

**JEWISH MARRIAGE MODELS**

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## Introduction

Marriage is an expansive subject in which I have a strong personal and professional interest. As a prospective congregational rabbi, I selected the topic of Jewish marriage in the hopes that it would have a direct application to my eventual work with individuals and couples of all ages. To begin, I searched for marriage related texts that future congregants and I could study. It is my firm belief that modern, liberal Jews should be able to access Jewish texts and apply them to their lives. I agree with Dr. Isa Aaron who wrote:

Jews who do not feel commanded by God, but who identify with the Jewish people and want to participate in Jewish life, need a foundation for understanding their Judaism and for enabling them to decide what traditions to follow. The Reform principle of *informed choice* speaks to this point: If one is going to be selective about one's Jewish practice, one had better be fully informed.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis will provide both professional Jews—including rabbis, cantors, and educators—and non-professional Jews with a knowledge base of traditional texts on the subject of Jewish marriage.

When considering the subject of Jewish marriage, I was immediately drawn to exploring the key relationships within Genesis: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. These paradigmatic relationships have been the subject of analysis and critique for centuries. The first chapter of this thesis reviews the behavior within each of these marriages and culls some of the most interesting

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<sup>1</sup> Isa Aron, *Becoming A Congregation of Learners* (Woodstock, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000) 23.

commentary found in the *Talmud* and *midrash*. Modern Jews of all observance levels are familiar with Adam, Eve, and the matriarchs and patriarchs. When I work with congregants, I expect this familiarity will serve as a bridge to the second chapter of this thesis, a review of *Talmudic* statements on marriage.

Chapter two focuses on *aggadic* (legendary story) material as well as proverbs on marriage found within the *Talmud*. I purposely centered on this material because much of it naturally applies itself to themes that relate to modern-day marriage. The *halacha*—body of Jewish law—detailing the roles and responsibilities of a husband and a wife according to the Rabbis is broadly addressed in this section of the thesis. As opposed to the first chapter which reviews each of the key relationships within the Torah's first book, this chapter spans a range of marriage related subjects that are mostly unattached to specific couples.

Chapter three further applies the lessons of the earlier chapters to modern marriage. The subjects of communication, conflict resolution, and children are highlighted in this chapter. Lastly, chapter four contains a mini-course on marriage designed for confirmation age (15-17 years old) students in a religious school setting.

When I reviewed Jewish and secular sources on marriage from the twentieth or twenty-first century, I consistently found statements such as:

[From 1939] The next few years will be critical ones for the American family. The current scene is disquieting. Present divorce statistics and those prognosticated for the future, in which some authorities predict that one out of

every two or three marriages may eventually end in divorce...are sufficient causes for disquietude.<sup>2</sup>

[From 1983] For every couple, the moment of marriage is a culmination of eager anticipation and inexpressible hope. Yet more than a few such couples are destined for great disappointment. For some, marriage will end in the divorce court; for others, it will degenerate into dull despair. During a recent period of seventy years in the United States, while population was increasing threefold and marriages fourfold, the number of divorces rose twentyfold!<sup>3</sup>

[From 1996] We share a profound sense of discomfort with the present state of marriage and family, even wondering sometimes if marriage as an institution can survive.<sup>4</sup>

Such commentary can still be heard in conversations in our synagogues and throughout our broader society. The concern over the state of marriage and family in our society is not a new one. When investigating the subject of marriage within the context of the Jewish family I found these words of Dr. David Kraemer:

If we understand the dynamism of earlier social conditions, we will appreciate the fact that contemporary experience represents less of a break with the past than we might have believed. Furthermore, though the discovery of past familial instability offers us no ready-made solutions for our own confused state, we may still derive some comfort in knowing that we are hardly unique in having to face upheaval and change. The challenge that confronts us might in some ways be more extreme, but it is only a difference in degree, not in kind.<sup>5</sup>

What emerges from these studies is a picture of immense variety and the realization that down through the ages the Jewish family has adapted almost 'organically' to the many and varied environments within which it has had to survive.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, this thesis was not written as a response to a Jewish marriage crisis. Instead, this thesis was written for Jewish professionals, Jewish couples, and Jews who aspire to be a part of a successful couple. Jews have great resources for understanding their tradition's

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Fowler Nelson, *Marriages Are Not Made In Heaven* (New York, The Woman's Press, 1939) 7.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Bertram Gittelsohn, *The Extra Dimension* (New York, UAHC, 1983) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Good Marriage* (New York, Warner Books, 1996) 4.

<sup>5</sup> David Kraemer, Editor, *The Jewish Family* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989) 4.

view on marriage. Despite the changes that have occurred in Jewish communities, the Torah and the *Talmud* have served as a foundation upon which Jews have built their lives. This thesis explores the book of Genesis's marriage models, and the *Talmud's* stories and proverbs on marriage to give the modern Jew tools to improve their modern lives.

### About Language

The primary texts from the Torah, *Talmud*, and other Rabbinic sources found in this document are translated based on their original form. These texts were written from a male perspective and do not reflect the modern trends of gender-neutral language and less clearly defined roles for men and women. The gender roles that are, at times, apparent in these texts communicate significant Jewish perspectives on marriage during the times that they were written. These perspectives may or may not speak to those living in modern times.

When modern sources are quoted, and when modern applications are interpreted from ancient texts, inclusive terms are used. These words are appropriate because they communicate the understanding of marriage in modern times where men and women's roles are far less defined than in ancient days. In addition, words such as 'partner' are used to reflect the acceptance of couples of all sexual orientations. Readers will note that when not interpreting ancient text, the words "relationship", "couple", "partnership", and "marriage" are often used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5.

### Acknowledgements

As I began my research for this thesis, it soon became clear that I was working on two objectives. First to learn as much as I could on the fascinating subject of Jewish marriage models and second to produce a worthy thesis document on the subject. There are many people that I would like to acknowledge for assisting me to achieve both of these objectives.

I am indebted to my thesis advisor, Dr. Carol Ochs, for her tremendous insight into the subject matter and constant support throughout the year that we worked together. Thank you also to Dr. Lisa Grant for her wisdom and the time she spent during her sabbatical to review weekly revisions of this document. This page also provides me the opportunity to thank Dean Dr. Aaron Panken, Dean Rabbi Shirley Idelson, Director of the School of Education Ms. Jo Kay, my extraordinary academic advisor and teacher Dr. Norman Cohen, and my many fine professors for their dedication and profound teaching throughout my years at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion.

The library staff at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion's New York campus serves the HUC-JIR community with honor. Many thanks to James Cohn, Leonid Gontar, Dr. Philip Miller, and Tina Weiss who regularly helped me find the many sources used in this document with the highest level of professionalism and courtesy. I deeply appreciate my dear colleagues at Temple Beth El in Hillsborough, especially my mentor Rabbi Arnold Gluck, who supported me in multiple ways throughout this endeavor. Thank you to my family and friends who were a constant source of



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## **Chapter One - The Marriage Models of Genesis**

Throughout all of its five books the Torah does not even include a term that accurately reflects our modern term for marriage. Overall, the Hebrew word that is closest to the idea of marriage has the Hebrew root **נָקַל** which means to take (i.e. Isaac took Rebekah.)<sup>7</sup>

The Torah may not have an exact word for marriage in its lexicon, but from its first chapters, it is clear that within the Torah it is standard for men and woman to be together in life-long relationships. Sometimes men had more than one wife, but even in these cases the relationships between the man and his wives were life-long.

The Torah's first book presents us with five main relationships as marriage paradigms. Each relationship provides the reader with insight into the Torah's perspective on partnership and marriage. In the beginning, these relationships demonstrate behavior that is to be emulated. As the Torah progresses, this dynamic is reversed; the relationships teach us primarily how not to behave. Adam and Eve set the initial paradigm and Abraham and Sarah build significantly upon it. Isaac and Rebekah add important variables to these paradigms as do Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. In just five sets of relationships the Torah sets some of the most significant models for Jewish marriage found in the entire Bible. So important were these five exemplars for married couples,

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 25.20

and Judaism at large, that according to the *Talmud*, all of them were buried in the same cave of *Machpelah*.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I will examine the key relationships within *Beresheet*; how their relationships are described, how they complement and contrast each other, and how ancient and modern interpreters comment upon them. Throughout my analysis, I will present some of the important lessons that can be inferred from these texts.

### Adam and Eve

The *Talmud* comments upon the words “male and female He created them. And when they were created, He blessed them and called them man”<sup>9</sup> as a proof text for the statement

א"ר אלעזר: כל אדם שאין לו אשה אינו אדם, שנאמר:  
זכר ונקבה בראם, ויקרא את שמם אדם.

Rabbi Eliezer says ‘Any man who does not have a wife is not a man.’ As it is written: ‘Man and female he created them and he called their name man.’<sup>10</sup>

Adam and Eve are the first people and the first biblical couple. They are barely individuals before they are thrust into the role of being together. Adam and Eve are the very first marriage model that the Torah provides for its readers. The Torah relates two stories of Adam and Eve. In the first, we learn that Adam and Eve are created simultaneously, and that God commands them to be fruitful and multiply and master the earth. In the second story we learn that, according to God, it is not good for man to be

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<sup>8</sup> *Eruvin* 53a

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 5.2

<sup>10</sup> *Yevamot* 63a

alone and that man needs a helper. Woman is created soon after. The Torah's messages seem to be: men and women should be together, have children, rule the earth, and be helpers for one another. These are the initial directions the Torah gives us regarding Adam and Eve, the first ever biblical people and biblical couple.

A closer inspection of the first story starts with its introduction: "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.'"<sup>11</sup> The remaining six verses of this chapter discuss how God gave the man and woman all that is on earth for food, and then rested on the seventh day.

The directive to man and woman to be fertile and multiply is considered by many to be the first commandment of the Torah. Jewish law as found in the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, (among other sources) uses this as a proof text requiring men to marry and have children. Many pages of the *Talmud* and codes discuss whether or not this obligation also falls upon women. For example, in the *Talmud* the following *Mishnah* and *Gemara* are found:

האיש מצווה על פריה ורביה, אבל לא האשה רבי יוחנן בן ברוקה אומר,  
על שניהם הוא אומר: ויברך אותם אלהים ויאמר להם [אלהים] פרו ורבו.  
גמ'. מנא הני מילי? אמר ר' אילעא משום ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון, אמר קרא:  
ומלאו את הארץ וכבשוה, איש דרכו לכבש, ואין אשה דרכה לכבש.  
אדרבה, וכבשוה תרתי משמע אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: וכבשה כתיב.

*Mishnah*: A man is commanded concerning the duty of propagation, but not a woman. Rabbi Johanan ben Beroka, however said 'on both of them it says God blessed them;' and God said to them: 'be fertile and multiply.'

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:26-28

*Gemara*: From where is this reasoned? Rabbi Ilea replied in the name of Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Simeon: the Torah stated, 'and replenish the earth, and subdue it; it is the nature of a man to subdue but it is not the nature of a woman to subdue. On the contrary! And subdue it implies two! Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac replied: It is written, 'and you subdue it.'<sup>12</sup>

Although the majority of Jewish law finds this commandment only obligatory for men, in the text, when God speaks to them, God speaks to both of them simultaneously - "God blessed them." One can see from the *Talmudic* argument above that the Rabbis in the *Talmud* participated in strong debate over this subject.

The *midrash* continues explicating the manner in which God blessed Adam and Eve, painting a picture of a wedding officiated by the Divine.

א"ר אבהו נטל הקב"ה כוס של ברכה וברכן אר"י רבי סימון מיכאל  
וגבריאל הם היו שושבינין של אדם הראשון אמר רבי שמלאי מצינו  
שהקב"ה מברך חתנים ומקשט כלות

Rabbi Abbahu said: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, took a cup of blessing and blessed them.' Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon said: 'Michael and Gabriel were Adam's best men.' Rabbi Simlai said: 'We find that the Holy One, blessed be He, blesses bridegrooms and adorns brides.'<sup>13</sup>

In another *midrash*, God serves as the best man.<sup>14</sup> The cup referred to is symbolic of the cup of wine required at wedding ceremonies. The rabbis of the *midrash* do directly what the text does not—they officially make Adam and Eve the earth's first married couple.

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<sup>12</sup> *Yevamot* 65b

<sup>13</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 8:13

<sup>14</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 18:3

Indeed in another section of the *Talmud* the blessings to be said in the presence of a newly married couple are reviewed by the Sages. These blessings are the source for the *sheva brachot* which continue to be said in modern times under the *chupah* for the bride and groom. The Sages incorporate Adam and Eve into these blessings, stating "May You grant great joy to these loved companions, just as you granted happiness to the work of your hands long ago in the Garden of Eden. Blessed are You, O God, who grants joy to the bridegroom and bride."<sup>15</sup> These exact words are said to this day in the fifth of the seven blessings for wedding couples. The implications of the words of the *midrash* and *Talmud* are clear. Although the Torah does not state any marriage, celebration, or gladness in the Garden of Eden, the Sages adopt Adam and Eve as the first bride and groom. Not only were they married, but they experienced tremendous joy due to their union.

The text however, does not describe Adam and Eve living happily ever after. We learn in Genesis 3:16 that, as punishment, Eve is relegated to serve Adam. *Midrash Rabbah* shows that the ancient Rabbis used a word from the Torah's text, *ve-kibshah* (and subdue her) to lighten the weight associated with Eve's punishment. The Torah text uses the word to describe how man and woman should be subduing the earth. The earth in Hebrew, *ha-aretz*, is a feminine noun. The word *ve-kibshah* describes the subduing of her, meaning the earth. The authors of *Midrash Rabbah* use this word to foreshadow Eve serving Adam. It seems as if they are not comfortable with what they know is about to occur, that Adam will be charged as the dominant partner. The *midrash* text states:

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<sup>15</sup> *Kethuboth* 8a

וכבשה כתיב האיש כובש אשתו שלא תצא לשוק שכל אשה שיוצאה  
לשוק סופה להכשל מנה לן מן דינה שנאמר ותצא דינה

'*ve-kibshah*' is written, the man must master his wife, so that she does not go out into the market place, for every woman who goes out into the market place will eventually stumble. From where do we know this? From Dinah, as it is written, And Dinah... went out.<sup>16</sup>

This *midrash* describes Adam's soon to be status over Eve not as punishment but as a way for Adam to protect Eve.

There is a second story in *Beresheet* about the creation of man and woman. In it God forms man from the dust of the earth, breathing life into his nostrils and making man a living being. Here the man is known as *ha-adam*. God also tells man that he can eat from any tree except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God says, "It is not good for man to be alone: I will make a fitting helper for him." God brings forth all the living beasts and birds of the earth and the man names all of them but no appropriate helper is found. God causes the man to go into a deep sleep, removes one of his ribs and creates a woman, *leh-eeshah*, from it and brings her to the man. Man says, "This one at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman for from man was she taken." This section of the Torah concludes with the words "thus a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 8:12

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 2:7-24

Twice in the *Talmud* do the Rabbis refer to the creation of Eve from Adam's rib.

*Sanhedrin* 39a tells the story of an emperor of Rome who accused Rabbi Gamaliel of his God being a thief for taking Adam's rib. The emperor's daughter preempts Gamaliel's response explaining:

ליסטין באו עלינו הלילה, ונטלו ממנו קיתון של כסף והניחו לנו  
קיתון של זהב. - אמר לה: ולוואי שיבא עלינו בכל יום. - ולא יפה  
היה לו לאדם הראשון שנטלו ממנו צלע אחת ונתנו לו שפחה  
לשמשו? - אמר לה: הכי קאמינא, אלא לשקליה בהדיא - אמרה  
ליה: אייתו לי אומצא דבישרא, אייתו לה. אותבה תותי בחשא,  
אפיקתה, אמרה ליה: אכול מהאי - אמר לה: מאיסא לי. - אמרה ליה:  
ואדם הראשון נמי, אי הות שקילה בהדיא - הוה מאיסא ליה.

'Thieves visited us last night and robbed us of a silver pitcher, leaving a golden one in its place.' 'Would that such a person visited us every day!' the emperor exclaimed. 'Ah!' she retorted, 'was it not to Adam's gain that he was deprived of a rib and a maidservant presented to him in its stead to serve him?' He replied: 'This is what I mean: he should have taken it from him openly.' Said she to him: 'Let me have a piece of raw meat.' It was given to her. She placed it under her armpit, then took it out and said to him to eat. 'I find it disgusting' he exclaimed. She retorted 'Also if she [Eve] had been given to him [Adam] explicitly she would have been disgusting to him.'<sup>18</sup>

The *Talmud* also refers to Adam's rib removal when a question about male and female personality dynamics is asked. The *Talmud* questions and answers:

מפני מה איש מחזר על אשה, ואין אשה מחזרת על איש?  
משל לאדם שאבד לו אבידה, מי מחזר  
על מי - בעל אבידה מחזר על אבידתו.

Why does a man go in search of a woman and a woman does not go in search of a man? This is analogous to the case of a man who lost something. Who goes in search of something? He who lost the thing goes in search of what he lost [referring loosely to Adam's lost rib.]<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Sanhedrin* 39a

<sup>19</sup> *Nidah* 31b



The first of these stories sheds some additional light onto why Adam was put to sleep. The second uses Adam and Eve as a paradigm to explain why men and women act in a certain way. These quotes from *Talmud* and *midrash* demonstrate that the Sages often had their own agenda regarding Adam and Eve. The Sages saw them as the first married couple and then use Adam and Eve to debate numerous questions such as why women serve men, the obligation to procreate, and why men and women behave in certain ways.

When one examines the Torah's text, the second story of Adam and Eve contains two important themes that differ from those of the first story. In the second story, God states that it is not good for man to be alone and that a man leaves his father and mother to be with his wife. Note that in this second story, woman is created for the purpose of being man's companion. Furthermore, this section of the creation story concludes with a section of text that explains that a man should leave his parents and cling to his wife.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that woman could have been created without having a specific relation to man. It is also possible that the story could have ended without reference to a man and woman being permanently together. In the Torah, "the ideal of marriage was that of a permanent union."<sup>21</sup> This idea of an everlasting marriage is what may be behind the words "cling to his wife."

