

Interdependence: the Key Value in Dating

Some singles have made a choice to remain independent, which is entirely their choice. However, many singles are investing incredible efforts, time and money into finding a life-partner. Many are in great distress as this seemingly simple goal eludes them year after year. We are not helping such people by telling them that they are fine unmarried and that they don't need a spouse to be happy or fulfilled.

What is confusing to many who deal with singles – as I do – is that some singles seem highly reluctant to make the kinds of changes that would help their cause. Central to this, in my analysis, is a resistance to giving up independence. While this may at times be due to self-protection, it seems to me that often the issue is one of values. Some singles struggle to recognise that for a true partnership to be forged, both parties need to give up a significant measure of independence. They date as 'singles' instead of acting like potentially couples. At some point, the individuals have to take a risk and cross the Rubicon, surrender a measure of their independence, and accept they are answerable to each other. Individuals in a dating situation have to practice compromise from an early point, something which they often find surprisingly difficult.

There is no point us criticising these behaviours, however. For those who are struggling with these issues, overcoming these hurdles is quite an awesome challenge. They need to understand these issues better and model practices that will help them in their relationships.

The importance of thinking of these issues in terms of values is that it makes it possible to address it more effectively. Simply urging a person to display greater flexibility will rarely result in any change. Only an altered attitude towards dating and marriage will facilitate sustainable change. This complexity is reflected for me in a singer/songwriter who produced a defiant defence of being single (*"This is my current single status, My declaration of independence, There's no way I'm trading places, Right now a star's in the ascendant"*), then produced a song full of pathos about the failure to find a soulmate (*"Who doesn't long for someone to hold, Who knows how to love you without being told, Somebody tell me why I'm on my own, If there's a soulmate for everyone"*)!

Again, values are not the only issue here. I realise that their own relationship role models, personality, social and religious background and circumstances all play a part, as do so many other factors. However, from my experience values are a powerful lever to help people to overcome some of the circumstantial and environmental barriers and effect positive change. While sometimes values are not relevant to the issue described above, I contend that they often are.

While many religious and philosophical traditions address the values of relationships, I perceive Judaic values as offering a valuable resource that I have found useful in guiding my own work with singles. For example, the Talmudic approach to marriage is heavily based on the concept of interdependence, which adds an incredible insight to the popular notion of 'love'. Interdependence invites both parties to focus on the needs of the other and become complete givers, each focusing on one another in order to develop mutual appreciation, respect and 'love' for the other.

I realise that this doesn't always sit well in our post-modern perspective of gender and relationships, and that some people will jump to criticise this orientation before even taking time to properly understand it. This doesn't in the least change the value or legitimacy of this outlook, which is much needed and often greatly lacking in our attitudes to relationships. I think

that the many dozens of Judaic teachings that comprise this outlook offer imagery, concepts and phrases that are worth considering when addressing this issue.

Dating is a journey from selfish to selfless. Dating is a paradoxical process: it must start out self-serving, but if it ends that way, there is no basis for marriage. Thus, dating is a trajectory from focusing initially on what you want, but then learning how to move beyond that towards a shared vision – in which your main role becomes the happiness of the other.

A single person needs to be convinced he or she has a need for the relationship; otherwise, they will be reluctant to give up their independence. As Rabbi Manis Friedman suggests, “a person is ready for marriage when he or she ceases to find themselves interesting.” For a person to be motivated to enter a committed relationship they need to be convinced they will get something more valuable in return for what they are willing to give up”.

Inherent in Judaic teaching on male-female relations is the sentiment of mutual vulnerability, the sense that men and women need to accept key aspects of their lives are fulfilled only through being in a lasting relationship – an awareness that should reflect itself in how the couple behave. The concept of interdependence, I would suggest, is the central and driving theme in traditional Jewish teachings on male-female relationships.

The Talmud (Bava Metziah 59a) states: *“One must always observe the honour due to his wife, because blessings rest on a man's home only account of his wife... If your wife is short, bend down and take her counsel.”* The Talmud (Yevamot 62b) further teaches: *“A man should love his wife like himself and honour her more than himself”*. The Talmud (Yevamot 63a) further teaches that *“a man who resides without a woman resides without peace, blessing and happiness. These are the thoughts of a culture that is comfortable saying to a man that you need your wife, all your blessings that come are due to her, show some flexibility, even lower yourself so she can be properly heard because without her, you are lacking in a significant way”*.

