This looming** Chinese catastrophe isn't just a societal issue; it has huge economic repercussions as well. The ever increasing older workforce cannot be replaced by younger workers with these birth rates. While the rest of the world may view this crisis as welcomed news – a situation that couldn't happen to a more deserving government – we have to be careful. Unfortunately, it could force those megalomaniacs in Beijing to attempt to achieve some societal goals through military means. This has to be carefully monitored.

**The second** reason, regarding high divorce rates, is a direct result of living in a disposable society. Growing up I remember there being repair shops for TVs, computers, shoes, etc. In previous generations, when something needed to be fixed they worked on it. Today, the attitude is throw it out and buy another; there is no innate work ethic or desire try to fix anything. Small wonder that the institution of marriage is treated the same way. Of course, this also creates a cascading effect as getting divorced now has less of a stigma.

**The last** one, the rise of cohabitation, is the focus of a new study by University of Denver psychology professors Scott M. Stanley and Galena K. Rhoades. The two have studied aspects of cohabitation for more than two decades and yet they both remain surprised that as the world has changed – and cohabitation patterns with it – the finding on marriage durability hasn't.

**They estimate** that today over 70% of couples cohabit before marriage. Astonishingly, they conclude that cohabitation is now more a part of dating culture than of marriage culture. So it should come as no shock that, in relative terms, marriages of those who moved in together before getting engaged or married were 48% more likely to end in divorce.

**This confirms** the 2010 government study called National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) that concluded that there is a group for whom marriage before 30 is not risky: women who married directly, without ever cohabiting prior to marriage. In fact, women who married between 22 and 30, without first living together, had some of the lowest rates of divorce in the NSFG.

**Perhaps** at the core of this problem is the fact that, in general, the concept of marriage is misunderstood. On the one hand, marriage carries significant legal implications; property rights, inheritance issues, tax benefits, insurance benefits, custody arrangements, etc.

**But** that's not what marriage is about. Marriage is about wanting to share your life with someone special whom you love and trust and with whom you want to create a home and family. Someone whom you are committed to giving to and making their life better. It has been said that we fall in love not with our mates' best attributes, but rather in their failings. Because it is in those that we complete them.

**We** learn some important lessons about the Torah's perspective on marriage from this week's Torah reading.

*Moses heard the people weeping by their families, each one at the entrance of his tent [...] (11:10).*

**This week's** Torah portion lists various complaints that the Jewish people leveled at God and Moses. One of the issues that they complained bitterly about was the miraculous *manná*. Remarkably, the verse above that seemingly describes the depths of their unhappiness with the *manná* is actually interpreted by the sages in the Talmud as an entirely different topic.

**The Talmud** (*Shabbos* 130a) states: "Any *mitzvah* that the Jewish people accepted in a quarrelsome manner, such as the prohibition against incestuous relationships, as the Torah (*ibid*) states, 'Moses heard the people weeping by their families' – (according to the Talmud they were weeping because they had been prohibited to marry their family members) is likewise still fulfilled while quarreling; for there is no *ketubah* (marriage contract) that doesn't cause the parties to quarrel."

**This seems** to be a little odd. After all, a wedding is a time of great happiness. Why should a *ketubah* cause quarreling more than any other financial arrangement? Furthermore, what does this have to do with the fact that they were bitter about the prohibition against incestuous relationships? In order to understand this, we must begin by examining

the root cause for having forbidden relationships in the first place.

**The great** medieval sage known as Nachmanides posits in his commentary on Leviticus that it would only be natural for people to choose their closest relatives as mates. For example, many of the complications of trying to merge two disparate families and cultures or dealing with inheritance issues would dissipate if a man were to marry his sister. Why are we forbidden from marrying our closest relatives?

**I remember** once overhearing a conversation at local park between a mother and child. The boy announced, "When I grow up, I'm going to marry you, Mommy." "You can't marry your own mother," said his older sister. "Then I'll marry you." "You can't marry me either." He looked confused, so they explained, "You can't marry someone in your own family." "You mean I have to marry a total stranger?!" he cried.