With the early paradigm set for Adam and Eve, the Torah proceeds in describing their life as a couple in the Garden of Eden. The text quickly introduces an instigator, the snake, who challenges Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve accepts

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<sup>20</sup> Genesis 2.24

<sup>21</sup> Hayyim Scheid, Editor, *Marriage* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 69.

the snake's challenge, eats from the tree, gives some of the fruit to Adam, and he also eats from it. Here, too, Adam and Eve operate in tandem. When their eyes are opened to their nakedness they work simultaneously to create loincloths to cover themselves.<sup>22</sup> The Torah's first description of their behavior as a couple is of them operating in concert with each other. They are partners, eating of the same fruit and dealing with the knowledge of their nakedness by creating basic covering. The Torah records no dissent between the two in the incident with the snake. Their creation of fig leaf clothing seems to be a logical reaction to their mutual perception that they were naked. Although they go against God's word, they do so willingly together.

Despite their apparent teamwork and lack of guilt, the text then introduces a series of conflicts between the couple, and between them and God. Given the opportunity to explain his role in eating from the tree, Adam blames God and Eve stating, "The woman You put at my side - she gave me of the tree and I ate." Given the opportunity to explain her role in eating from the tree, Eve states, "The serpent duped me, and I ate."<sup>23</sup> While both statements might technically be true, neither Adam nor Eve takes personal responsibility for eating the fruit. Further, they do not speak of themselves as acting together. They don't even team up against the snake as their mutual foe. They are not helpmates. Instead they do what God had implicitly asked them not to do—separate from each other, and in the case of Adam, blame the other.

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<sup>22</sup> Genesis 3:7

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 3.12-13

God's anger is intense, and God tells Eve that she will have painful childbirth and that her husband will rule over her. God tells Adam that he will now have to work the land for food. Despite God's punishments for Adam and Eve, God makes clothing for them.<sup>24</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* implies that the act of making clothing for Adam and Eve demonstrated God's support for the couple, despite their actions.<sup>25</sup> Following the trend seen earlier, the Rabbis also use this aspect of the story to teach something that is not specifically mentioned in the text but is important to them. In this situation they remark about how to spend one's money. "The Torah teaches you here a rule of worldly wisdom: spend according to your means on food; less than you can afford on clothing, but more than you can afford on a dwelling."<sup>26</sup> This section of the Torah ends with God banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

The second half of chapter three of Genesis sits in drastic opposition to chapter two, and the first half of chapter three, where Adam and Eve are partners and helpmates. Adam and Eve do not work together when they communicate with God. Most dramatically, God states that Adam will rule over Eve. This is a major change from the initial description of their relationship where they together would master the earth and be a helpmate to the other. Perhaps this swift change in their relationship dynamic is what motivated the rabbis of the *Mishnah* to suggest that this was really done to protect Eve.<sup>27</sup> Whereas chapter two of the Torah ended with directing the first biblical couple to be

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<sup>24</sup> Genesis 3.16-21

<sup>25</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 20:12

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 8:12 (also see footnote three)

together, have children, rule the earth, and be helpers for one another, chapter three ends with an amendment - Adam shall rule over Eve.

Chapters four and five of the Torah also reference Adam and Eve, but only briefly. In these chapters Adam and Eve first fulfill the commandment to have children when they give birth to Cain and Abel. The Torah makes no mention as to how Adam and Eve raise their children, react to Cain's murder, and react to Abel after the murder. After the birth of Cain and Abel, only Adam is mentioned directly again, in chapter five, regarding the birth of Seth and many other sons and daughters.

As with many of its characters, the Torah only provides us a glimpse into Adam and Eve. Other texts, ancient and modern, attempt to shed additional light onto the Bible's first people, the Bible's first couple. As with each of the relationships discussed in this chapter, the messages from these texts are many and often incongruent. The Torah initially describes and charges the couple to work together, help each other, and have children. Soon after, the Torah indicates that they do not work together well and that the woman will serve the man.

### Abraham and Sarah

The Torah mentions a number of other couples after Adam and Eve. The text states that Cain had a wife and his grandson Lamech had two wives Adah and Zillah.<sup>28</sup> Noah was also married, as were his three sons.<sup>29</sup> The stories of Adam and Eve and Noah end with

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<sup>28</sup> Genesis 4:17-23

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 7:6-13

genealogies, long listings of the children of the children of Adam and Noah. Adah and Zillah are mentioned in Adam's genealogies, but no wives at all are named or even mentioned as part of Noah's genealogies. In Genesis, from chapter 4:23 to 11:29, no wives are actually named and only Noah and his son's wives are briefly mentioned. This is particularly striking because of the long list of names that are found in these chapters of the Torah. Many children are being born, but couple relationships are rarely mentioned in these chapters.

At the end of chapter eleven, the names of Abram's wife, Sarai, and his brother Nahor's wife, Milcah, are found. Immediately afterwards in verse, the text explains that Sarai was barren.<sup>30</sup> These two facts, that Abram and Sarai were a couple, and that Sarai was barren, set the stage for the Bible's second major model relationship.

The Torah provides us with more words about Abraham and Sarah's relationship than any other couple. Abraham and Sarah build upon the framework of the first couple relationship in the Torah, that of Adam and Eve. The text and its commentary provide us with additional understanding of what it means to be a married couple in the Jewish tradition.

After God tells Abram to go from his native land, Abram is described as taking his wife Sarai, as well as his servants and nephew, Lot, to Canaan. Sarai and Abram's relationship is barely mentioned in this text, but it is significant that Abram takes his wife and nephew on his journey to Canaan with him. God, after all, promises to make

Abram's name great and tells Abram to go forth. It is Abram who brings Sarai with him. We know that Sarai is barren and that Abram was seventy-five when he leaves Haran. Though we haven't learned Sarai's age yet, we can imagine her inability to give birth is a source of frustration for both her and Abram. God's call might have been the perfect time for Abram to leave Sarai, but the text indicates clearly that one of Abram's first acts before leaving Haran is to gather up Sarai to go with him.<sup>31</sup>

The Torah states that Abram and Sarai took all the wealth they had amassed and the persons that they had acquired in Haran and they set out for the land of Canaan.<sup>32</sup> The *midrash* adds *אלה הגרים שגירו*, these are the converts which they converted.<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Hunia then explains that Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women. This is another example of the teamwork ascribed to Abraham and Sarah.<sup>34</sup>

Abram and Sarai's relationship is further detailed in the Torah. Because of a famine in Canaan, Abram and Sarai go to Egypt. Abram says to Sarai, "Please say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you." Abram suggests this plot to prevent the Egyptians from killing him in order to get his beautiful wife.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Genesis 11:29-30

<sup>31</sup> Genesis 12:1-5

<sup>32</sup> Genesis 12:5

<sup>33</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 39:14

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 12:11-13

One *midrash* considers this an act of making himself of secondary importance. Saying, "please say you are my sister" was the equivalent to becoming subordinate to her. The Rabbis explain that because Sarai accepted his request, Abram was able to prosper in Egypt.<sup>36</sup> They use this to explain why the Torah actually says "and because of her, it went well with Abram."<sup>37</sup> Here the Rabbis highlight Sarai's listening and agreeing to Abram. Because of this relationship dynamic, all went well.

The Egyptians find Sarai beautiful and take her into the Pharaoh's court. Abram succeeds and acquires a lot of livestock. After God punishes Pharaoh for taking Abram's wife into his palace, Abram and Sarai are expelled from Egypt with all of Abram's newfound wealth intact.

Some criticize Abram for forcing Sarai to become a part of Pharaoh's harem. In fact, there are a number of commentators of ancient texts that describe the harrowing situation that Sarah experienced in Pharaoh's home. *Midrash Rabbah* describes Sarah being sexually harassed:

וכל אותו הלילה היתה שרה שטוחה על פניה ואומרת רבון  
העולמים אברהם יצא בהבטחה ואני יצאתי באמונה אברהם  
יצא חוץ לסירה ואני בתוך הסירה אמר לה הקב"ה כל מה שאני  
עושה בשבילך אני עושה והכל אומרים על דבר שרי אשת אברם  
אמר רבי לוי כל אותו הלילה היה מלאך עומד ומגלב בידו הזה אמר  
לה אין אמרת מחי מחינא אין אמרת נישבק שביקנא וכל כך למה  
שהיתה אומרת לו אשת איש אני ולא היה פורש

Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Your assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is outside this prison while I am within!' Said the Holy One, blessed be

<sup>36</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 40:4

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 12:16

He, to her: 'Whatever I do, I do for your sake, and all will say, 'It is because of Sarai Abram's wife.' Rabbi Levi said: 'The whole of that night an angel stood [by Sarai protecting her] with a whip in his hand; when [Pharaoh made advances] she ordered, 'Strike,' he struck, and when she ordered, 'Desist,' he desisted. And why [was Pharaoh punished with] such severity? Because she told him [Pharaoh], 'I am a married woman,' yet he would not leave her.'<sup>38</sup>

Modern commentator Norman Cohen also sees Abram's behavior as inappropriate. He writes:

About to confront potential adversaries, Abraham was more concerned about his safety than about Sarah and her feelings. He seemed willing to sacrifice his relationship with her to ensure his survival. For the moment, Sarah was unimportant: a non-entity, an unnamed object who could be taken into the Pharaoh's harem and sacrificed for Abraham's sake. His willingness to sacrifice Sarah demonstrated his lack of maturity.<sup>39</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with the Rabbis of the *midrash* that Abram was subordinating himself to Sarai, or that he was selfish and forced her into a situation where she was sexually harassed, it is clear in the text that that Abram asks Sarai to join him in his plot to avoid famine. Abram says to her "please" and explains to her, that without her, he could die. Sarai's answer is not recorded in the text.

Did Abraham and Sarah know what Sarah's fate would be when she was taken into Pharaoh's home? It is unclear from the Torah text, but commentators seem to take it as fact that saying that Sarai was Abram's sister would result in her being taken into Pharaoh's harem. Did Abram know this? If he did, why would he put his wife in such a threatening situation? Yes, he asks her for her help and she seemingly agrees, but the situation does not seem to be one in which Sarai's safety is taken into full consideration.

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<sup>38</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 41:2

<sup>39</sup> Norman Cohen, *Voices from Genesis* (Woodstock, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998) 76.



Separately, the *Talmud* also uses Abraham's words "I know what a beautiful woman you are"<sup>40</sup> to teach a lesson of modesty. It states

אברהם אפילו בדידיה לא איסתכל. דכתיב: הנה נא ידעתי כי  
אשה יפת מראה את, מכלל דמעיקרא לא חוה ידע לה.

Abraham did not even look at his own [wife to recognize her beauty], as it is written, 'Behold now I know what a beautiful woman you are to look upon,' which shows that originally he did not know.<sup>41</sup>

This section of the Torah does not engage in any discussion of modesty. Yet, once again, the Sages of the *Talmud* use the team of Abraham and Sarah to emphasize something that was important to some of them - modesty amongst all Jewish couples.

In the Torah's first description of Sarai and Abram, we see that just as Adam and Eve did, they work together. Sarai and Abram make a plan, one filled with risk, especially for Sarai, before entering Egypt. This scene is more complex compared to the scene where Adam and Eve eat the apple together. Abram consults with Sarai and asks for her help. Such behavior was never witnessed between Adam and Eve.

The Torah transitions into its next story with the following words "From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negeb with his wife."<sup>42</sup> Even though the story is told through the lead character of Abram, the Torah makes it clear that Sarai is right by his side for the next stage in their journey. Sarai is not mentioned directly again until the Torah states "Sarai, Abram's wife, had born him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name

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<sup>40</sup> Genesis 12:11

<sup>41</sup> *Baba Batra* 16a

<sup>42</sup> Genesis 13:1

was Hagar.” Torah then describes how Sarai suggests that Abram have a child with Hagar. The text states “and Abram heeded Sarai’s request.” Here Sarai is asking something of Abram. In the most intimate of circumstances Sarai suggests that Abram impregnate her handmaiden so that he can have a son. The text of the Torah, which often lacks in detail, makes it clear that Sarai gave Hagar to her husband. Due to the text’s specificity, it is impossible to interpret the text as Abraham taking Hagar or wanting to have a child with Hagar before Sarai asks him to do so.<sup>43</sup>

When Hagar conceives immediately, Sarai and Abram’s relationship is strained. The *midrash* explains why. Based on the Torah’s text that states Hagar’s esteem in Sarai was lowered, the *midrash* tells that Hagar slandered Sarah.

הגר אומרת להם שרי גבירתי אין סמרה כגלויה נראית  
צדקת ואינה צדקת אילו היתה צדקת ראו כמה שנים שלא  
נתעברה ואני בלילה אחד נתעברתי

Hagar said to them, ‘My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!’<sup>44</sup>

Hagar’s pregnancy and tale bearing only aggravated Sarai’s pain. In the Torah Sarai blames Abram saying says, “the wrong done me is your fault.”<sup>45</sup> The *midrash* explains her accusation. According to it the Rabbis complain that Abram did not support her

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<sup>43</sup> Genesis 16:1-3

<sup>44</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 45:4

<sup>45</sup> Genesis 16.5

when Hagar insulted her. Furthermore they criticize Abram for saying to God "I will die childless."<sup>46</sup>

רבי ברכיה בשם ר' אבא בר כהנא אמר בעי דיני גבך  
משל לשני בני אדם חבושים בבית האסורים נמצא המלך  
עובר א"ל חד תבע דקיון ידי אמר אפקוהו אמר ליה חבריה  
יבעי דיני גבך אילו אמרת תבוע דקיון דידן כמה דאפקך כן  
אפקני וכדו דאמרת תבע דקיון ידי לך אפיק לי לא אפיק  
כך אילו אמרת ואנו הולכים ערירים כמה דיהב לך כן יהב  
לי וכדו דאמרת אנכי הולך עירי לך יהיב ולי לא יהיב

Rabbi Berekiah explained it in Rabbi Abba's name: I have a grievance against you. 'Imagine two men incarcerated in prison, and as the king passes one of them cries out, 'Execute justice for me!' The king orders him to be released, upon which his fellow-prisoner says to him, 'I have a grievance against you, for had you said, 'Execute justice for us,' the king would have released me just as he has released you; but now that you said, 'Execute justice for me,' he released you but not me. Similarly [Sarah said], 'had [you] said, 'We go childless,' then as God gave you a child so would God have given me; since, however, you said 'I will die childless,' and God gave you a child but not me.'<sup>47</sup>

Abram's response to Sarai's pain is "your maid is in your hands, deal with her as you think right."

Contrast Abram's response to Sarai with Adam's response to God when God questioned Adam after he had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Although these are not completely analogous situations, one can see an important difference in the responses of Adam and Abram when confronted with a challenge to their behavior.

Adam blames Eve, as well as God, saying, "The woman You put at my side - she gave me of the tree, and I ate."<sup>48</sup> When challenged about being intimate with Hagar, Abram's

<sup>46</sup> Genesis 15.2

<sup>47</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 45:5

<sup>48</sup> Genesis 3.12

response is not to protect himself or blame Sarai for her suggestion to have a child with Hagar. Instead, Abram provides a response that addresses the situation at hand.

Abram doesn't focus his words on the accusation addressed to him, instead he focuses on Sarai's perception of Hagar's behavior. He centers on the actual problem and ignores the blame levied upon him by Sarai. He reminds Sarai that Hagar is Sarai's handmaid and that she is empowered to deal with her as she sees fit. Abram is aware that Hagar is pregnant at the time he tells Sarai this information. Abram risks sacrificing his yet unborn child when he explains to Sarai that she can do as she thinks is right with Hagar. He does not say, "But be careful, she's pregnant with my child," or "our child." He does not even bring up his feelings about finally having a child.

God reappears to Abram and tells him that he will now be called Abraham and that Sarai will now be called Sarah. God tells Abraham, "I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her."<sup>49</sup> Until this point in the Torah, only Abraham has been told by God that he would be the father of nations and that his children would be as numerous as the stars. God now recognizes Sarah and blesses her as God had blessed Abraham.

What is Abraham's response to God's words? He laughs. Abraham says, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"<sup>50</sup> Note that Abraham has no direct response to God's blessing of Sarah, except for laughing and

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<sup>49</sup> Genesis 17.16

<sup>50</sup> Genesis 17.17

questioning his and her age for bearing children. Until this point in the Torah, Abraham had experienced God only blessing him. When Sarah's name is mentioned with the same blessing that God had bestowed upon him, Abraham accepts it. He does not say, "What about my blessing," or "I thought you had reserved that blessing for me."

In chapter eighteen of Genesis, three men visit Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah welcome the guests by quickly preparing food for them. They seem to work seamlessly in welcoming these strangers on short notice. Ancient and modern commentators alike look to this section of Torah as a proof text for Jews to engage in the mitzvah of hospitality.

When they predict to Abraham that Sarah will have a son, Sarah overhears and laughs at the thought saying "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old."<sup>51</sup> God asks Abraham why Sarah laughed at the suggestion that she will have a child. Note that Sarah did not laugh at the idea that she would have a child, she laughed at the idea that she would have enjoyment with her husband. When Abraham confronts her, Sarah lies about her laughter because she is frightened. Abraham knows the truth and tersely responds "you did laugh."<sup>52</sup>

From this incident, the *Talmud* teaches a lesson about the power of words between a husband and wife, especially with regard to sensitive subjects.

גדול השלום, שאף הקדוש ברוך הוא שינה בו, דמעיקרא כתיב:  
ואדוני זקן, ולבסוף כתיב: ואני זקנתי.

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<sup>51</sup> Genesis 18:12

<sup>52</sup> Genesis 18:15

Great is the cause of peace. Seeing that for its sake even the Holy One, blessed be He, modified a statement; for at first it is written, 'my lord being old', while afterwards it is written, 'and I am old.'<sup>53</sup>

The *Talmud*'s words show God understood how significant peace was to Abraham and Sarah. This is the reason God told Abraham that Sarah laughed at the idea of having child verses telling Abraham her actual words. Once again, Jewish tradition uses Abraham and Sarah to provide a model of behavior and relationship for future Jewish couples.

Later, Abraham tells another leader, Abimelech king of Gerar, that Sarah is Abraham's sister. There is no dialogue between Abraham and Sarah before this encounter. Once Abimelech discovers the truth, he confronts Abraham. Abraham explains to Abimelech that he was concerned that he would be killed on account of his wife.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the previous sister incident with Pharaoh, there is no sense of partnership and teamwork between Abraham and Sarah. Sarah does not even speak a word in this story. As with the first incident many of the commentaries are not kind to Abraham for allowing his wife to be put in danger. This time, the Torah's text provides the reader with no explanation how Abraham and Sarah communicated about this episode.

