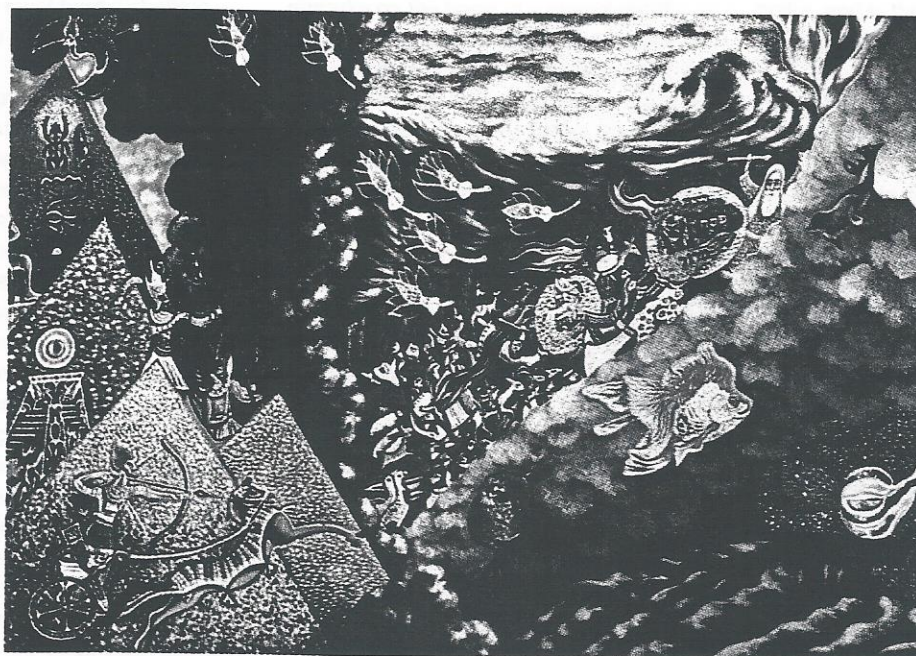


Marriage and the parting of the red sea

WRITTEN BY
PROF. GEORGE SCHLESINGER



CROSSING OF THE
RED SEA BY
BARUCH
NACHSHON.

The parting of the Red Sea remains unique among the many miracles that have taken place before and after. Not only was this the only miracle to which the beneficiaries responded with song, unlike its counterparts, which were of brief and momentary duration, the Parting of the Red Sea was a long and involved process requiring, not one, but an entire series of miraculous events. The mere parting of the waters for instance would not have sufficed for everyone would have sunken into the muddy sea floor had it not miraculously been made dry. Had the waters returned to their natural form any sooner, Pharaoh and his troops would have caught up with the Israelites, etc.

Although G-d came through for His people, the Midrash points out that the Children of Israel were told to head on into the Sea before it showed any signs of part-

ing. They obeyed, and were consequently submerged in water up to their noses before the water began to recede. In other words, the Al-mighty demanded from them a demonstration of trust to the point of abnegation, a complete disregard for the dangers they faced in diving headfirst into a raging sea.

Our Sages have since compared the parting of the Sea to the institution of marriage, saying, "It is as difficult to pair man and woman as was the division of the Red Sea." Many have pondered over the possible commonalities between the earth-shattering events at the Red Sea and the everyday occurrence of a wedding. Now, although this Talmudic comparison may not be that easy to understand at first glance, it is widely cited. Not too long ago in Israel, after successfully bringing together a couple, a marriage broker demanded an

extraordinarily high commission. His clients complained bitterly and cited the example of a leading trial attorney who had charged them no more than half the amount for his services. The marriage broker claimed, however, that he was entitled to twice the amount received by any other professional. "You must not forget," he said, "that when I accomplish my task I perform twice the miracle of the Red Sea's parting. To me it is a way of making a living which the Talmud itself stresses as striking as much wonder as Israel's crossing of the Red Sea. In addition, I achieve the pairing of a man and a woman which is a second miracle of the same magnitude."