The same is true in reverse. For example, a well-known passage in the Talmud (Berachot 17a) states: *“What is the great merit of our women? That they educate their children, encourage their husbands to go out and learn Torah and wait for them until they return from the study hall.”* Similarly, the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Shoftim 4) says that *“a good woman is one who fulfils the wishes of her husband”*. Taken on their own these quotes appear to be male chauvinist. However, if taking in conjunction with the previous quotes, and many other like them, one gets an overall sense that Judaic teaching asks of both men and women to be flexible towards one another on the basis that both parties gain from doing so.

I do not feel that these latter Rabbinic statements suggest male chauvinism. In my analysis, Judaic sources portray the man as far more in need of a woman than the reverse. This finds expression in numerous mainstream Talmudic concepts. For example, a man has an obligation to find a wife, and not the reverse (Talmud Yevamot 65b), even whilst acknowledging (Kiddushin 2a) that a woman fear being alone and is likely to prefer any husband to no husband (in part reflecting the economic realities of the time). According to the Talmud (Ketubot 47b, 48a) it is the man who has sexual obligations to his wife, and not the reverse, which puts the onus on the man for his wife's fulfilment and happiness (See Rakover, 1980). As Goldstein (2006 p. 190) concludes: “According to Jewish law, sexual satisfaction is primarily the husband's duty and the wife's right.” While the Judaic tradition is broad and varied, taken as a whole it is very reasonable to conclude that there is an overall sentiment being expressed especially in favour of a man's acknowledgment of his need for a life partner.

At the heart of this approach is the sense that finding a life partner is about completing a loss. The Talmud (Berachot 8a; Yevamot 63b) describes marriage as a ‘find’. You can only find something if it has previously been lost. This is consistent with several statements in the

Talmudic and Aggadic literature that joining in partnership with a life partner is an effort to close a fissure that occurred by birth, in which each person was born as only half of their complete self. The Talmud (Sota 2a) asserts that forty days before a child is born a heavenly voice declares who a person is destined to marry, expressing the view that life is a search for that predestined soulmate. The Talmud (Kiddushin 2b) quotes Rabbi Shimon saying "*the biblical (Deut 22:24) description of marriage 'When a man takes a woman' suggests that it is the imperative on the man to go in search of the women, and not the reverse*". What is striking is the parable that then follows: "*It may be compared to someone who lost something – who goes looking for it? Surely the one who lost the item goes in search of it.*" The man is portrayed as bereft of a much needed facet of his life, for which he embarks on a quest to find. This is expressed most explicitly in the Zohar (Book 1:85b): "*As they set out from their place above, each soul is male and female as one. Only as they descend to this world do they part, each to its own side. And then it is the One Above who unites them again.*"

By contrast, it seems that a great many people do not look upon marriage as getting something valuable, but that rather a great deal of cynicism has crept into relationship attitudes whereby the focus is on what they give up and not what they get. Rebbetzin Rivka Slonim, who lectures on marriage, argues that for relationships to succeed a person has '*got to be in love with the idea of being in love*'. By this she means, that individuals need to be sold on marriage as an *idea*.

Many formulations of adulthood define maturity by growing independent and self-sufficient. There is much in psychology to suggest that turning to others for emotional support is a sign and source of strength. In fact, there is evidence to suggest (Johnson, 2004) that greater attachment to a life partner enables healthy independence. The first biblical reference to life partnerships (Genesis 2:24) follows on from the union of Adam and Eve: "*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh.*" This is a somewhat puzzling, given that in the Biblical story neither spouse had parents. It seems fairly clear that in the Biblical scheme of things, attachment is essential and that adulthood is not to be marked by absence of attachment, but by a transition to a new form of attachment.

However, interdependence can be psychically challenging, requiring the individual to accept the overriding importance of another. When a person is born, they are totally self-absorbed and narcissistic. Through infancy and childhood a child learns to live and share with others becoming increasingly aware of other people's needs as well as their own. As young people continue to mature that they come to recognise their own limitations and are sufficiently capable to transcend their own ego to truly make space in their life for another person. However, admitting a need for another is a struggle for some people. It is for this reason that in the Biblical account of creation Adam was created first without Eve. All other living being were created male and female, yet an omniscient God omniscient leaves Adam temporarily partnerless.