The Torah describes a number of other important interactions between Abraham and Sarah. In chapter twenty-one, Sarah gives birth to Isaac and demands that Abraham cast away Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah does not want Ishmael to share Abraham's inheritance

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<sup>53</sup> *Yevamot* 65b

<sup>54</sup> Genesis 20.11

with Isaac. The text explains that Abraham is very upset about this matter, but God speaks to Abraham and tells him to do whatever Sarah tells him to do. Abraham expels Hagar and Ishmael. Although the text is brief, it is clear that there is a lot stress between Abraham and Sarah.<sup>55</sup> God's directive drives Abraham to follow Sarah's request, but what is not addressed is Abraham's intense emotional pain attached with their departure.

The text of the Torah does not mention Sarah's name, or Abraham and Sarah in a relationship context again until her death.

#### Isaac and Rebekah

The text describing Isaac and Rebekah's relationship adds some new material to the Torah's words about couples. Love is described for the first time in reference to Isaac loving Rebekah. Also, in this chapter there is mention of how Rebekah provided Isaac comfort after his mother Sarah's death, certainly a loving act.<sup>56</sup>

Rabbi Raymond Zwerin and Audrey Marcus note that "marriage in biblical times was for companionship and to have children. These marriages were usually arranged for the couple. By chance, love sometimes followed, as in the case of Isaac and Rebekah. But love was not a necessary condition for marriage."<sup>57</sup>

Rebekah and Isaac's relationship begins warmly, but even before they meet, the Torah is outlining a new and important standard for married couple—a quality match. Rebekah,

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<sup>55</sup> Genesis 21:9-12

<sup>56</sup> Genesis 24:67

after all, is the woman selected by Abraham's servant for Isaac. What characteristics does she portray that makes his servant so fond of her? She is kind, she is generous, she is humble, and she is welcoming. Note that only much later in the text is she described as physically beautiful. Abraham sends his servant to his homeland in search of a woman with these qualities, who is also from the proper community. This combination of status and proper character is what Abraham was looking for. This very first story of a couple being matched emphasizes what variables are most important in a match. As Gunther Plaut writes:

The story of Rebekah's betrothal reveals the biblical attitude toward the nature and content of marriage. The union between man and woman must be grounded in the finest qualities, and Rebekah exhibits them to perfection....Modern man who thinks of marriage primarily as the fulfillment of a romantic relationship will find it difficult to see significant values in arranged marriages. But, for biblical man, the ideal was not 'first love, then marriage,' as it is today, but the reverse 'first marriage, then love.'<sup>58</sup>

The Sages note Rebekah's consenting to go with Abraham's servant<sup>59</sup> as the source for their statement that a girl is not to be married without her consent.<sup>60</sup> The *Talmud* also states:

אסור לאדם שיקדש את בתו כשהיא קטנה, עד שתגדל  
ותאמר בפלוגי אני רוצה.

One may not give his daughter in betrothal when a minor, [but must wait] until she grows up and says: 'I want so-and-so.'<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Raymond Zwerin and Audrey Marcus, *Marriage in Jewish Life and Tradition* (Denver, ARE, 1978) 2.

<sup>58</sup> Gunther Plaut, Editor, *The Torah A Modern Commentary* (New York, UAHC Press, 1981) 168.

<sup>59</sup> Genesis 24:57-8

<sup>60</sup> Mendell Lewittes, *Jewish Marriage* (Northvale, New Jersey, Jason Aronson, Inc. 1994) 41.

<sup>61</sup> *Kidushin* 41a



The editor of the *Stone Edition of the Chumash* also finds many interesting themes in the meeting of Isaac and Rebekah.

The brief passage describing the meeting and marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is touching, and reflective of basic principles of Judaism and Jewish marriage. It begins with Isaac walking back home from praying at a place that recalled God's mercy to the previous generation, for Jews cleave to their past and the God who guided it. Isaac and Rebekah 'met,' but not by chance. She displayed the personal modesty that has always been one of the glories of Jewish women and she recognized intuitively that the stranger she had just encountered was a holy person. Finally, Isaac brought her to his mother's tent, and there it became apparent that she was a fitting successor to Sarah, for the holy presence of Sarah returned to the tent of her son. It was then that Isaac loved her, for the Jewish home is a temple and its priestess is the wife and mother whose spirit infuses it. Isaac could love only a mate who could be his companion in creating the Chosen People. In Rebekah he found her.

The Torah begins the narrative by saying that Isaac 'happened' to meet Rebekah and Eliezer on the road, before they entered the city, just as Eliezer 'happened' to encounter Rebekah at the well. Both meetings seemed to occur by chance, but in reality they were results of God's providential will (Radak).<sup>62</sup>

The Torah briefly explains that Rebekah was barren and that Isaac pleaded with God on her behalf.<sup>63</sup> Commenting on this verse, the Rabbis of the *Talmud* debate whether both Isaac and Rebekah were infertile. They also infer from Isaac's actions that prayer can influence God to change from anger to mercy.<sup>64</sup> The Torah states, within the same verse that Isaac's plea is made, that God responded to Isaac and Rebekah conceived.<sup>65</sup>

"Rebekah's barrenness puts her again in line of succession to her late mother-in-law, Sarah, though the narrative about Rebekah is much more compressed and much less complex than the corresponding story of Sarah. The 'barren mother' is a common motif

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<sup>62</sup> Nosson Scherman, Editor, *The Chumash, Stone Edition* (New York, Mesorah Publications, 1993) 119.

<sup>63</sup> Genesis 25:21

<sup>64</sup> *Yevamot* 64a

<sup>65</sup> Genesis 25:21

in special birth stories.”<sup>66</sup> The Torah explains that Rebekah is pregnant with twins.

When a suffering Rebekah questions God regarding what is happening within her womb she learns that her twins will also struggle with each other after they are born.<sup>67</sup>

Unlike any other couple prior to Isaac and Rebekah, the Torah describes their parenting. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah favored Jacob. God had told Rebekah that the older would serve the younger<sup>68</sup> and “the mother mediates God’s preference.”<sup>69</sup>

As their boys grow into men, Esau marries two Hittite women. These marriages were a source of bitterness to both Rebekah and Isaac.<sup>70</sup> This is the Torah’s first example of the strain that can occur between parent and child regarding his or her chosen spouse. Even Isaac, who favors Esau, is upset.<sup>71</sup>

Toward the end of Isaac’s life, Rebekah plans to deceive Isaac so that he will bless Jacob over Esau. Jacob follows her detailed directions, succeeds in tricking his father and receives his blessing while disguised as Esau. The Torah describes Esau’s rage when he discovered that Jacob had stolen his blessing. Esau harbors a grudge over Jacob, but no such anger is seen in Isaac’s behavior toward his youngest son. The text does not clarify whether Isaac was aware of Rebekah’s role in his deception. The Torah is equally silent

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<sup>66</sup> Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Editors, *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, Oxford, 2004) 53.

<sup>67</sup> Genesis 25:22-23

<sup>68</sup> Genesis 25:23

<sup>69</sup> Berlin and Brettler, Editors, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 53.

<sup>70</sup> Genesis 25:34-35

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

as to how Rebekah felt when communicating with her husband after she tricked him.<sup>72</sup>

The Torah then returns to Rebekah's frustration with Esau's marriages to the Hittite women. This is the last recorded conversation between Isaac and Rebekah in the Torah. Rebekah communicates to Isaac her frustration with Esau, adding that if Jacob married a Hittite her life would be worthless. This results in Isaac charging Jacob to not marry a Canaanite and to marry one of his uncle's daughters. All things considered, Isaac, who is also in support of Jacob marrying appropriately, seems remarkably responsive to his wife's anguish. This charge to Jacob occurred under the cloud of Esau's threat to murder his brother for his actions.<sup>73</sup>

The editors of *The Jewish Study Bible* postulate that "the distaste for Hittite women that Isaac and Rebekah both truly share becomes the pretext for her saving her favorite son from his vindictive brother's rage."<sup>74</sup> This commentary suggests that even in this situation Rebekah manipulated Isaac, using his dislike of Hittite women to send Jacob off to safety.

Isaac and Rebekah's relationship began with love and warmth. Despite this beginning, the majority of the words describing them in the Torah reveal a relationship characterized by deception and manipulation.

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<sup>72</sup> Genesis 27:1-45

<sup>73</sup> Genesis 27:46 - 28:9

<sup>74</sup> Berlin and Brettler, Editors, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 54.

### Jacob, Leah, and Rachel

The text states that Jacob loved Rachel so much that he was willing to work seven years to marry her. "The story of Jacob and Rachel in the Bible clearly indicates the acceptance of romantic love in marriage."<sup>75</sup> The love experienced by Jacob was different than the love Isaac felt for Rebekah. Jacob's love is described in the context of Rachel's physical beauty as well as her kindness. Jacob requests her from Laban when Jacob could have requested financial gains instead.<sup>76</sup> Laban's acceptance of Jacob's request shows support of the idea that romantic love was understood and accepted in biblical times.

New to the Torah's explanation of marriage rituals is Jacob's participation in legitimately choosing his own wife. Jacob was given direction from his father to marry one of his uncle Laban's daughters. Up until this point the tenor of the texts and commentary in Genesis recommend arranged weddings, similar to that of Isaac and Rebekah.

Foretelling modern romantic patterns, Jacob travels to Laban's village and falls in love with Rachel at first sight. Though the scope of Jacob's choices is proscribed by his father, Jacob selects his bride. We know that Isaac and Rebekah were very upset with Esau's choice of brides, but the story of Jacob legitimizes another option.

Laban, however, takes advantage of Jacob and tricks him into first marrying Leah. Their union is the first description of wedding ritual in the Torah. While no actual wedding ceremony is recorded in the Bible, it appears that feasting, song and gift giving

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<sup>75</sup> Scheid, *Marriage*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Genesis 29:10-19

accompanied the event.<sup>77</sup> This can be seen in the words describing Jacob's first marriage, but the celebration for Jacob did not last long. Jacob is allowed to marry Rachel seven days after Leah, but due to Laban's deception, Jacob spends a total of fourteen years working to marry Rachel.<sup>78</sup>

The *Talmud* describes Rachel as being modest.

ומאי צניעות היתה בה ברחל? דכתיב: ויגד יעקב לרחל כי אחי אביה הוא וכי בן רבקה הוא, וחלא בן אחות אביה הוא אלא, אמר לה: מינסבת לי? אמרה ליה: אין, מיהו אבא רמאה הוא ולא יכלת ליה. אמר לה: מאי רמאותיה? אמרה ליה: אית לי אחתא דקשישא מינאי, ולא מנסבא לי מקמה. אמר לה: אחי אני ברמאות. א"ל: ומי שרי להו לצדיקי לסגויי ברמאותא? אין, עם נבר תתבר ועם עקש תתפל. מסר לה סימנין. כי קא מעיילי לה ללאה, סברה: השתא מיכספא אחתאי, מסרתינהו ניהלה. והיינו דכתיב: ויהי בבקר והנה היא לאה, מכלל דעד השתא לאו לאה היא אלא, מתוך סימנים שמסר לה יעקב לרחל ומסרתה ללאה, לא הוה ידע לה עד ההיא שעתא.

Where did Rachel's modesty lie? — It is written, 'And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother and that he was Rebekah's son.' Wasn't he the son of her father's sister? Yet he said to her, '[Will] you marry me?' [And] she replied to him, 'Yes, but [my] father is sharper, and you will not be able [to hold your own against] him.' 'Where,' he asked her, 'does his trickery lie?' 'I have,' she said, 'a sister who is older than me, and he will not allow me to be married before her.' 'I am his brother,' he said to her, 'in trickery.' — 'But,' she said to him, 'may the righteous indulge in trickery?' — 'Yes,' [he replied]. 'With the pure. You show yourself pure, and with the crooked you show yourself subtle.' He entrusted her [with certain identification] marks. While Leah was being led into [the bridal chamber] she [Rachel] thought, 'my sister will now be disgraced,' [and so] she [Rachel] entrusted her [with] these very [marks]. And this accounts for the Torah's text, 'And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah,' which seems to imply that until then she was not Leah! But, on account of the [identification] marks which Jacob had entrusted to Rachel who had entrusted them to Leah, he didn't know [who] she [was] until that moment.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Zwerin and Marcus, *Marriage in Jewish Life and Tradition*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Genesis 29:28

This section of *Talmud* first shows that Jacob and Rachel spoke frankly with each other about Laban's character in regard to their desire to marry. Despite this conversation and their plan to place marks to identify Rachel from Leah, Rachel chose to protect her sister's dignity rather than marry Jacob.

This *Talmudic* story explains how Jacob was led to marry Leah. The text of the Torah simply describes Leah as unloved. Leah names their first son Reuben—a name that can be interpreted as "*Adonai* has seen my affliction" or "now my husband will love me." Simeon, their second son's name is said to mean "This is because *Adonai* heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also." Leah's third child is named Levi for "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have born him three sons."<sup>80</sup>

Jacob and Rachel are unable at first to have children and the text records Jacob laying the blame on Rachel. When Rachel provides her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob and Bilhah conceives Rachel names him Dan stating "God had vindicated me, indeed, God has heeded my plea and given me a son." When Jacob and Bilhah had a second son, Naphtali, Rachel said "a fateful contest waged with my sister, yes and I have prevailed."<sup>81</sup>

The marital picture painted by the intense jealousy between Leah and Rachel is bleak. Nowhere between Jacob and his wives is any of the teamwork demonstrated by Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah. Nowhere is love discussed again between Jacob and

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<sup>79</sup> *Baba Batra* 123a

<sup>80</sup> Genesis 29:32-34

either of his wives. The *Talmud* provides this story about Leah. It seems to divert attention away from the apparent pain between Leah and Jacob by explaining key words in the text.

רב אמר: לעולם רכות ממש, ולא גנאי הוא לה אלא שבח הוא לה, שהיתה שומעת על פרשת דרכים בני אדם שהיו אומרים: שני בנים יש לה לרבקה, שתי בנות יש לו ללבן, גדולה לגדול וקטנה לקטן, והיתה יושבת על פרשת דרכים ומשאלת: גדול מה מעשיו? איש רע הוא מלסטם בריות, קטן מה מעשיו? איש תם יושב אוהלים, והיתה בוכה עד שנשרו ריסי עיניה. והיינו דכתיב: וירא ה' כי שנואה לאה, מאי שנואה? אלימא שנואה ממש, אפשר! בגנות בהמה טמאה לא דבר הכתוב, בגנות צדיקים דבר הכתוב! אלא ראה הקב"ה ששנואין מעשה עשו בפניה - ויפתח את רחמה.

Rab said: [Leah's eyes were] indeed actually weak, but that was no disgrace to her but a credit for at the crossroads she heard people saying: 'Rebekah has two sons, [and] Laban has two daughters; the elder [daughter should be married] to the elder [son] and the younger [daughter should be married] to the younger [son].' And she sat at the crossroads and inquired: 'How does the elder one conduct himself?' [And the answer was] 'A wicked man, a highway robber.' 'How does the younger man conduct himself?' 'A quiet man dwelling in tents'. And she wept until her eyelashes dropped. And this accounts for the Torah's text, 'and the Lord saw that Leah was hated.' What [could be the meaning of] 'hated?' If it is suggested [that it means that she was] actually hated, [is this conceivable?] [If] Torah did not speak disparagingly of an unclean animal, [would] it speak disparagingly of the righteous? But the [meaning is this]: The Holy One, blessed be He, saw that Esau's conduct was hateful to her, so he opened her womb.<sup>82</sup>

These words lend an alternate perspective to the *pshat* of the Torah text. The Sages see Leah as one of the righteous, and this story provides information as to how the words of the Torah can be reinterpreted.

Jacob, Rachel, and Leah do have one particularly significant moment when they work together. This is seen when they discuss leaving Laban's household. Jacob shares the

<sup>81</sup> Genesis 30:6-8

<sup>82</sup> *Baba Batra* 123a

Divine message he has heard, and Leah and Rachel, "in agreement for once,"<sup>83</sup> simultaneously support Jacob doing what God had told him.<sup>84</sup> This is one of the few examples in the Torah of Jacob and his wives talking, listening, and making a decision together. Soon after their emancipation from Laban, Jacob, Leah, and Rebekah are seen working together when they meet Esau. Although the Torah records no conversation between the three regarding what they were to do, they prepare together for Esau's arrival, and treat him with the respect due a king. By the time Leah and Rachel bow before Esau with their children, Esau and Jacob had already embraced. They behaved as a unified family during this very sensitive reunion.<sup>85</sup>

The encounter with Esau is the last section of the Torah where all three are described in the same chapter. The next time Rachel is mentioned is when she dies giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob is not even referred to in this section of the Torah.<sup>86</sup> Leah is never seen again in the Torah, but is mentioned as the mother of her children on a few occasions.

As with Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel's relationship begins with tremendous love. The love felt between these two never exists between Jacob and Leah, and soon after Rachel becomes Jacob's wife there is little mention of anything positive regarding Jacob and Rachel's relationship. Although there are a few examples of their teamwork, the difficulty in these paradigmatic Genesis marriages is omnipresent.

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<sup>83</sup> Berlin and Brettler, Editors, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 64.

<sup>84</sup> Genesis 31:4-15

<sup>85</sup> Genesis 33:1-7

<sup>86</sup> Genesis 35:16-19



### In Summary

The relationships between Adam and Eve and the matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis teach us that marriage, though it can be wonderful, is not always easy. Every member of these paradigmatic relationships experience struggles with his or her partner. This is not a coincidence; rather it is a reflection of the reality of marriage. Sometimes, such as with Abraham and Sarah, the Torah models how people in relationships can resolve conflict positively. In other cases, the Torah describes how unresolved conflict can have lasting negative effects on a relationship.

The Rabbis of the *Talmud* and *midrash* comment upon these relationship dynamics. They discuss the biblical individuals themselves and their direct and indirect involvement with many other subjects that were of interest to the Rabbis. These comments provide a glimpse into how the Rabbis interpreted Torah and the social issues of their day.