In addressing one of these comparisons, let me say the following. As we all know the economic situation is not too good these days, but recession and economic growth usually follow one another in

cycles. On the other hand, the institution of marriage seems to go uniformly from bad to worse. When a speaker at a recent wedding reception praised the institution of marriage by saying, "Were it not for the common fact that men and women get married, life would be so much more difficult ... one would have to quarrel with strangers," why did people laugh so heartily? And when he continued on in a mode of fake regret saying, "for 20 whole years my wife and I were completely happy. Our lives were pure pleasure, and then ... well ... then, we met and got married," why were his words greeted with even more uproarious shrieks of laughter? Without wishing to delve into a profound analysis of humor, it seems evident that the function of many jokes is to provide relief from disturbing thoughts which we may not wish to admit even to ourselves.

It is a sign of our times that so many marriage counselors are offering their services to the public and that the number of practitioners of the art of marriage restoration keeps growing steadily. Most of these experts do not claim to have a master key to the wedlock padlock, but offer advice on how to alleviate the many marital problems they have studied extensively. For example, the eminent psychiatrist A.G. Thompson has stated categorically that there is simply no such thing as a marriage free of conflict, as it is contrary to human nature to refrain from fighting with one another. He further explains that there are certain emotional forces which are part of the essential dynamics of our personalities. These operate as intensely in marriage as they do in any other deep emotional relationships we may have, and inevitably lead to some measure of conflict and frustration between us and those we are in relationship with. It's worth noting that Dr. Thompson is a member of the Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies in London which is dedicated to the science of overcoming marital conflict. The first axiom of that science would seem to be that quite frankly they cannot be overcome, although they may be mitigated and kept within workable boundaries.

Another expert explains that we should aim for "good" rather than "bad" fights. The bad fight is "dysfunctional" i.e. it has no positive outcome. In fact, it never ends, but remains an ongoing battle during which each partner continues to inflict, if not physical, then psychological damage upon the other. What the author terms the

"good" fight is one during the course of which the two sides gradually understand each other's position and eventually reach a mutually negotiated compromise, and live happily ever after, at least until the next fight.

Our Sages had an outlook on the purpose and nature of matrimonial union that is radically dissimilar from the one held in contemporary society. Instead of elaborating greatly on strategies for conflict resolution, they advocate a fundamental attitude which couples should adopt before embarking on marriage, so that no conflict is likely to arise in the first place. In Genesis, we are told about Abraham and Sarah traveling east of Beth El where they had pitched their tents. The Midrash remarks on the basis of a grammatical point that Abraham first pitched his wife's tent and then his own. From this we derive the general rule that a husband must take care of his wife's needs before his own. In a statement which might surprise feminists who insist that traditional Judaism ascribes to the wife the status of a maid servant, the Ramban (Nachmanides) describes the basic attitude of mind which is a prerequisite for a happy marriage as follows; The Sages commanded that the husband honor his wife more than himself and love her more than himself." Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes very clearly on this matter, "The key to a successful marriage relationship is that both bride and groom should aspire to be "givers" rather than "receivers." They should always wish to give of themselves to one another, to seek ways always to bestow kindness upon their mates rather than to seek to be the recipients of the kindness and benevolence of their spouse."

In closing let me mention that the saintly Rebbe of Sassov married a poor woman who was neither intelligent nor pretty. He said, "If I do not marry her, who will?" It is

said that it turned out to be a very happy union. Realizing the holiness of her husband, she was spurred to extraordinary exertions, gaining strength which was thought to be beyond her, and developing into a genuinely supportive helpmate.

Not too many of us are likely to emulate the immeasurable selflessness of the Sassover Rebbe. However most of us are capable of appreciating the point of Rabbi Dessler's thesis. Naturally, the initial self-denial it demands may seem difficult much like the abnegation of those who intrepidly plunged into the Red Sea. As we said before the division of the Red Sea was a rare kind of miracle. Almost as rare are actual couples who follow Rabbi Dessler's prescription. Still his counsel sets a wise, noble, and in the long run, beneficial ideal for wedded pairs to strive for.

PROFESSOR GEORGE NATHAN SCHLESINGER, IS A PROFESSOR OF SCIENCE AND LOGIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA WHERE HE HAS TAUGHT FOR THE LAST 25 YEARS.

RASHI

A statement of good taste!
All the rest is commentary.

For more information call (718) 845-2024