An illuminating Aggada (Yevamot 63a) states that Adam first 'mated' with all the animals and came to the conclusion that they were not suited for him, and that only then was he given a partner. This perplexing passage seems to be suggesting that Adam was not ready for a mate until he tried the alternatives and concluded that he had a need. Only when Adam acknowledged that something was missing in his life was he capable of entering into a true relationship. So says the commentator Chizkuni (Genesis 2:18): "*The Holy One willed that man should be without woman for a brief period, and then afterwards introduced her to him, so that she would be dearer to him after he had felt life so lacking without her.*" On the biblical verse (Genesis 2:18) '*It is not good for man to be alone*' Rashi gives as the reason "*so that [people] should not say that there are two authorities: the Holy One, Blessed is He, is unique in the higher realms, and he has no mate; and the one, man, is unique in the lower realms, and he has no mate.*" According to this interpretation, Adam needs a partner in order that he should know that he is not a G-d!

Man needed to feel a sense of existential loneliness, a deep and unfulfilling lack, to impress upon him how important his partner is to his life and happiness. He needed to understand that without his wife he could never achieve the happiness he truly longed for. This feeling of loneliness was meant to impress upon Adam, and all future Adams, the centrality of their “other half”, so that man and woman would appreciate the need for each other and value each other.

On the verse (Genesis 1:27) “*male and female He created them*” Rashi points out a contradiction: “*And later (Genesis 2:21) it says, “And He (God) took one of his sides etc.”* – An Aggadic Midrash answers this apparent contradiction by saying that at the original creation “*He created man with two faces, one side male and one side female and afterward He divided him.*” This interpretation is one opinion expressed in Midrash Rabba (Genesis 17) and followed by numerous commentators from Maimonides (Guide 2:30) to Samson Raphael Hirsch. However, Rashi’s only adds to the confusion: “*What would be the point in creating man and woman as one entity just to later divide them; why were they not simply created as separate beings?*”

It is understood that man and woman are different and that their differences may hamper their desire to achieve oneness. Their wish for closeness may be frustrated by different styles of communication, complex emotions, and their inability to understand and appreciate what each other needs. Ask many married women: What is your greatest complaint against your husband? You are sure to hear: “*He fails to appreciate me,*” “*He takes me for granted,*” “*He doesn’t spend time with me,*” “*He fails to nurture our relationship.*” She feels that she has become merely an appendage of his being, taken for granted and not treated as the essential centre of his life. Thus, man was originally created alone so that he would realise the extent to which he needs a partner. Proverbs (27:19) states: “*As water reflects a face back to a face, so one’s heart is reflected back to him by another.*” If you recognise you need someone else, it makes the other feel needed, which in turns results in the other feeling a need for you. By referring to Eve as Adam’s helper may be read as a gentle suggestion to Adam that he may be in need of the help! By creating Adam and Eve as a single entity drives home the point that the unity of a life partnership is key to the erasing the rupture of division and restoring wholeness.

Thus, it may be said that the tenor of Judaic thinking on forming relationships suggests that looking to find a life partner is about showing a willingness to give up the right to detach. It is about losing the right to turn attachment and commitment on and off depending on the mood. Entering into a confirmed sustained relationship is not synonymous with not being single. All singles dating or looking to date prefer not to be single, but it would seem that not all are quite prepared for the reverse either. In Jewish law, there is a distinction drawn between *kiddushin*-betrothal and *nisu’in*-marriage. Until modern times these stages were many months apart. The first stage was a legally binding ‘engagement’, but without the intimacy of marriage. I would suggest that this aspect of Jewish law reflects an acknowledgement that simply not being single does not mean that there is a true union. This two stage process reveals how connectedness in a lasting relationship can get stuck at entering into the relationship but without the next stage, merging into a single entity.

From a more spiritual perspective it may be argued that residual childish narcissism can over accentuate the divisions and harm the potential for intimacy. Lord Jacobovitz pointed out that ‘soil’ has an ‘I’ whilst ‘soul’ has a ‘u’, signifying that focusing on materialist values (soil) promotes selfishness, whereas focusing on spiritual values (soul) encourages more selflessness. This is echoed by the words of Rabbi S Z of Liadi (Tanya ch. 32) that by constraining one’s view to the superficial physical exterior, a person focuses on that which divides and separates, whereas by placing the emphasis on the more profound spiritual interior the person focuses on that which unites. Fostering interdependence is therefore enhanced through greater spiritual maturity. Thus, it may be argued that coaching singles to focus on more spiritual priorities would also help to facilitate greater openness to interdependence, upon which successful human pairing depends.