Chapter three of this paper will examine further what modern Jews can learn from the relationships of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

## Chapter Two - *Talmudic* Reflections on Marriage

אמר רבי תנחום א"ר חנילאי: כל אדם שאין לו אשה - שרוי  
בלא שמחה, בלא ברכה, בלא טובה בלא שמחה - דכתיב:  
ושמחת אתה וביתך, בלא ברכה - דכתיב: להניח ברכה אל  
ביתך, בלא טובה - דכתיב: לא טוב היות האדם לבדו.

Rabbi Tanhum stated in the name of Rabbi Hanilai: 'The unmarried person [any man with no wife] lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness.' 'Without joy,' for it is written 'and thou shall rejoice, you and thy house (Deut. 14.26).' 'Without blessing,' for it is written, 'to cause a blessing to rest on thy house (Ezekiel 44.30).' 'Without goodness,' for it is written, 'it is not good that the man should be alone (Genesis 2.18).'<sup>87</sup>

The Sages of the *Talmud* lived during a time in Jewish history where marriage had become an established institution. Throughout the *Talmud* there is much discussion, through *halacha*, Jewish law, and *aggadah*, legendary story, about the subject of marriage. Though I will briefly discuss *halacha*, this chapter will focus on *aggadic* and proverbial material—statements of wisdom and insights into marriage such as this opening quote. This chapter will also include stories of couples who provide lessons on marriage and the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife within a marriage.

It should be noted that the selections from the *Talmud* found in this chapter are taken from different sections, and therefore were not necessarily written to complement one another.

### *Halacha and Aggadah*

The *Talmud* is filled with legal language describing in great detail a husband and wife's rights and duties. These legal discussions review the topics of money, clothing, food,

lodging, sexual relations, marriage contracts (*ketubot*), medical care, safety, burial responsibilities, housework, proper behavior, and divorce. This material serves as the proof text for the formal *halacha* that Jews have been following for centuries.

[The Rabbis] understood the problem of maintaining the marriage relationship. Jewish law therefore carefully defined the rights and obligations of both the husband and wife in order to avoid the fears and uncertainties that accompany an undefined relationship. Only in a clear, secure and content relationship can both parties to the marriage make their best contribution to it. The act of marriage, the wedding ceremony, is thus a combination of a religious ceremony and a legal contract designed to send off the couple on their long voyage through life together.<sup>88</sup>

The enormous volume of legal text outnumbers the *aggadic* and proverbial texts within the *Talmud*. The tone of the legal texts is often very different than that of the *aggadic* and proverbial texts, but themes of these texts sometimes overlap. This chapter focuses primarily on *aggadic* and proverbial texts because they best describe the *Talmud's* thoughts on a couple's personal relationship. The fact that the *Talmud* includes texts describing specific duties and rights, and texts describing how a couple should relate, demonstrates that the Sages believed that couples needed both for their relationships to thrive.

Not surprisingly, most non-scholarly works on the *Talmud* and marriage emphasize the proverbial statements discussing marriage. These phrases resonate with the modern Jew who can appreciate the idea of honoring one's partner much more than considering him or her to be property. Similarly, for this chapter, I chose a greater number of stories and proverbs on marriage over detailed law texts.

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<sup>87</sup> *Yevamot* 62b

<sup>88</sup> Lewittes, *Jewish Marriage*, 7.

### Ketubot - Marriage Contracts

The discussion on marriage contracts is a good example of legally focused text within the *Talmud*. The *Talmud* contains much thought and discussion about the *ketubah*, the legal document that the husband gives his bride. The *ketubah* was a practical, legal requirement. According to the *Talmud*, one of the main reasons for requiring a *ketubah* was to ensure that a man would not easily divorce his wife.<sup>89</sup> It is a contract in which "all the forces governing a free and fluctuating market might affect the arrangement. It assumed basic requirements on the part of both parties...and provided both parties with certain benefits."<sup>90</sup> Even though the man and woman benefited from the *ketubah*, the document reflects the male dominated society in which it was created.

The traditional *ketubah* is highly problematic for many modern, liberal Jews today. Through it, the man is effectively purchasing the woman, with her purchase price dependent on her status as a virgin. It stipulates the amount of money the man agrees to pay in case of divorce or death. Two male witnesses testify that the man, not the woman or the couple, has agreed to the terms. The woman is discussed, but she has no voice in the discussion. Liberal Jews have taken the original concept of the *ketubah* and created alternative contemporary egalitarian *ketubot* that focus primarily on a couple's mutual love and commitment, hopes and plans, rather than on finances.<sup>91</sup>

The Rabbis lived in a time when, except for a woman of exceptional wealth, women were more interested in becoming married than were men. The Rabbis state that it is more embarrassing for a woman to be single than for a man to be single. History may have contributed to this condition, for in the first and second centuries wars against the Roman Empire greatly reduced the numbers of Jewish men. The lack of supply of young men

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<sup>89</sup> *Ketubot* 39b

<sup>90</sup> Isaiah M. Gafni, "The Institution of Marriage in Rabbinic Times." *The Jewish Family*, David Kraemer, Editor, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989) 15.

<sup>91</sup> Dan Judson and Nancy Wiener, *Meeting at the Well* (New York: UAHC Press, 2002) 93.

could have resulted in a greater demand by unmarried women.<sup>92</sup> It is likely that the patriarchal nature of society was so strong that men held the upper hand in the selection of marriage partners. Further, a woman's status was defined by her mate and children, and therefore there was more interest among women in marriage than men.

Despite the *Talmud's* abundance of legal language in tractate *ketubot*, there are also some very interesting stories.

### Benefits and Importance of Marriage

Throughout the *Talmud*, tales and proverbs underline the Sages' opinions and thoughts on marriage. In regard to the importance and benefits of marriage the *Talmud* states:

עד כ' שנה, יושב הקב"ה ומצפה לאדם מתי ישא אשה,  
כיון שהגיע כ' ולא נשא, אומר: תיפח עצמותיו.

Until the age of twenty, the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and waits. As soon as one attains twenty and has not married, He exclaims, 'Blasted be his bones!'

A father of a daughter was responsible for arranging for her to be married, "while she is of suitable age [as early as twelve and a half, but only with her permission]"<sup>93</sup> or face the Torah's condemnation that he is profaning her and making her into a harlot.

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<sup>92</sup> Gafni, "The Institution of Marriage in Rabbinic Times." *The Jewish Family*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> *Sanhedrin* 76a

## God's Role in Marriage

According to the *Talmud*, the Eternal was actively involved with making matches.

ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד, בת קול יוצאת ואומרת:  
בת פלוני לפלוני בית פלוני לפלוני שדה פלוני לפלוני

Forty days before the formation of a child a Bat Kol announces, the daughter of so and so is meant to marry this person.<sup>94</sup>

The Sages of *Midrash Rabbah* built upon this idea of God's role in matching couples.

ביתה מטרונה שאלה את ר' יוסי בר חלפתא אמרה לו לכמה ימים  
ברא הקב"ה את עולמו אמר לה לששת ימים כדכתיב כי ששת ימים  
עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ אמרה לו מה הוא עושה מאותה  
שעה ועד עכשיו אמר לה הקב"ה יושב ומזווג זיווגים בתו של פלוני  
לפלוני אשתו של פלוני לפלוני ממונו של פלוני לפלוני אמרה לו וד  
הוא אומנתיה אף אני יכולה לעשות כן כמה עבדים כמה שפחות יש  
לי לשעה קלה אני יכולה לזווג אמר לה אם קלה היא בעיניך קשה  
היא לפני הקב"ה כקריעת ים סוף הלך לו ר' יוסי בר חלפתא מה  
עשתה נטלה אלף עבדים ואלף שפחות והעמידה אותן שורות שורות  
אמרה פלן יסב לפלונית ופלונית תיסב לפלוני וזיווגה אותן בלילה  
אחת למחר אתון לגבה דין מוחיה פציעא דין עינו שמיטא דין רגליה  
תבירא אמרה להון מה לכון דא אמרה לית אנא בעי לדין ודין אמר  
לית אנא בעי לדא מיד שלחה והביאה את ר' יוסי בר חלפתא אמרה  
לו לית אלוה כאלחכון אמת היא תורתכון נאה ומשובחת יפה אמרת  
אמר לא כך אמרתי לך אם קלה היא בעיניך קשה היא לפני הקב"ה  
כקריעת ים סוף

A [Roman] matron asked Rabbi Jose: 'In how many days did the Holy One, blessed be He, create His world?' 'In six days,' he answered. 'Then what has He been doing since then?' 'He sits and makes matches,' he answered, 'assigning this man to that woman, and this woman to that man.' 'If that is difficult,' she taunted, 'I too can do the same.' She went and matched [her slaves], giving this man to that woman, this woman to that man and so on. Some time after those who were matched went and beat one another, this woman saying, 'I do not want this man,' while this man protested, 'I do not want that woman.' Immediately she summoned Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and admitted to him: 'There is no god like your God: it is true, your Torah is indeed beautiful and praiseworthy, and you spoke the truth!' Said he to her: 'If it is easy in your eyes, it is as difficult before the Holy One, blessed be He, as the dividing of the Red Sea.'<sup>95</sup>

<sup>94</sup> *Sotah* 2a

<sup>95</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 68.4

God's role and presence is not limited to matchmaking. A common term in the *Talmud* for marriage is *kiddushin*, or sanctification. Modern scholars note that "it is significant that the choice of the Hebrew term for marriage is *kiddushin*, a word derived from the root to be holy. By the act of marriage a man sanctifies his existence."<sup>96</sup> In the *Talmud* tractate *kiddushin*, the use of words with the root ק.ד.ש is explained:

ומאי לישנא דרבנן? דאסר לה אכ"ע כהקדש.

Now what does the Rabbinical term [*mekadesh*] connote? That he [the husband] prohibits her to all [men] as *hekdesh* [like an object that is dedicated to the Sanctuary, forbidden for secular use.]<sup>97</sup>

In addition,

איש ואשה, זכו - שכינה ביניהן, לא זכו - אש אוכלתן.

When the husband and wife are worthy, the *Shechinah* is with them. When they are not worthy fire consumes them.<sup>98</sup>

This quote is related to the Hebrew words for husband and wife, א'ש and אשה; each word has two letters that can be configured to spell the Hebrew word for fire אש. Also, the difference between the two words is the letter ה, a short version for the name of God. Here the *Talmud* instructs that when a husband and wife live and work in agreement together, God's presence is a part of their marriage; if the couple is not working it is as if fire is present between them.

<sup>96</sup> Scheid, *Marriage*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> *Kiddushin* 2b

<sup>98</sup> *Sotah* 17a

## Marrying Properly

The *Talmud* also discusses marrying for improper reasons, using proper marriage

preparation, and marrying people who are different in age. Specifically,

כל הנושא אשה לשום ממון - הויין לו בנים שאינן מהוגנים...  
אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: חדש נכנס וחדש יצא וממונם אבד.

Whoever marries a woman for her money will have disreputable children...[in addition] Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak said a month comes and a month goes and their money [will be] lost.<sup>99</sup>

כל הנושא אשה שאינה הוגנת לו, אליהו כופתו והקב"ה רוצעו  
Anyone who marries a wife who is not fit for him, Elijah binds him and the Holy One, blessed be He, beats him.<sup>100</sup>

לימדה תורה דרך ארץ, שיבנה אדם בית ויטע כרם ואח"כ ישא אשה

The Torah teaches the correct procedure: a man should first build a house, then plant a vineyard, and after that marry.<sup>101</sup>

המשיא את בתו לזקן, והמשיא אשה לבנו קטן, והמחזיר אבידה  
לנכרי - עליו הכתוב אומר למען ספות הרזה את הצמאה לא  
יאבה ה' סלח לו.

He who marries his daughter to an old man, or who takes an old woman as a wife for a young son, to him the verse refers 'to add drunkenness to thirst; God will not pardon him (Deuteronomy 29.19).<sup>102</sup>

אמר ר"ל: גבוה לא ישא גבוהית - שמא יצא מהן תורן,  
ננס לא ישא ננסת - שמא יצא מהם אצבעי, לבן לא ישא  
לבנה - שמא יצא מהם בוחק, שחור לא ישא  
שחורה - שמא יצא מהן טפוח.

An abnormally tall man should not marry an abnormally tall woman, so that their offspring be [like] a mast. A male dwarf should not marry a female dwarf, so that their offspring be a dwarf of the smallest size. A man with abnormally white

<sup>99</sup> *Kidushin* 70a

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>101</sup> *Megillah* 27a

<sup>102</sup> *Sotah* 44a



[skin] complexion should not marry a woman with equally abnormal white complexion, so that their offspring be excessively white-complexioned. A man with dark [skin] complexion should not marry a woman with an equally dark complexion, so that their offspring may be pitch black.<sup>103</sup>

### Scholarship

The *Talmud's* pages are also filled with discussion about scholarship. There are texts that discuss the selection of a woman based upon her father's scholarship, and texts regarding the importance of time spent by the husband in study. In regard to finding a wife,

תנו רבנן: לעולם ימכור אדם כל מה שיש לו וישא בת  
תלמיד חכם, וישא בתו לתלמיד חכם. משל לענבי הגפן  
בענבי הגפן, דבר נאה ומתקבל. ולא ישא בת עם  
הארץ - משל לענבי הגפן בענבי הסנה, דבר כעורואינו  
מתקבל. תנו רבנן: לעולם ימכור אדם כל מה שיש לו וישא  
בת תלמיד חכם. לא מצא בת תלמיד חכם - ישא בת גדולי הדור.  
לא מצא בת גדולי הדור - ישא בת ראשי כנסיות, לא מצא בת  
ראשי כנסיות - ישא בת גבאי צדקה. לא מצא בת גבאי  
צדקה - ישא בת מלמדי תינוקות ולא ישא בת עמי הארץ,  
מפני שהן שקץ, ונשותיהן שרץ, ועל בנותיהן הוא אומר  
ארור שכב עם כל בהמה.

A man should sell all he possesses, and marry the daughter of a learned man, for if he were to die or be exiled, he is assured that his children will be scholars. But do not let him marry the daughter of an ignoramus for if he dies or goes into exile, his children will be ignoramuses.

Our Rabbis taught: Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar, and marry his daughter to a scholar. This may be compared to [the grafting of] grapes of a vine with grapes of a vine, [which is] a seemly and acceptable thing. But let him not marry the daughter of an ignoramus; this may be compared to [the grafting of] grapes of a vine with berries of a thorn bush, [which is] a repulsive and unacceptable thing.

Our Rabbis taught: Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar. If he does not find the daughter of a scholar, let him marry the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation. If he does not find the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation, let him marry the daughter of the head of synagogues. If he does not find the daughter of the head of synagogues, let him marry the daughter of a charity treasurer. If he does not find the daughter of a charity treasurer, let him marry the daughter of an elementary school-teacher, but

<sup>103</sup> *Bechorot* 45b

let him not marry the daughter of an ignoramus, because they are detestable and their wives are vermin, and of their daughters it is said, 'cursed be he that lie with any manner of beast (Deuteronomy 27.21).'<sup>104</sup>

The rabbis had a vested interest in promoting scholarship for they were learned men who believed all men were responsible for studying. Although we have already seen other *Talmudic* excerpts that prioritize establishing a home and a livelihood, scholarship is a reoccurring and reemphasized priority for married men in relation to their wives.

Paradigmatic couples, such as those seen in Genesis and discussed in chapter two, are few and far between within the volumes of the *Talmud*. Yet, one of the most well known couples, Rabbi Akiva and his wife Rachel, are discussed in relation to study. The *Talmud* tells their story:

ר"ע רעיא דבן כלבא שבוע הוה, חזיתיה ברתיא דהוה צניע ומעלי,  
אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אזלת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין. איקדשא  
ליה בצניעה ושדרתיה. שמע אבוא אפקה מביתיה, אדרה הנאה  
מנכסיה. אזיל ותיב תרי סרי שנין בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה  
תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה להחוא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה  
קא מדברת אלמנות חיים? אמרה ליה: אי לדידי ציית, ותיב תרי סרי  
שני אחריני. אמר: ברשות קא עבדתא, הדר אזיל ותיב תרי סרי שני  
אחריני בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי.  
שמעה דביתיה הוה קא נפקא לאפיה, אמרו לה שיבבתא: שאילי  
מאני לבוש ואיכסאי, אמרה לה: יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו. כי מטיא  
לגביה, נפלה על אפה קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה, הוה קא מדחפי לה  
שמעיה, אמר לה: שבקוה, שלי ושלכם שלה הוה. שמע אבוא דאתא  
גברא רבה למתא, אמר: איזיל לגביה, אפשר דמפר נדראי. אתא לגביה,  
א"ל: אדעתא דגברא רבה מי נדרת? א"ל: אפילו פרק אחד ואפ"ל הלכה  
אחת. אמר ליה: אנא הוה, נפל על אפיה ונשקיה על כרעיה, ויהיב ליה  
פלגא ממוניה. ברתיא דר"ע עבדא ליה לבן עזאי הכי. והיינו דאמרי  
אינשי: רחילא בתר רחילא אזלא, כעובדי אמה כך עובדי ברתא.

Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Sabua. His daughter, seeing how modest and noble [Akiva] was, said to him, 'Were I to be betrothed to you would you go away to [study at] an academy?' 'Yes,' he replied. She was then secretly

<sup>104</sup> *Pesachim* 49a, 49b

betrothed to him and sent him away. When her father heard he sent her from his house and forbid her by a vow to have any benefit from his estate. [Akiva] departed and spent twelve years at the academy.

When he returned home he brought with him twelve thousand disciples. [While in his home town] he heard an old man saying to her [Akiva's wife], 'How long will you lead the life of a living widowhood?' 'If he would listen to me,' she replied, 'he would spend [in study] another twelve years.' Said [Akiva] 'It is with her consent that I am acting' and he departed again and spent another twelve years at the academy.

When he finally returned he brought with him twenty-four thousand disciples. His wife heard [of his arrival] and went out to meet him. When her neighbors said to her, 'Borrow some respectable clothes and put them on,' she replied: 'A righteous man regards the life of his beast [Proverbs 12.10].' On approaching him she fell upon her face and kissed his feet. His attendants were about to thrust her aside, when [Akiva] cried to them, 'Leave her alone, your and my [learning] are hers' [i.e. our learning is thanks to her support.]