**We find** in *Genesis* (2:18) God said, "*It is not good for man to be alone, I will make a compatible helper for him.*" The great Biblical commentator known as Rashi explains (ad loc) that if man were inherently self-sufficient he would be comparing himself to God. Just as God is one above, man is one below. In other words, man would consider himself more or less equal to God on the plane below. This would cause man to become totally egocentric and self-centered.

**Therefore**, the Almighty created a partner for man, someone he would have to merge with to balance him out and become a helpmate and an opposing opinion. This "merger" requires a true partner, one who is a totally separate entity and would not be swallowed up by the merger.

**We are** overly familiar with our closest relatives. For example, if we go into our sister's home we feel perfectly comfortable opening the fridge and helping ourselves to whatever we want. That is exactly what would happen in a familial marriage; we would always take what we wanted because that familial relationship is just an extension of ourselves. This is true with parents, children, aunts, uncles, etc.

**Having** to leave your comfort zone and bond with an outside entity (i.e. a non-family member), causes a rethinking of who we are and a continual negotiation on the merged "space." Being obligated to marry outside one's family removes much of the egocentricity that would otherwise naturally be ever present.

**On** the face of it, completing the *ketubah* at a wedding is a very odd custom; imagine if at every non-Jewish wedding there would be a public reading of a financial arrangement (such as a prenup) between the bride and groom. All of the guests would feel uncomfortable and it would be inappropriate. Why is the *ketubah* such a central part of the Jewish wedding?

**The ultimate** expression that we are merging with an outside party is the *ketubah*. It is a reminder that the husband cannot just be a taker, as he was living in his parents' home. The *ketubah* is a testament to the fact that the husband has real responsibilities as a giver. It's a reminder that the husband is merging with someone who isn't just an extension of himself; he now has to negotiate his life within someone else's space. Every *ketubah* is a reminder of this concept, and can easily become a source of conflict. In this way, the *ketubah* becomes the de facto definition of a Jewish marriage.

**Finally**, it is nearly impossible to marry because of a true bond of love. Most people marry because of a combination of infatuation and emotional and physical attraction. A true bond of love develops and grows ever deeper over many decades of experiencing happy times and challenging times and being there for one another – through thick and thin. Marriage is about a commitment to give another person your loyalty and trust. We cannot view marriage as easily disposable because the bond of love develops in the tears and repairs along the way.

**TORAH PORTION:** Beha'alosecha, Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

**Aaron** is commanded in the lighting of the Menorah, the Levites purify themselves for service in the Tabernacle (they trained from age 25-30 and served from age 30-50). The first Passover is celebrated since leaving Egypt. The Almighty instructs the Jewish people to journey into the desert whenever the ever-present cloud lifts from above the Tabernacle and to camp where it rests. Moses is instructed to make two silver trumpets to be sounded before battle or to proclaim a *yom tov* (a holiday).

**The people** journey to the wilderness of Paran, during which time they rebelled twice against the Almighty's leadership. The second time they complain about the boring taste of the *maneh* and the lack of meat in the desert. The Almighty sends a massive quantity of quail and those who rebelled died.

**Moses** asks his father-in-law, Yitro (Jethro) to travel with them in the desert, but Yitro returns to Midian.

**Miriam**, Moses' sister, speaks *lashon hora* (defaming words) about Moses. She is struck with *tzora'as* (the mystical skin disease which indicated that a person spoke improperly about another person) and is exiled from the camp for one week.

**SHABBAT LIGHTING:** *Jerusalem* 7:08 Miami 7:53 Cape Town 5:25 Guatemala 6:12 Hong Kong 6:49 Honolulu 6:54

Jo'Burg 5:04 LA 7:45 London 9:00 Melbourne 4:59 Mexico 6:56 Moscow 8:52 New York 8:08 Singapore 6:51 Toronto 8:39

**"QUOTE OF THE WEEK":** Love seems to be the swiftest when in reality it is the slowest of growths.

— Mark Twain

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to  
**Edward Grodsky**



Shabbat Shalom,

*Yitzchak Zweig*

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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