Her father, on hearing that a great man had come to the town, said, 'I shall go to him; maybe he will invalidate my vow [to my daughter].' When he came to him [Akiva] asked, 'Would you have made your vow if you had known that he was a great man?' '[Had he known]' the other replied 'Even one chapter or even one single *halacha* [I would not have made the vow.]' He [Akiva] then said to him, 'I am the man.' The other fell upon his face and kissed his feet and also gave him half of his wealth.

The daughter of Rabbi Akiva acted in a similar way [like her mother] towards Ben Azzai. This is indeed an illustration of the proverb: 'Ewe follows ewe; a daughter's acts are like those of her mother.'<sup>105</sup>

This striking story is one of a number of stories in the *Talmud* regarding a wife's support of her husband's study of Torah. Rabbi Akiva was considered one of the greatest scholars of all, and this story establishes one model that supports a man studying Torah over almost everything else, even his family.

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<sup>105</sup> *Kethubot* 62b-63a

This model is counterbalanced by stories such as the one told of Rabbi Rechumi and his wife.

כי הא דרב רחומי הוה שכיח קמיה דרבא במחוזא, הוה רגיל דהוה  
אתי לביתיה כל מעלי יומא דכיפורי. יומא חד משכתיא שמעתא,  
הוה מסכיח דביתיה השתא אתי השתא אתי, לא אתא, חלש דעתה  
אחית דמעתא מעינה, הוה יתיב באיגרא, אפחית איגרא מתותיה ונח נפשיה.

Thus Rabbi Rechumi, who was frequenting [the school] of Raba at Mahuza, used to return home on the evening of every Day of Atonement. On one occasion he was so attracted by his subject [that he forgot to return home.] His wife was expecting [him every moment, saying] 'He is coming soon, he is coming soon.' When he did not arrive she became so depressed that tears began to flow from her eyes. He was [at that moment] sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed under him and he was killed.<sup>106</sup>

The story of Rabbi Rechumi is surrounded by other similar tales in which studying far away from one's family is connected with negative events.

רבי חנניה בן חכנאי הוה קאזיל לבי רב בשילהי הלוליה דר"ש  
בן יוחאי, א"ל: איעכב לי עד דאתי בהדך, לא איעכבא ליה.  
אזל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי רב עד דאתי אישתנו שבילי דמתא  
ולא ידע למיזל לביתיה. אזל יתיב אגודא דנהרא, שמע לההיא  
רביתא דהוו קרו לה: בת חכנאי, בת חכנאי, מלי קולתך ותא  
ניזיל. אמר: ש"מ, האי רביתא דידן, אזל בתרה. הוה יתיבא  
דביתיה קא נהלה קמחא, דל עינה חזיתיה, סוי לבה פרח רוחה.  
אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, ענייה זו זה שכרה? בעא רחמי עלה וחיייה.

Rabbi Hanania ben Hakinai was about to go away to the academy towards the conclusion of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai's wedding. 'Wait for me,' another said to him, 'until I am able to join you.' He [Hakinai,] however, did not wait for him but went away alone and spent twelve years at the academy.

By the time he returned the streets of the town were altered and he was unable to find the way to his home. Going down to the river bank and he sat down and there he heard a girl being addressed: 'Daughter of Hakinai, daughter of Hakinai, fill up your pitcher and let's go!' 'It is obvious,' he thought, 'that the girl is ours,' and he followed her. [When they reached the house] his wife was sitting and sifting flour. She lifted up her eyes and seeing him, was so overcome with joy that her spirit left her. 'Lord of the universe,' [the husband] prayed to Him, 'this

<sup>106</sup> *Kethubot* 62b

poor soul; is this her reward [for my study of Torah away from her?]' And so he prayed for mercy to be granted to her and she recovered.<sup>107</sup>

רבי חמא בר ביסא אויל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי מדרשא. כי אתא,  
אמר: לא איעביד כדעביד בן חכנאי, עייל יתיב במדרשא, שלח  
לביתיה. אתא ר' אושעיא בריה יתיב קמיה, הוה קא משאיל ליה  
שמעתא, חזא דקא מתחדדי שמעתיה, חלש דעתיה, אמר: אי הואי  
חכא הוה לי זרע כי האי. על לביתיה, על בריה, קם קמיה. הוא סבר,  
למשאליה שמעתתא קא בעי, אמרה ליה דביתהו: מי איכא אבא דקאים  
מקמי ברא? קרי עליה רמי בר חמא:

Rabbi Hama ben Bisa went away [from home and] spent twelve years at the house of study. When he returned he said, 'I will not act as did ben Hakinai. He therefore entered the [local] house of study and sent word to his house. Meanwhile his son, Rabbi Oshaia [who his father did not know] entered, sat down before him and asked him a question about [one of the] subjects of study. [Rabbi Hama] seeing how well versed he was in his studies, became very depressed. 'Had I been here [and taken care to teach my children,] he said, 'I also could have had such a child.' [When] he entered his house his son came in, whereupon [the father] rose before him, believing that he wished to ask him some [further] legal questions. 'What father,' his wife laughed, 'stands up before a son!'<sup>108</sup>

Despite the respect for Rabbi Akiva and the overall push for married men to be learned, these tales above describe couples and families adversely affected by a husband's long-term study away from the home. This has led many to believe that the "felicitous relationship between Rabbi Akiva and Rachel, despite such an extended absence, was unique and was not recommended by the Sages for other scholars."<sup>109</sup>

Dr. Michael Chernick teaches that stories such as Rabbi Rechumi and his wife were also meant to reprove men and women that, in *Talmudic* times, desired high social status through their study in far-off academies. Just as in modern times, during the days of the Rabbis high social status was connected with certain activities and professions. There

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

was a reward for being a *talmid chacham* in a respected school of study. In some communities men and their families received or wanted to receive cult-like status due to their association with their study and school. Men, like Rabbi Rechumi in the tale, might return home infrequently, allowing them and their wives to parade around the community demonstrating their prestige. This tale was an attempt to undermine the cult that promoted the status of study over the priority of family.<sup>110</sup> In modern liberal Jewish, and non-Jewish, communities other professions have replaced that of the *talmid chacham*. In situations and communities when these positions take on cult-like status, the lessons of this story are equally applicable.

### Children

The Rabbis strongly believed that children were an important result of a marriage. "The rabbis pointed to the verse (Isaiah 45:18) 'he created it [the world] not a waste, he formed it to be inhabited' as the source for the religious duty not only of marrying but of setting up a family. The *Mishnah* sees procreation as the fulfillment of the command "be fruitful and multiply."<sup>111</sup>

In one section of the *Talmud*, the Rabbis debate the minimum number of children a marriage should produce. *Beit Shammai* says two male children and *Beit Hillel* says one

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<sup>109</sup> Lewittes, *Jewish Marriage*, 40.

<sup>110</sup> In the fall of 2003 I was fortunate to study selected texts from *Ketubot* with Dr. Michael Chemick. His insight into topics such as this subject helped me gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the *Talmud* and its authors.

<sup>111</sup> Scheid, *Marriage*, 2.

female and one male child.<sup>112</sup> In addition the *Talmud* states:

כל מי שאין עוסק בפריה ורביה - כאילו שופך דמים... וממעט הדמות

Anyone who does not engage in propagation of the race is as though he sheds blood and... diminishes the Divine Image<sup>113</sup>

#### Honor and Responsibility Toward One's Wife and Family

ת"ר: האוהב את אשתו כגופו, והמכבדה יותר מגופו, והמדריך  
בניו ובנותיו בדרך ישרה, והמשיאן סמוך לפירקן, עליו  
הכתוב אומר: וידעת כי שלום אהלך.

Our Rabbis taught: [One] who loves his wife as himself, honors her more than himself, leads his sons and daughters in the right path, and arranges for their marriage soon after puberty, to him the text [in the Bible] refers, 'You will know that your tent is in peace (Job 5.24.)'<sup>114</sup>

לעולם יאכל אדם וישתה - פחות ממה שיש לו, וילבש  
ויתכסה - במה שיש לו, ויכבד אשתו ובניו - יותר ממה שיש לו

A person should spend less than his means on food and drink for himself, up to his means on his clothes, and above his means on honoring his wife and children.<sup>115</sup>

איתתך גוצא גחין ותלחוש לה

If your wife is short, bend down and listen to her<sup>116</sup>

אמר ר' חלב: לעולם יהא אדם זהיר בכבוד אשתו, שאין  
ברכה מצויה בתוך ביתו של אדם אלא בשביל אשתו,  
שנאמר ולאברם הטיב בעבורה. והיינו דאמר להו רבא  
לבני מחווא: אוקירו לנשיכו כי היכי דתתעתרו.

<sup>112</sup> *Yevamot* 6b

<sup>113</sup> *Yevamot* 63b

<sup>114</sup> *Yevamot* 2b

<sup>115</sup> *Chullin* 84b

Honor your wife, for by this you enrich yourself. A man should always be careful about the honor due to his wife, because no blessing is experienced in his house except on her account.<sup>117</sup>

In a society where men had tremendous control and power in comparison to women, these significant statements of sensitivity regarding a man's relationship to his wife and children take on even more importance. Radiating from these statements are concepts that many men and women embrace today: prioritizing spouse and family, receptive and active listening of the other, and honoring and respecting one's partner.

### In Summary

As one can see from this selection of texts within the *Talmud*, the Sages had much to say about marriage. Because the *Talmud* was compiled over several centuries, the historical, political, and social variables impacting the Sages' comments varied. In fact, it is not uncommon for a section of the *Talmud* to be in conflict with another section.

Nonetheless, the quotes provide a wide spectrum of the early Rabbis' thoughts on marriage.

In some situations, some of the major contributing societal variables to the Rabbis' comments such as Christianity's growth can be deduced. For the Rabbis though, "marriage is considered a sacred relationship, it is not a sacrament in the Christian sense, its dissolution through divorce is possible, though regrettable. Marriage is effected through a legal contract, it must however, not be devoid of spiritual content, i.e. both

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<sup>116</sup> *Baba Metziah 59a*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*



parties must seek to raise their marriage to the highest level by means of mutual consideration and respect."<sup>118</sup>

The *Talmud's* mix of law and lore regarding marriage provided insight into both its formal institutional aspects as well as its informal relational side. Yes, the *Talmud* is not shy to describe the wife as property, but is also attuned to sharing wisdom on the importance of marriage, appropriate matches, mutual respect, priority of wife and family, and occasionally, romantic love. This unique combination provides its readers with a glimpse of the complexities surrounding marriage during the age of the Rabbis.

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<sup>118</sup> Scheid, *Marriage*, 6.

### Chapter Three - Modern Applications

The marriages of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah, and Rachel, along with the stories and statements of the *Talmud*, provide important insight into Jewish marriage in the twenty-first century. This chapter will specifically investigate what these relationships and *Talmudic* statements teach about communication, resolving conflict, and child rearing in a marriage.

#### Communication Skills and Conflict Resolution

The paradigmatic marriages of Adam and Eve, and the matriarchs and patriarchs, are rich with possibilities for exploring the subject of communication and conflict. The origins of Adam and Eve include God creating Adam and Eve in God's image. God tells them both to, "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."<sup>119</sup> In the second story of Adam and Eve, God explains that Eve was created to be a helpmate to Adam.<sup>120</sup>

Commenting on this encounter, Gunther Plaut writes in his commentary on the Torah "men and women were created equal."<sup>121</sup> If Adam wanted and needed a servant he could have chosen from the many animals, but the creation of Eve provided him what the animals did not, a helpmate and a partner with whom to live.

As noted earlier, Adam and Eve's first activities in their relationship demonstrate positive communication skills. They share with each other, together eat from the Tree of

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<sup>119</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>120</sup> Genesis 2:18

Knowledge of Good and Evil, and even sew clothing together. There is no sign of manipulation or miscommunication. They work well together as the helpmates that God envisioned them to be. In many ways Adam and Eve's behavior mirrors modern-day marriage manuals that describe the ideal couple's communication as being shared and open. Perhaps this high level of partnership is connected to the utopia that the Garden of Eden is symbolic of.

Adam and Eve's story is very similar to situations where modern couples face conflict after a period of early teamwork and positive communication. Adam and Eve worked well together and were enjoying their lives together in the Garden of Eden until the controversy over eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil arose. Adam and Eve demonstrated that this first major conflict is often dealt with ineffectively. Instead of accepting responsibility for their actions individually and as a couple, they blame the other, or another (i.e. the snake.) They do not discuss with each other why they openly went against God's directive to avoid eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They do not even talk with each other at all. We only see them discussing the events with a third party, God.

When it comes to lessons about communication and conflict, Adam and Eve provide the modern reader with a miniature model of a couple's best and worst behaviors. They are the ultimate team in good times, but when conflict occurs, a weakness in their ability to communicate with each other is revealed. Such an experience is not unusual for modern-day couples who often experience a honeymoon period at the start of their relationship in

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<sup>121</sup> Plaut, *The Torah A Modern Commentary*, 28.

which conflict is absent or minimal. Though the couple might fantasize that this "honeymoon period" will last forever, conflict is inevitable, a natural result of two different people coming together. Modern sources on the subject of communication and conflict recommend people do what Adam and Eve cannot, reflect on their entire life in order to obtain a deep self-knowledge of their communication skills.

It is critical for each member of a couple to understand his or her communication patterns and preferences. A couple that knows this information is in a much better position to succeed in a marriage than one that does not. For some individuals and couples this task is easy; for others it is quite challenging. In order to ascertain a broad-based understanding of one's communication style, the following personal assessments can be made:

- 1) Where do I fall on the spectrum of introverted and extraverted?
  - A) With my partner
  - B) With people I know
  - C) With people I don't know
- 2) Am I a skilled, receptive listener or an unreceptive listener?
- 3) What are my non-verbal communication traits when speaking and listening?
- 4) Where do I fall on the spectrum of very comfortable with silence vs. very uncomfortable with silence?
- 5) What do I expect of my partner when she or he is listening to me?
- 6) What is my comfort level in communicating to my partner what I need and want?

It may not be easy to answer these questions about oneself. A partner, close friend, or family member may provide helpful feedback to a person trying to grasp her or his own nature of communication. What would have happened if Eve had asked Adam why he was blaming her without having spoken with her first?

In addition, analyzing one's family and the ways in which the family members communicate can often provide insight into one's communication style. Children initially learn how to communicate from their parents. Though each individual develops a style of communication uniquely his or her own, childhood lessons have important ramifications for adulthood. This family analysis should take care to attend to the distinction between rhetoric and truth, as what family members say about their styles may not match what they actually do. Adam and Eve were in a unique position of not having a childhood and young adulthood to reflect upon. The rest of us must understand the significance of these periods of time.

Communication skills are the bedrock of the ability of a couple to thrive together over time. A guide to pre-marital counseling published by the Union for Reform Judaism recommends, in its chapter on communication, that couples use these principles of communication:

1. Be open to your differences...your background and your life experiences greatly determine what your opinions and strongly held beliefs are.
2. There is no right answer...as adults we have to accept that there are many issues where people hold widely different views, not wrong ones, but differing ones.

3. Be open [to other opinions while also appreciating the fact that] your opinions count

4. Don't develop a laundry list...of grievances that have been stored up.

There are attitudes and behaviors that you may have learned that can prevent effective communication. Beware of the following common communication pitfalls: critical or judgmental behavior; sarcasm; contempt; antagonism; arrogance; defensiveness; game-playing and manipulative behavior; controlling style; placating or self deprecating behavior; and behaving in a superior way. Each of these behaviors used either alone or in conjunction with another can sabotage effective communication... You may not even be aware that you are exhibiting any of these behaviors, but take a minute and reflect on how you may be being perceived. Better yet, ask your partner.<sup>122</sup>

### Communicating Conflict

As if understanding each other's communication styles were not difficult enough, the communication during conflict is often the most problematic communication that spouses face. It is this communication of conflict, or lack of it, that can also be the most helpful or dangerous aspect of a relationship. "Husband and wives must at all times strive to keep their lines of communication open. Nothing is more conducive to contamination in the marital relationship than a person who retreats into sullen silence at the first sign of disagreement. Better by far an explosive moment—if no better choice seems possible—than refusal to communicate at all!"<sup>123</sup>

Two types of couples are described in the book *Close Companions*. According to its authors, the majority of modern couples are in "conflict-avoiding" marriages, while a minority experience "conflict-resolving" marriages. They describe each as follows:

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<sup>122</sup> Lynn Levy, *The Aleph-Bet of Marriage* (New York, URJ Press, 2004) 40.

<sup>123</sup> Roland Bertram Gittelsohn. *The Extra Dimension, A Jewish View of Marriage* (New York, UAHC Press 1983) 78.

*The Conflict-Avoiding Marriage.* This is an apt description of the average couple of today. The culture tells them very plainly that people who really love each other don't get into conflict, which of course is not at all true. When in fact they do develop serious disagreements, they have no appropriate skills to deal with the situation. After a few bitter quarrels, one or both may be so deeply hurt that peace at any price may seem the best deal to make. The only way to do this is to withdraw from each other. Physical withdrawal is of course not usually practicable; but psychological withdrawal is. The usual procedure is to close off areas of the relationship that prove to be explosive and to choke back intense feelings that might start a fight. In this way the couple make their life together tolerable by limiting their areas of interaction to those that can be safely handled. This of course means settling for a superficial relationship and giving up all hope of loving intimacy. People who do this find themselves denied the warm and tender love they hoped to find in marriage. Such people easily become disillusioned and are ready to turn elsewhere for the meaningful relationship they failed to find. Among these are the unhappy, frustrated husbands and wives who are divorcing in a large scale today.

*The Conflict-Resolving Marriage.* This is simply another way of describing the enriched marriage. As I have already said, conflict is not something tragic in a human relationship. It is not to be feared and run away from. It is a normal and integral part of any close relationship. It is in fact raw material to be worked on and transmuted into an opportunity to grow. A conflict may even be welcomed, because it pinpoints an area where an adjustment has to be made—very much as an unusual noise in an automobile engine locates a fault, which, when corrected, makes the machine run more smoothly. Couples who learn the necessary skills to work on their conflicts therefore have the assurance that they are continually improving their relationships. Each conflict resolved marks another milestone in their progress toward relationship-in-depth.<sup>124</sup>

Conflict-resolving marriages embrace conflict and its resolution. They “never waste a good conflict.”<sup>125</sup> Even if couples readily accept that they need to be able to resolve conflict, achieving this objective is often difficult. Couples who are not comfortable or currently successful in resolving conflict will need to practice techniques that help them to communicate about their issues. An agreed-upon commitment to practice conflict-

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<sup>124</sup> David R. Mace, *Close Companions*, (New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982) 86.

<sup>125</sup> David Mace and Vera Mace, *How to Have a Happy Marriage* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1977) 99.

resolution over time greatly assists in developing a relationship that can weather almost any conflict, large or small.

The following suggestions for resolving conflicts are taken from the *Prepare and Enrich Workshop* for couples. It is one of the many programs that focus on conflict resolution as a core marriage skill.

Every couple has differences and disagreements. But healthy couples find ways to resolve marital disputes without turning them into marital wars. Couples who accept and appreciate the fact that their partner has independent opinions tend to reach successful and satisfying resolutions.

When you have issues that are ongoing, use this ten-step approach to deal with them. The exercise may boost your success in ending issues that resist solution.

As simple as the ten-step exercise looks, remember it is not a game. Take time to work on all of the steps. Focus on one issue at a time and you will discover new solutions to old problems.

1. Set a time and place for discussion.
2. Define the problem or issue of disagreement.
3. How do you each contribute to the problem?
4. List past attempts to resolve the issue that were not successful.
5. Brainstorm. List all possible solutions.
6. Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions.
7. Agree on one solution to try.
8. Agree on how each individual will work toward this solution.
9. Set up another meeting. Discuss your progress.
10. Reward each other as you each contribute toward the solution.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> David Olson, Ph.D., *Building a Strong Marriage Workbook*, (Life Innovations, Inc., Minneapolis, 1992) 12.



As described, a conflict-resolving couple understands that conflict is another way to understand each other and build connections with each other. The texts that describe Adam and Eve never demonstrate that they understood how to address conflict.

The texts describing the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs contain multiple examples of how they communicate. As with Adam and Eve, some of their interactions model behavior to be emulated and others, behavior to avoid. Couples like Abraham and Sarah model mostly positive communication skills in situations of stress and conflict; others, such as Jacob, Leah, and Rachel do not.

The first detailed exchange between Abraham and Sarah provides a praiseworthy model for communication. In a situation of danger, as they were approaching Egypt and Pharaoh's guards, Abraham communicates his fears to Sarah and asks her to participate in a scheme that would save his life. Sarah listens to his assessment of the situation and agrees to pose as his sister when entering Egypt. Abraham doesn't force her to do this, or tell her to do this, he asks her. Her response is not included in the text, but he does not tell her to do anything, instead he asks her to please accept his request. If their relationship was one where the husband dominated the woman, he could have commanded her to do what he wanted, but that does not happen here.

The Rabbis and modern commentators criticize Abraham for asking Sarah to put herself in a dangerous situation. Perhaps this indicates that there may have been some selfishness, immaturity, or even manipulation of Sarah that the text does not describe.

Reviewing the *pshat* of the text, Abraham's dialogue is sincere and communicative.

Sarah and Abraham enter Egypt to avoid a famine and exit with food and riches. Their gamble as a couple results in significant reward.

There is major critique of Abraham's behavior in this situation. Yet, this first example of how Abraham speaks to Sarah in a time of crisis can also be seen as exemplary. Do they always speak to each other with such depth of expression? Does Abraham use the word "please" when speaking with his wife in crisis and non-crisis situations? If so, such language indicates that he did not expect to always get what he wanted.

Later on in Genesis, the text describes a conflict-filled situation for Abraham and Sarah after Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. Once again Sarah and Abraham model good communication skills. Sarah does not hold back from communicating her distress and anger. Abraham, although invested in Hagar, seems to listen to Sarah's words because he tells her to deal with Hagar as she sees fit. Modern protocol for conflict resolution would most definitely recommend that Abraham and Sarah more thoroughly explore the nature of their conflict, and communicate their feelings and motives in the process. Still, the first Jewish couple does show that they have some skill in communicating with each other. Later on in Genesis God tells Abraham to actively listen and be receptive to Sarah.<sup>127</sup> Here the Torah's words clearly advise Abraham to do something that every good marital partner must do. God did not list the ten steps of Jewish conflict resolution to Abraham, but does tell him to listen, perhaps the most important aspect of any communication between two people.

The *midrash* associated with this text explains that Sarah was upset. In the *midrash*, Abraham did not represent both of them when speaking to God, and did not stand up for Sarah when Hagar spoke badly of her. As with the *midrash* about Abraham's request to have her act as his sister, the Rabbis describe their relationship as imperfect. Abraham should have lamented to God about being childless on behalf of both of them and defended Sarah when hearing Hagar's harsh words against her. This *midrash* shows Abraham and Sarah as real people who make real mistakes. Through their criticism, the Sages explain what Abraham should have done to properly meet the needs of his partner. Abraham and Sarah were in no way perfect all of the time, but when Sarah confronted Abraham he listened and supported her – a model response for all spouses to follow.

Unlike Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah's early encounters demonstrate some behavior in conflict-filled moments that modern couples can themselves imitate. In other situations, such as when three unexpected visitors arrive, they work as a team. Although the earlier mentioned *midrash* describes a situation where Abraham seemed to be selfish about the pain of being childless, the Torah does show Abraham as being comfortable with Sarah receiving a blessing that God had previously reserved for him. Regularly, he acts as Sarah's partner and not her superior.

The *midrash* where God protects Abraham from learning that Sarah laughs at the concept of receiving sexual pleasure from Abraham also teaches an important lesson for couples. Words matter in Judaism. They can heal and they can hurt, especially when spoken by

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<sup>127</sup> Genesis 21:12

one loved one to another. This *midrash* explains an event in the Torah, while also teaching an important communication lesson.

The texts cited previously shed light onto select times of the lives of Abraham and Sarah. Although, their relationship was not ideal, there is enough detail to know that Abraham and Sarah were capable of communicating effectively, and even sometimes exceptionally, with each other.

The remaining matriarchs and patriarchs demonstrate a lesser ability to communicate well, especially under the stress of conflict. Isaac and Rebekah, for example, each favor different children and Rebekah purposely deceives Isaac. Isaac and Rebekah's inability to create a shared vision for how they wanted to parent led to dire consequences. When faced with conflict over their children, their marriage, which began with love, is reduced to a relationship of deception and power plays. Positive communication traits, especially in the face of conflict, are difficult to find within their relationship. From a modern perspective, they model multiple behaviors to avoid, and serve as a case study for what can go wrong if couples do not communicate well.

Jacob, Leah, and Rachel's marriage relationships begin under duress, and they never find a way to communicate effectively and positively with each other. The text includes stories of how Leah and Rachel express the pain they have due to their poor relationships with each other and Jacob. Sadly, at least from a modern perspective, the text does not demonstrate how, or if, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel resolved their conflicts.

Naming children with meanings such as, "this time my husband will become attached to me, for I have born him three sons,"<sup>128</sup> indicates that the situation between Leah and Jacob, for example, was desperate. This lack of communication and inability to address other conflicts productively further damaged their strained relationship.

The range of communication skills seen in Adam and Eve, and the matriarchs and patriarchs, provides a modern reader with examples of how important communication is within a relationship. These marriage models of Genesis give couples ideas to consider about their own communication abilities and the impact they could have upon their marriage.

Although the *Talmud* was not designed to be a guide to marital success, its proverbial statements and *aggadot* shed much insight into how the Rabbis viewed marriage. The *Talmud's* legal code often describes a woman in the same category as property of a man. Such a concept is foreign to the modern understanding of partnership and marriage. Still, as described in the chapter on the *Talmud*, the *Talmud* contains many stories and statements that reflect a modern view of marriage relationships.

For example, the *Talmudic* statement, "If your wife is short, bend down and listen to her"<sup>129</sup> is a proverb about communicating effectively. It is a metaphor for all types of communication issues. In addition it demonstrates that each partner has to be open to adjusting his or her positions to that of the other.

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<sup>128</sup> Genesis 29:34

<sup>129</sup> *Baba Metziah* 59a

The Rabbis of the *Talmud* also speak of the importance of honoring one's wife. They state "honor your wife, for by this you enrich yourself. A man should be ever careful about the honor due to his wife, because no blessing is experienced in his house except on her account."<sup>130</sup> "[One] who loves his wife as himself, honors her more than himself."<sup>131</sup>

What does it mean to honor one's wife? The *Talmud* provides one answer: "A man should spend less than his means on food, and drink for himself, up to his means on his clothes, and above his means on honoring his wife and children."<sup>132</sup> Financial support was not the only way to honor a wife, but a demonstration of a husband's priorities. The same is true today. A couple's finances shed light onto what and how they prioritize. The same is true for how couples spend their time. A modern couple that prioritizes time for each other and their family honors each other and facilitates opportunities for the family members to grow and develop in many important ways.

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<sup>130</sup> *Baba Metziah* 59a

<sup>131</sup> *Yevamot* 2b

<sup>132</sup> *Chullin* 84b

### The Impact of Children on a Relationship

Adam and Eve are told directly by God to have children. The *Talmud* interprets the statement to "be fruitful and multiply" as the Torah's first commandment.<sup>133</sup> The imperative to have children remains significant today, and many contemporary couples see children as one of the most important aspects of marriage.

Despite Adam and Eve's inability to work together in the face of conflict, they do fulfill the commandment to have children. The Torah does not share any words about how children impact Adam and Eve and their relationship.

"Married people need each other, and they want and need contented children. Balancing the two needs is one of the most important and difficult tasks of marriage."<sup>134</sup> The relationships of all the matriarchs and patriarchs were significantly affected by their children. Abraham and Sarah's marriage suffers greatly from the strain of not being able to have children at all, an issue all too familiar to many modern couples. Sarah's recommendation to have Abraham father a child with Hagar results in tremendous stress between Abraham and Sarah, both before and after Isaac's birth.

Isaac and Rebekah also experience stress from the inability to conceive, but it is their inability to create a shared parenting standard for their children that seems to most negatively impact their marriage. The initial love described between Isaac and Rebekah

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<sup>133</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>134</sup> Wallerstein and Blakeslee, *The Good Marriage*, 82.

is only mentioned once, and based upon the text, one can infer that the love felt upon their meeting is not fully nurtured, especially after the birth of their twins.

Sadly, the relationships between Jacob, Leah, and Rachel are even worse than Isaac and Rebekah's relationship. Children are used partially by Leah and Rachel to assess their connections with Jacob, with the names of the children serving as the verbalization of their marital pain and suffering.

Despite the challenges associated with raising children seen in the book of Genesis, Jewish tradition considers procreation and child rearing essential. The *Talmud* specifically focuses on the importance of a couple's ability to procreate. "He who does not engage in propagation of the race is as though...he sheds blood and diminishes the Divine image."<sup>135</sup> As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the *Talmud* also includes debates over the minimum amount of children a couple should have and if the obligation to have children falls upon both men and women. The inability of a couple to conceive children after ten years is also discussed in the *Talmud* as one of the grounds for a man to divorce a woman. Although the *Talmud* gives some attention to stories about parenting, the *Talmud's* primary discussion revolves around a couple's responsibility to have children. According to the Rabbis, "there was never any doubt, that every married couple would, in the normal course of events, want and have children."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Yevamot* 63b

<sup>136</sup> Gittelson, *The Extra Dimension*, 117.



Jewish tradition calls upon modern Jewish couples to consider the subject of children seriously. Modern sources echo this sentiment. The authors of *A Guide to Successful Marriage* write: "The only time when reproduction is truly desirable for the children, for the married couple, and for society as a whole is when...both mates not only want to have children in a sentimental sense, but are eager to make parenthood a major enterprise for the next quarter of a century and realize that this means considerable hard study and hard work and sacrifice of many other satisfactions."<sup>137</sup>

The texts within the book of Genesis make it clear that even though having children is a *mitzvah*, children greatly impact a marriage relationship. No one can accuse the Torah's first book of creating the illusion that marriage with children is an easy enterprise.

Anyone familiar with the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs know that children, and the attempt to conceive them, can alter the nature of a relationship. This wisdom is all too necessary for married couples in modern times. A couple that discusses the subject of children realistically, early, and often, enhances their relationship.

As was the case for Abraham and Sarah, the arrival of children can change a marital relationship immediately. The man and a woman in a good marriage:

share new feelings of tenderness and pride and willingly make sacrifices for their children. They also share their resentment and fatigue. Most parents most of the time accept the sacrifices as necessary, fervently hoping that it will be worthwhile in the long run. The adults' partnership is reinforced by the funny, poignant antics of the children and by their shared concern. The memories of these years will sustain the couple when the children have grown and left home.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Albert Ellis, Ph. D. and Robert A. Harper, Ph. D., *A Guide to Successful Marriage* (N. Hollywood: Wishshire Book Company, 1972) 210.

<sup>138</sup> Wallerstein and Blakeslee, *The Good Marriage* 72.

In a successful marriage, both husband and wife are able to face their internal conflicts and make room for the child. But at the same time they do not allow the child to take over the marriage. It helps greatly to know ahead of time that the post-birth period is stressful. The woman needs to apportion her attention between husband and child, recognizing the importance of her role as wife and sexual partner. She needs to be aware that her sexual interest may diminish, especially if she is breastfeeding...but she should not ignore her husband's aroused sexual needs and treat them as one more demand on her fatigued condition."<sup>139</sup>

The texts of the Torah and *Talmud* do not verbalize these words taken from *The Good Marriage* directly. Still, one can see that the relationships of the patriarchs and matriarchs suffered because they were not prepared for how their relationships would change once children arrived. The story of Isaac, Rebekah, and their children is a dramatic example of what can go wrong when a couple is not united in child rearing.

Jacob, Leah, and Rachel's child rearing experience teaches different lessons. Sadly, the names given to their children demonstrate that, at least in part, the children were seen by their mothers as an attempt to mend a broken relationship. The text provides no sign that the children achieved the goals attached to their names. So it is with modern-day relationships. Sometimes couples hope that children will serve as a panacea for all that is wrong in a relationship. These couples should be warned "unhappy marriages are most rarely rendered happy by producing offspring."<sup>140</sup> The Torah's words also demonstrate that children do not automatically bring couples together. The Torah seems to repeat this lesson time and again. No less than eleven of Jacob's sons are given names describing

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>140</sup> Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper, *A Guide to Successful Marriage* (North Hollywood, CA., Wilshire Book Company, 1961) 210.

their mother's difficulty regarding her relationship with Jacob and yet no change occurs. If anything, the cycle just perpetuates itself.

With regard to children, the texts of Isaac and Rebekah remind us that even though most children bring couples joy, children may also be a source of conflict. The relationships of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel teach us another lesson, that children do not serve as the solution to a marriage's problems.

### In Summary

There is ample expression throughout the Talmud about the importance of marriage and children. A close inspection of these texts reveals the difficulties inherent in managing each successfully to maintain a healthy and vibrant partnership. While there is no guaranteed recipe for marital success, it is clear that an understanding of communication styles and preferences, a commitment to approaching conflict constructively, and an active engagement with each other with regard to parenting styles and child rearing can go a long way towards facilitating a healthy marriage and family.

## Chapter Four – A Mini-Course For Teenagers

### A Story: "Love Is Not Enough"

Rabbi Arnold S. Gluck and I stood before our thirty-three-member confirmation class in the Winter of 2004 and began discussing the subject of Jewish identity and dating. In the middle of our ninety-minute lesson plan, fifteen-year-old David politely raised his hand. "Rabbi," David said, "I am not going to have to worry about the conflict you are discussing because when I fall in love, our love will conquer all of our problems." I scanned the room and found a number of other students nodding in agreement. We quickly held a class vote on the following question: Do you think that once you find the love of your life that your love will allow you to conquer all the challenges that you will face in life – yes or no? The class voted. It was unanimous. Thirty-three students voted yes.

Rabbi Gluck in the kindest of tones responded to the class' vote with these words: "love is not enough." Rabbi Gluck went on to explain that the students were likely basing their vote on the power of romantic love. "Though love is significant to a couple's ability to thrive, couples must realize that as they consider marriage there are topics that they will have to address that romantic love will not resolve automatically."

Where did our class of bright, knowledgeable confirmation students get the idea that love will conquer all? Was it from their parents and other members of their family? Was it from feelings they themselves have felt? Was it from the music they listen to, the books they read, and the movies they watch? Scholars of cognitive development have found that adolescents are often "idealistic about social, political, religious, and ethical issues...It is only through experience that adolescents eventually begin to temper their optimism with some realism about what is possible in a given time frame and with limited resources."<sup>141</sup> Surely adolescent idealism was connected to the students' response that winter day.

If the students were familiar with the marriage relationships within Genesis, and the stories and proverbs in the *Talmud* on marriage, I would like to think that the vote might also have been unanimous - with thirty-three students voting no.

### Core Concept

This mini-course is designed to teach the following core concepts:

- 1) The ability to resolve conflict effectively is an essential dynamic in a successful marriage and any other significant relationship.
- 2) Jewish texts demonstrate how important conflict resolution is for people in a marriage relationship.

The mini-course will primarily use the relationships of Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob and Rachel as discussed in the book of Genesis, commentaries on their relationship, and insight from the *Talmud* to teach students these core concepts. Links will be made between these ancient Jewish texts and modern-day premarital and marital relationships.

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<sup>141</sup> Teresa M. McDevitt and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Child Development* (Columbus, Ohio, Pearson Education Inc., 2002) 153.

## Overview of the Mini-Course

### **Lesson One:** Marriage and Romantic Love and Conflict Management Skills

Sources: Text from Genesis 12, 15, and 16 on Abraham and Sarah.

*Midrash from Midrash Rabbah* Genesis 45 and 46 and Norman Cohen's *Voices from Genesis*.

### **Lesson Two:** Additional Marriage Models in the book of Genesis and The Need to Resolve Conflict

Sources: Text from Genesis 29 and 30 on Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

Modern conflict-resolution quotes from David Mace's *Close Companions*.

### **Lesson Three:** One Conflict Resolution Model: Practice and Application

Sources: Text from Genesis 12, 15, 16, 29 and 30 as well as *Talmud* excerpts. Modern conflict-resolution lessons from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.

## A Note About Pedagogy and Translations

This mini-course is designed to be interactive and engaging in order to meet the multiple learning styles of our students. Many confirmation classes are held during weekday evenings. These lesson plans have been created to be dynamic with the hope that they will facilitate more student involvement at time when they might be tired or their attention spans may be fading. The lessons are intended to be flexible enough for individual teachers to adapt them to the learning styles and needs of their specific classes.

The ancient texts describe relationships strictly between men and women, and their translations reflect this. Yet, the lessons taken from these texts, as well as from modern sources, are applicable to both same and mixed-gender couples. Therefore, in this document the terms "couple," "partner," and "relationship" are used instead of terms such as husband and wife. Facilitators of this lesson are encouraged to communicate these lessons as meant for all types of couples.

In addition, facilitators may find that some students will be insulted by what they may consider sexism and objectification of women in the texts. Facilitators should be

prepared to discuss these subjects with students. Ideally students' concerns should be validated without going off track from the core concept of the mini-course. Students may feel better when they understand that the texts being studied are from an ancient times when roles for men and women were different than today. This often being true, the study of the relationship dynamics between the people in the texts is still worthy.

Lastly, the lesson is written to assist the facilitator throughout the lesson. When the term [Facilitator's Guide] is found, the lesson plan will suggest specific roles for you or optional answers for you to provide to the class. At other times, the lesson plans are written as if you are addressing the class. Feel free to adjust the language as necessary to customize the lessons to your class.

## **Lesson One: Marriage and Romantic Love and Communication Skills**

### **Core Concept:**

Conflict management and resolution skills are critical for a successful marriage.

### **Lesson Overview:**

Using modern sources and Jewish texts, this class will help students begin to explore their understanding of romantic love and its relation to marriage. This lesson, using texts about Abraham and Sarah, will also help students understand that communication and conflict-management skill are critical for a successful marriage.

### **Timeline :**

- A. Video Clip and Discussion (30 minutes)
- B. Text Study and Discussion
  - B1. Small Group (25 minutes)
  - B2. Large Group (20 minutes)
- C. Wrap Up (15 minutes)

#### **A. VIDEO CLIPS: 30 MINUTES**

Open with clips from the movie *Serendipity* (opening scene) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (lead in and song: *Do You Love Me?*)

#### **Post-film discussion:**

The objective of the conversation is to identify:

- the differences between the two clips
- society's broad view on romantic love
- society's view of other dynamics impacting marriage
- students' opinions on romantic love's role in a marriage relationship.



Questions:

1. What are the messages communicated in the *Serendipity* clip?

[Facilitator's Guide - Note: Throughout the document some appropriate answers are provided to assist the facilitator in linking these questions to the core concept of these lessons. Ideally students will provide these answers without your help.

Answer: the power and magic of romantic love, especially romantic love that occurs by chance.]

2. What are the messages communicated in the *Fiddler on the Roof* clip?

[Facilitator's Guide - Answer: long term commitment to each other, through good and bad, year after year, can also be considered love. This love is related but different to the romantic love discussed in the first film. Follow-up question: do the students consider the love in *Fiddler* love or something else?]

3. Based upon these clips and your understanding of the subject of marriage, what are the important skills and dynamics necessary for a successful marriage?

[Facilitator's Guide- Write responses for the class on a whiteboard noting if students relate their answers to the clips from *Serendipity* and *Fiddler*. As appropriate ask students to explain their reasoning and/or comment on student additions.

Do the items that we have recorded compliment or contrast each other?]

4. Can anyone suggest Jewish principles or texts that support or argue against the items on this list?

[Facilitator's Guide - After they answer, share with them that we are about to review some texts that will further inform them on Jewish perspectives on successful marriage relationships.]

B. JEWISH TEXT STUDY AND DISCUSSION (45 MINUTES TOTAL)

Facilitator explains: You may not have been able to answer the last question with ease. Still, you should know that Jews have over three thousand years of experience in one of society's greatest institutions: marriage. Our most revered texts—the Bible and *Talmud*— have many models, stories, and discussions on the subject of marriage.

This mini-course will focus on the Jewish perspectives on marriage relationships.

You should complete this mini-course with a greater understanding of how specific Jewish texts can inform modern couples on the skills and efforts necessary for a successful marriage. Note that this course will focus on successful marriage relationships; it will not address symbolic marriage objects such as a *chupah* or the marriage ceremony itself.

#### B1. TEXT STUDY – SMALL GROUP (25 MINUTES)

In dyads or triads students will read and analyze two stories about Abraham and Sarah with commentary.

[Facilitator's Guide –

Let's examine these stories to understand the relationship between Sarah and Abraham. Abraham and Sarah had been married many years by the time we read of their experiences in this text.

The details of what we are reading will be ancient, but the relationship issues are current. The facilitator should be present to answer questions about these texts.

Both texts describe Abraham and Sarah in conflict or in stressful situations. The facilitator should, group by group, determine if students are critically identifying that these Abraham and Sarah stories describe the couple under stress and conflict. If not, facilitator should lead the students to this conclusion by pointing out relevant parts of the text.]

#### B2. TEXT STUDY – LARGE GROUP (20 MINUTES)

After texts are read and discussed in small groups, gather together to discuss the following questions:

1. Can you identify the key areas of stress in Abraham and Sarah's relationship?
2. What is going on in the relationship between Abraham and Sarah in this story?
3. What was Abraham's motivation to ask Sarah to be his sister?
4. What do you imagine Sarah's reaction was to his request?

[Facilitator's Guide – Possible Answers: Abraham was worried about his life. Sarah's reaction could have ranged quite a bit

depending upon whether or not she knew the potential danger in which she would be put.]

5. What positive or negative behaviors do Abraham and Sarah demonstrate under stress and in conflict?

[Facilitator's Guide – Answer:

They communicate well under pressure/when stressed – they speak to each other, listen to each other;

They also communicate poorly under pressure/when stress;

The *midrash* on Gen. 12 says Abraham was selfish and put Sarah in danger.]

Jewish tradition considers Abraham and Sarah a married couple. Do you consider them a good role model for modern couples? Why or why not?

[Facilitator's Guide – Answers: They provide some good role modeling for communicating when in conflict and stress – in Genesis 12 Abraham says "please," Sarah listens.

In Genesis 16 Sarah initially makes a request of Abraham which he listens to. Later she is not afraid to confront Abraham, Abraham listens and addresses the event instead of attacking Sarah.

They also demonstrate that people can sometimes be dangerously selfish especially when under stress – in Genesis 12 the *midrash* says Abraham was selfish and suggests that he should have never asked Sarah to enter into such a risky situation.

In Genesis 16 – Sarah seems to change her mind about Hagar having Abraham's child. Abraham doesn't remind her that this was her first idea, instead he focuses on the specifics of her concerns.]

How, if at all does love, play a role in these stories?

[Facilitator's Guide – Answers: love, romantic or other wise, is not mentioned in either the text or the *midrash*. Potential follow-up questions:

1. How would you describe Abraham and Sarah's relationship?

2. Do Abraham and Sarah love each other?

3. If we assume they do, how does their love impact the situation? Perhaps it motivated them toward some of their positive behavior.

If we assume they do not love each other can we postulate that the

lack of love influenced some of their negative behavior?

Another option – they like Tevya and his wife were in a long-term committed relationship, and they were committed to meeting the needs of their spouse. It was in this way that they loved each other.]

The two pieces of texts that we studied are the first two major interactions between Abraham and Sarah in the Torah.

1. Why do you think these stories are the first interactions mentioned in the Torah for Abraham and Sarah?
2. Is this significant? Why or why not?

[Facilitator's Guide – Jewish commentators traditionally consider all aspects of the Torah to communicate important ideas. The fact that these two incidents are the first interactions between Abraham and Sarah could suggest that Jewish couples need to be realistic that they will have to, like Abraham and Sarah, be prepared to face conflict with each other.]

#### C. WRAP UP (15 MINUTES)

[Facilitator's Guide -

The wrap up is to be used to reinforce the core concept of this lesson - conflict management and resolution skills are critical for a successful marriage.

Romantic love complements and may motivate these communication skills and behaviors but cannot replace them.

Are conflict management and resolution skills important to other relationships? Answer: Yes. Just like romantic love may be a key dynamic with a partner, friends need to be able to manage and resolve conflict too. You also need to be able to resolve conflict effectively with your parents, siblings, and family.

1. Has anyone ever had a difficult conflict with a family member or friend?
2. Were you able to resolve it?
3. How did your ability to resolve it impact your relationship?

The best of friendships are able to translate conflict into a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other. Friends that are unable to resolve conflict effectively may find their friendship at risk.

The facilitator can utilize the students' knowledge of the importance of conflict resolution between friends to help them understand the similar significance for a marriage relationship.

Before students depart for home, hand out and the one page "Communication Style Question Sheet" on their communication styles for them to complete before the next class.]

## Communication Style Question Sheet

Informally assess your communication style and that of your family in preparation for next week's class. Answer the following questions or write two to three paragraphs about this subject and be prepared to discuss this subject in class. *Todah Rabah.*

- 1) How would you describe your communication style (introverted, extraverted, shy, outgoing, clear, direct, indirect, etc.?) Has your style changed over time? Explain. Does your style change depending on who you are with? Explain.
  
- 2) How would you broadly describe your family's communication styles? Is there an overall family style? How do the individual members of the family contribute this style?
  
- 3) Describe your ability to communicate feedback that is critical or related to a conflict or a stressful situation? Does this ability vary depending on who you are communicating to (i.e. friend, family, teacher, boy/girlfriend etc.?) Share an example or two.

## **Texts and Commentary for Review in Small Groups** [Section B1 of the Lesson Plan]

*Note: In these texts Abraham and Sarah had yet to change their names from Abram and Sarai.*

### **Genesis 12**

10. And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was severe in the land.

11. And it came to pass, when he came near to enter to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "Behold now, I know that you are a pretty woman to look upon;

12. Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see you, that they shall say, This is his wife; and they will kill me, but you they will keep alive.

13. Please say that you are my sister; that it may be well with me for your sake; and my soul shall live because of you."

14. And it came to pass, that, when Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw the woman that she was very pretty.

15. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken to Pharaoh's palace.

16. And he treated Abram well for her sake; and he had sheep, and oxen, and male asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and female asses, and camels.

17. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife.

18. And Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?

19. Why did you say, 'She is my sister?' So I might have taken her for my wife; now therefore behold your wife, take her, and go your way."

20. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.

Some criticize Abram for forcing Sarai to become a part of Pharaoh's palace (i.e. his harem). In fact, there a number of ancient commentators that describe the harrowing situation that Sarah experienced in Pharaoh's home. *Midrash Rabbah* describes Sarah being sexually harassed:

Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Your assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is outside this prison while I am within!' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: 'Whatever I do, I do for your sake, and all will say, 'It is because of Sarai Abram's wife.' Rabbi Levi said: 'The whole of that night an angel stood [by Sarai protecting her] with a whip in his hand; when [Pharaoh made advances] she ordered, 'Strike,' he struck, and when she ordered, 'Desist,' he desisted. And why [was Pharaoh punished with] such severity? Because she told him [Pharaoh], 'I am a married woman,' yet he would not leave her.'<sup>142</sup>

Modern commentator Norman Cohen explains Abram's inappropriate behavior thus:

About to confront potential adversaries, Abraham was more concerned about his safety than about Sarah and her feelings. He seemed willing to sacrifice his relationship with her to ensure his survival. For the moment, Sarah was unimportant: a non-entity, an unnamed object who could be taken into the Pharaoh's harem and sacrificed for Abraham's sake. His willingness to sacrifice Sarah demonstrated his lack of maturity.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 41:2

<sup>143</sup> Norman Cohen, *Voices from Genesis* (Woodstock, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998) 76.



## Genesis 16

1. Now Sarai Abram's wife bore him no children; and she had a maidservant, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.
2. And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the Lord has prevented me from bearing; Please go in to my maid; perhaps I may have a son through her." And Abram heeded Sarai's request.
3. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram as a concubine.
4. He cohabited with Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress [Sarai] was despised in her eyes.
5. And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; and now that she sees that she is pregnant, I was despised in her eyes; the Lord decide between you and me."
6. But Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

When Hagar conceives immediately, Sarai and Abram's relationship is strained. The *midrash* explains why. Based on the Torah's text that states Sarai was despised in Hagar's eyes, the *midrash* explains that Hagar slandered Sarah. Hagar said:

My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 45:4

Hagar's pregnancy and tale bearing only aggravated Sarai's pain. In the Torah Sarai blames Abram saying "the wrong done me is your fault."<sup>145</sup> The *midrash* explains her accusation. According to it Sarai complains that Abram did not support her when Hagar insulted her. Furthermore she criticizes Abram for saying to God "I will die childless."<sup>146</sup> This incident occurred earlier in the Torah when Abraham shared his distress of not having a child with God. Abram said "I will die childless" not "we." The Rabbis of the *Talmud* explain this further:

Rabbi Berekiah explained it in Rabbi Abba's name: I have a grievance against you. 'Imagine two men incarcerated in prison, and as the king passes one of them cries out, 'Execute justice for me!' The king orders him to be released, upon which his fellow-prisoner says to him, 'I have a grievance against you, for had you said, 'Execute justice for us,' the king would have released me just as he has released you; but now that you said, 'Execute justice for me,' he released you but not me. Similarly [Sarah said], 'had [you] said, 'We go childless,' then as God gave you a child so would God have given me; since, however, you said 'I will die childless,' and God gave you a child but not me.'<sup>147</sup>

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) How would you describe Abraham and Sarah's relationship?
- 2) How would you assess their ability to communicate with each other? How would you rate their ability to operate under stress? Explain.

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<sup>145</sup> Genesis 16:5

<sup>146</sup> Genesis 15:2

<sup>147</sup> *Midrash Rabbah* - Genesis 45:5

## **Lesson Two: Additional Marriage Models in the Book of Genesis and the Need to Resolve Conflict**

### **Core Concept**

Core Concept: Romantic love is unable to conquer all challenges for a couple in a relationship. A couple must be committed and skilled in resolving conflict effectively.

### **Lesson Overview**

Using modern sources and Jewish texts, this class will continue to explore the student's understanding of romantic love and its relation to marriage. This lesson will include analysis of the texts describing the relationship of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. Students will also review their personal approaches to conflict and study some modern quotes on marriage and conflict resolution.

### **Timeline**

#### **A. Opening**

A1. Text Study and Movie and Music Clip (20 minutes)

A2. Review of their Questionnaires (15 minutes)

#### **B. Role of Conflict in Relationships**

B1. Introduction (10 minutes)

B2. Text Study - Jacob and Rachel Part Two (15 minutes)

B3. Their Personal Approach to Conflict (15 minutes)

B4. Modern Quotes on Marriage and Conflict Resolution (10 minutes)

#### **C. Wrap Up (5 minutes)**

### **A. OPENING (35 MINUTES TOTAL) – TEXT, MOVIE AND MUSIC CLIPS AND THEIR QUESTIONNAIRES**

A1. Text study and Movie and Music Clip (20 minutes)

Hand out and read story of Jacob meeting Rachel at the well.

[Facilitator's Guide -

Quickly choose a student to read each of these parts: narrator, Jacob, shepherd, and Laban. Before reading, provide them with a bit of context regarding the story they are about to read.

For example: This story takes place right after Jacob escapes from his home and his brother Esau who wanted to kill him for taking Esau's birthright.]

After reading text about Jacob, watch clip from *Back to the Future* where the song *The Power of Love* by Huey Lewis is played. Hand out and read lyrics and play song in full.

After the text is read, the movie clip seen, and the song listened to, begin a discussion first asking students to describe the messages being communicated in the text from Genesis.

[Facilitator's Guide - This text describes how Jacob falls in love with Rachel at first sight. The text describes how love made seven years of work feel like days. During these seven years it is unclear exactly how Rachel and Jacob interacted, but based on a biblical understanding of relationships they were unable to have any significant physical contact during these years. Optional questions for the class to facilitate conversation include:

- 1) What happens when Jacob sees Rachel?
- 2) Why does he kiss her? If students don't say ask: was it love at first sight?
- 3) Did Jacob and Rachel have a relationship during the seven years? (Answer: Yes, but it is likely that it stayed in a more distant romantic status for men and women were not allowed to have any major physical interactions before they were married and it is unclear how much time Jacob spent with Rachel.)
- 4) Does anybody remember what happens after these seven years are completed? (Answer: Laban tricks Jacob and marries Leah to him instead of Rachel. Jacob then marries Rachel seven days after he marries Leah and in exchange for Rachel he has to work for seven more years.)]

Ask students to describe the messages being communicated from the movie clip.

[Facilitators Guide - the movie clip is a light piece that depicts the romantic side of love. Although there are conflicts surrounding the clip's characters, the conflict does not exist between them. Jennifer's note to Marty saying "I love you" along with the song *The Power of Love* falls mostly in line with the notion that love will conquer all. Ideally the students will bring up these themes. If not you may want to ask these more directed questions:

- 1) Describe Jennifer and Marty's relationship and dynamics within their relationship?
- 2) How does Marty feel when he receives her note?
- 3) Does the clip show or hint at any conflict between the two?]

Afterwards, ask them to share their understanding of the messages from the song.

[Facilitators Guide: the song, like the movie clip, portrays the romantic side of love. There are a few lyrics such as "It's strong and it's sudden and it's cruel sometimes" that students might recognize as falling outside of the romantic paradigm. This line could refer though to anything from conflict between a couple to someone breaking up with another. Optional questions for them:

- 1) What are the messages about love in the song?
- 2) What is it that the power of love gives you power to do?
- 3) What do you think "It's strong and it's sudden and it's cruel sometimes" is referring to?]

#### A2. Review of their Questionnaires (15 minutes)

Ask students to take out their communication style question sheet that we asked them to complete.

In dyads or triads, ask them to share the answers to the questions with each other. Students should be asked to focus the majority of their time on the third question about their comfort and ability in communicating conflict.

The facilitator should be closely observing, and facilitating the conversation within each small group.

## B. THE ROLE OF CONFLICT IN A RELATIONSHIP (50 MINUTES IN TOTAL)

### B1. Introduction (10 minutes)

Connect last week's lesson with the text describing Jacob and Rachel's first encounter and the idea that all relationships will face situations of conflict, even if romantic love is present.

[Facilitator's Guide – As we saw last week, the Torah describes Abraham and Sarah experiencing stressful situations together, such as the decision to call Sarah Abraham's sister when they went into Egypt.

Their relationship was one in which they experienced conflict between each other, such as in the events surrounding Sarah's maidservant Hagar giving birth to Ishmael. In most of these situations, Abraham and Sarah dealt fairly well with these conflicts and demonstrated that they had some ability to resolve conflict effectively.

Compare this to today's text. Ask:

- 1) Does Jacob and Rachel's relationship experience any stress in its first seven years?
- 2) Do they experience any conflicts together? (Answer: The text does not describe any stress. Although in modern times we would consider a seven-year waiting period a burden, the text does not mention this.)
- 3) How about Marty and Jennifer's relationship and the relationships described in *The Power of Love*. Are stress or issues of conflicts addressed? (Answer: Marty and Jennifer face complex teenage lives, but no stress of conflict exists between them. *The Power of Love* describes angst as a part of love, but this could be related to anything from liking someone who does not like you to conflict with your partner.)

Love and marriage are related. Love, in our modern times, is considered a prerequisite for marriage, but is not enough to help a couple automatically succeed in marriage.

One major factor in a marriage succeeding is how a couple manages conflict.

Just in case some of you are not planning to get married any time soon, know that all relationships require effective conflict management skills.

As we will soon see this was true for Jacob and Rachel. We will be talking about conflict resolution in the context of marriage, not just because this is the focus of this class, but because it is a necessity in all healthy relationships (i.e. friends and family.)]

B2. Text Study - Jacob and Rachel: Part Two (15 minutes)

Jacob and Rachel finally marry seven years after they fell in love at first sight. Let's go back to reading the story to see what happens to our lovebirds.

Assign parts of: Narrator, Jacob, Leah, Rachel and read the handout entitled "Jacob, Rachel (and Leah) Part Two."

After the text is read, explain that there is much to discuss, but this section of the class will focus on how Jacob and Rachel and Jacob and Leah dealt with the conflicts between each other.

Ask:

- 1) What are the reasons for the conflict between Jacob and Leah and Jacob and Rachel? (Answer: The text clearly describes that Leah does not feel Jacob loves her and he seemingly does not. The text describes in Genesis 30:1-2 the difficulty that Jacob and Rachel have getting pregnant.)
- 2) How do Jacob and Leah and Jacob and Rachel deal with the conflict within their relationship? (Answer: There is no dialogue between Jacob and Leah, but the naming of her children describes great anguish about her yearning for his love. In Genesis 30:1-2, Rachel shares her anguish with Jacob and Jacob responds to her angrily. They seem to lack the ability to resolve conflict constructively.

Both these situations are not models for conflict resolution, but demonstrate how important it is for couples to have the ability to

resolve conflict effectively.)

3) Why are these interactions poor models for conflict resolution?

(Collect student's thoughts on why these interactions didn't work.)

### B3. Personal Approach to Conflict (15 minutes)

Let's take a break from our text to examine our ability to communicate with another person when there is conflict. We spent time during the first part of this activity asking you to review with your classmates your ability to communicate when there is a conflict.

I am going to ask you to stretch your imagination. Put yourself in the situation that we just discussed with Jacob and Rachel found in verse 1 of chapter 30.

Although this is just an exercise, imagine that you are in love with either Jacob or Rachel...you can pick who you want to play. Rachel is extremely jealous of Leah and says to Jacob "Give me children or else I will die."

Instead of playing the character as described in the text, find someone with whom to have a dialogue. The role-play should begin with Rachel speaking to Jacob. The person playing Rachel is still extremely jealous of Leah, but does not have to use the quote "Give me children or else I will die" as the first line from the conversation. Use your own personality style regarding conflict to have this conversation, not those described in the text. For example if you are Rachel and avoid conflict you might start the conversation with "Hi Jacob, how was your day at work?" and take a bit of time to bring up the subject or only hint at it (i.e. I'm kind of down about not being pregnant.")



If you feel comfortable with conflict and you are Jacob you could ask Rachel more about what she is feeling.

(Give students 3-5 minutes to role-play this conversation. Select one or two to present their version in front of the class. Ideally one of these would be a version where the couple is able to demonstrate good listening skills, empathy, and support for the other.)

After a few minutes of the role-play you should ask if you, the facilitator, can substitute yourself for either Jacob or Rachel. Ask the other person to remain in their character while you take on another personality.

The goal of this interaction is to present a situation where conflict is difficult in front of the class (i.e. you may play an agitated, insensitive partner in order to see what happens to the normally patient partner.)

#### B4. Modern Conflict Resolution Quotes (10 minutes)

Introduce the quotes from handout entitled "Modern Sources on Marriage and Conflict Resolution" (with quotes from *Close Companions and Pre-Marital Counseling*.) The message from this handout is that it is very important for couples to have conflict resolution skills.

[Facilitator's Guide – Sample introduction to the quotes:

Yes the power of love is real, but so is conflict and stress. One of the main lessons that can be taken from the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel is that relationships, especially marriages, must be able to deal with conflict effectively.

Don't be fooled, it is not a question of whether conflict will occur within a marriage relationship; it is only a question of when. When it occurs, feelings of love alone will not help to resolve the conflict. A couple needs the skills to be able to make conflict a positive force in their marriage instead of a negative one.

Let's read a few quotes from a modern source on the subject of conflict in

marriage (see handout entitled "Modern Sources on Marriage and Conflict Resolution.") The first provides one rabbi's overall view of marriage. (Call on a volunteer to read this quote.) The second source is taken from a book entitled *Close Companions*.]

Ask class:

- 1) Does anyone have any questions about these quotes?
- 2) Do you agree or disagree with any of the ideas in these statements?

Explain.

- 3) Without having to share with the class, do you know of any couples real or fictional who avoid conflict? Resolve conflict effectively?

#### C. WRAP UP (5 MINUTES)

Prepare students for next week.

[Facilitator's Guide -

Next week for our final part of our unit on marriage relationships we will explore one of many models for creating skills to effectively resolve conflict in a marriage relationship. I will share with you a handout of the basic overview of the model we will be learning next week. It is taken from the book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. Please review it.

I encourage you to imagine yourself during the upcoming week practicing the model in situations that you encounter. Be careful to remember that this model is meant for two people to study and participate in. If you practice the activities with someone unfamiliar with the model, do not expect that they will automatically react positively to your words. Next week you all will have the opportunity to practice the model in class. Handout the model from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.]

## Genesis 29 - Jacob Meets Rachel

1. Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east.
2. And he looked, and saw a well in the field, and there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for from that well they watered the flocks; and a great stone was upon the well's mouth.
3. And there were all the flocks gathered; and they rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the sheep, and put the stone again upon the well's mouth in his place.
4. And Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where are you from?" And they said, "Of Haran are we."
5. And he said to them, "Know you Laban the son of Nahor?" And they said, "We know him."
6. And he said to them, "Is he well?" And they said, "He is well; and, behold, Rachel his daughter comes with the sheep."
7. And he said, "Behold, it is yet high day, nor is it time that the cattle should be gathered together; water the sheep, and go and feed them."
8. And they said, "We can not, until all the flocks are gathered together, and till they roll the stone from the well's mouth; then we will water the sheep."
9. And while he still spoke with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she kept them.
10. And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.
11. And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept.

12. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

13. And it came to pass, when Laban heard the tidings of Jacob his sister's son, that he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and kissed him, and brought him to his house. And he told Laban all these things.

14. And Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh. And he stayed with him a month."

15. And Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my brother, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

16. And Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.

17. Leah had weak eyes; but Rachel was beautiful and well favored.

18. And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, "I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter."

19. And Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you, than that I should give her to another man; stay with me."

20. And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her.

## Jacob, Rachel (and Leah) Part Two

### Genesis 29

22. And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast.

23. And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in to her.

24. And Laban gave to his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an maidservant.

25. And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah; and he said to Laban, "What is this that you have done to me? Did not I serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"

26. And Laban said, "It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.

27. Wait until the bridal week of this one is over, and we will give you this one [Rachel] provided that you serve me another seven years."

28. And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week; and he gave him Rachel his daughter for his wife also.

29. And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his maidservant to be her maid.

30. And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.

31. And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

32. And Leah conceived, and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, "Surely the Lord has looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me."

33. And she conceived again, and bore a son; and said, "Because the Lord has heard that I was hated, he has therefore given me this son also;" and she called his name Simeon.

34. And she conceived again, and bore a son; and said, "Now this time will my husband be joined to me, because I have born him three sons; therefore was his name called Levi."

35. And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she said, "Now will I praise the Lord; therefore she called his name Judah;" and ceased bearing.

### Genesis Chapter 30

1. And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die."

2. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, "Am I in God's place, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"

3. And she said, "Behold my maid Bilhah, consort with her, that she may bear upon my knees, that through her I may also have children."

4. And she gave him Bilhah her maidservant to wife; and Jacob went in to her.

5. And Bilhah conceived, and bore Jacob a son.

6. And Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice, and has given me a son;" therefore she called his name Dan.

7. And Bilhah Rachel's maid conceived again, and bore Jacob a second son.

8. And Rachel said, "With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed," and she called his name Naphtali.

9. When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing, she took Zilpah her maid, and gave her for a wife to Jacob.

10. And Zilpah Leah's maid bore Jacob a son.
11. And Leah said, "Fortune has come;" and she called his name Gad.
12. And Zilpah Leah's maid bore Jacob a second son.
13. And Leah said, "Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed; and she called his name Asher."
14. And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Give me, I beg you, of your son's mandrakes."
15. And she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? And would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" And Rachel said, "Therefore he shall lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes."
16. And Jacob came from the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, "You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night.
17. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived, and bore Jacob the fifth son.
18. And Leah said, "God has given me my hire, because I have given my maid to my husband;" and she called his name Issachar.
19. And Leah conceived again, and bore Jacob the sixth son.
20. And Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now will my husband live with me, because I have born him six sons;" and she called his name Zebulun.
21. And afterwards she bore a daughter, and called her name Dinah.
22. And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her, and opened her womb.
23. And she conceived, and bore a son; and said, "God has taken away my reproach,"

24. And she called his name Joseph; and said, "The Lord shall add to me another son."



## **The Power of Love – Huey Lewis & The News**

The power of love is a curious thing  
Make a one man weep, make another man sing  
Change a hawk to a little white dove  
More than a feeling that's the power of love

Tougher than diamonds, rich like cream  
Stronger and harder than a bad girl's dream  
Make a bad one good make a wrong one right  
Power of love that keeps you home at night

### **Chorus 1 :**

You don't need money, don't take fame  
Don't need no credit card to ride this train  
It's strong and it's sudden and it's cruel sometimes  
But it might just save your life  
That's the power of love  
That's the power of love

First time you feel it, it might make you sad  
Next time you feel it it might make you mad  
But you'll be glad baby when you've found  
That's the power makes the world go'round

### **Chorus 2 :**

And it don't take money, don't take fame  
Don't need no credit card to ride this train  
It's strong and it's sudden it can be cruel sometimes  
But it might just save your life

They say that all in love is fair  
Yeah, but you don't care  
But you know what to do  
When it gets hold of you  
And with a little help from above  
You feel the power of love  
You feel the power of love  
Can you feel it ?  
Hmmm

### **Chorus 3 :**

It don't take money and it don't take fame  
Don't need no credit card to ride this train  
Tougher than diamonds and stronger than steel  
You won't feel nothin' till you feel  
You feel the power, just the power of love  
That's the power, that's the power of love  
You feel the power of love, You feel the power of love

## Modern Sources on Marriage and Conflict Resolution

1) "There is a great deal of misinformation and mythology involved with marriage. The mythology might be summarized in the statement, "they lived happily ever after." That statement implies that a husband and wife after marriage never argue, never get angry with each other, never hurt each other's feelings, and live on a constant level of bliss. None of the assumptions is an accurate description of the reality of marriage. Two people in love and happily married, will have misunderstandings, will occasionally fight, may hurt each other's feelings, and will have periods of boredom and frustration."<sup>148</sup>

2) *The Conflict-avoiding Marriage*. This is an apt description of the average couple of today. The culture tells them very plainly that people who really love each other don't get into conflict, which of course is not at all true. When in fact they do develop serious disagreements, they have no appropriate skills to deal with the situation. After a few bitter quarrels, one or both may be so deeply hurt that peace at any price may seem the best deal to make. The only way to do this is to withdraw from each other. Physical withdrawal is of course not usually practicable; but psychological withdrawal is. The usual procedure is to close off areas of the relationship that prove to be explosive and to choke back intense feelings that might start a fight. In this way the couple make their life together tolerable by limiting their areas of interaction to those that can be safely handled. This of course means settling for a superficial relationship and giving up all hope of loving intimacy. People who do this find themselves denied the warm and tender love they hoped to find in marriage. Such people easily become disillusioned and are ready to turn elsewhere for the meaningful relationship they failed to find. Among these are the unhappy, frustrated husbands and wives who are divorcing in a large scale today.

*The Conflict-resolving Marriage*. This is simply another way of describing the enriched marriage. As I have already said, conflict is not something tragic in a human relationship. It is not to be feared and run away from. It is a normal and integral part of any close relationship. It is in fact raw material to be worked on and transmuted into an opportunity to grow. A conflict may even be welcomed, because it pinpoints an area where an adjustment has to be made--very much as an unusual noise in an automobile engine locates a fault, which, when corrected, makes the machine run more smoothly. Couples who learn the necessary skills to work on their conflicts therefore have the assurance that they are continually improving their relationships. Each conflict resolved marks another milestone in their progress toward relationship-in-depth."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Aaron Landes, "Sample Interview: Jewish Marriage," *Pre-Marital Counseling*, David M. Feldman Editor (New York, Commission on Synagogue Relations: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, 1974) 34.

<sup>149</sup> David R. Mace, *Close Companions*, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982) 86.

### **Lesson Three: One Conflict Resolution Model: Practice and Application**

#### **Core Concept:**

A couple in a marriage (or other) relationship that resolves conflict effectively is skilled in methods of communication such the ones studied and practiced during today's lesson.

#### **Lesson Overview:**

With support and guidance from teachers, students will practice a conflict resolution model from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. Students will apply the model to a text from Genesis as well as their own lives.

Note: It is strongly recommended that additional teaching and/or counseling support is present for this lesson. This staff support should have some background in conflict resolution and/or counseling. Consider contacting the rabbi or cantor or others on staff with counseling training.

If there are social workers in the synagogue, Jewish Community Center, or larger community, consider hiring one or more of them to help coach the students throughout the lesson. Any additional support will need to receive this lesson plan in advance and meet with you to discuss their roles and responsibilities. You may want to have them present the information on the conflict resolution model alone or with you. At minimum if you are not comfortable with the content of this subject, you should speak to a skilled counselor about any questions or concerns you have about presenting this material properly.

## Timeline

- A. Opening ~ Warm Up Activity (10 minutes)
- B. Study and Practice of Conflict Resolution Model by John Gottman (50 minutes)
- C. Application to Texts and Their Lives
  - C1. Text (10 minutes)
  - C2. Their Lives (10 minutes)
- D. Wrap Up and Summary of Course (10 minutes)

### A. OPENING (10 MINUTES)

If there are additional teachers or counselors introduce them to the class and explain how they will be helping throughout the lesson.

Tell the class to read the following *Talmudic* quotes (handout: "*Talmudic* Quotes on Marriage"):

[One] who loves his wife as himself, honors her more than himself.<sup>150</sup>

A man should spend less than his means on food, and drink for himself, up to his means on his clothes, and above his means on honoring his wife and children.<sup>151</sup>

If your wife is short, bend down and listen to her<sup>152</sup>

Honor your wife, for by this you enrich yourself. A man should be ever careful about the honor due to his wife, because no blessing is experienced in his house except on her account.<sup>153</sup>

Have the class answer the following questions in small groups of three (written on the board.) The teachers and counselors will listen in as they discuss:

- 1) How do these quotes relate to what we have been discussing in class?
- 2) Which of the patriarchs and matriarchs displayed behaviors such as the ones discussed in these quotes?

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<sup>150</sup> *Yevamot* 2b

<sup>151</sup> *Chullin* 84b

<sup>152</sup> *Baba Metzia* 59a

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*

[Facilitator's Guide: Depending on how well students have connected with the material you may need to assist the students in linking these quotes to past lessons. For example the third quote could be linked to the story when Abraham listened to Sarah when she was upset about Hagar's behavior after Ishmael was born.]

#### B. ONE MODEL OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION (50 MINUTES IN TOTAL)

##### Study and Practice of Conflict Resolution Model using the Gottman Handout

[Facilitator's Guide –

A suggested introduction to this section of the lesson to the class:

There are many models that have been created to help people learn how to create an effective conflict-resolving marriage. Imagine if Jacob and Rachel had been aware that marriage would be difficult even though they loved each other.

Imagine if they had a process by which they worked on their conflicts in order to help their marriage. Perhaps the high stakes situation described in Genesis 30, when Rachel cries out in pain to Jacob and he responds angrily, could have been dealt with differently.

Last week I handed out a model of conflict resolution for couples based on information in the book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. We are now going to review this model and practice it with a classmate. After, we will apply it to some of the biblical sections we have been studying and consider how it applies to you now in your own lives.

This model is found in the book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. Have additional copies of the handout "Resolving Conflict in a Loving Relationship" available.]

Facilitator's Guide to the Handout "Resolving Conflict in a Loving Relationship"

Dr. John Gottman suggests that there are five steps to resolving conflict in a loving relationship. Note that he uses the term loving relationship, recognizing the role that love has played in the relationship to date and the role it can play in resolving conflict. In his book Gottman writes that couples who love and respect each other often "lose their way when trying to persuade each other or settle disagreements. A conversation that could have been productive instead ends in a screaming match or angry silence."<sup>154</sup>

Love is not enough for couples. Couples need skills to help them resolve conflict instead of avoiding it or allowing it to hurt their relationship.

The five steps that are on your handout that Gottman recommends are:

- 1) Soften your startup
- 2) Learn to make and receive repair attempts
- 3) Soothe yourself and each other
- 4) Compromise
- 5) Be tolerant of each other's faults

Let's look at each step so that it makes sense to you. (Take 10 minutes per step including time for students to practice what they learn.)

- 1) Soften your startup

This step is about how to bring up a touchy issue.

Note that Genesis 30:1 states "when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said to Jacob, Give me children, or else I die."

Ask Class: Did Rachel begin her conversation with Jacob softly?

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<sup>154</sup> John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York, Crown Publishers, Inc. 1999) 157.

What emotions were behind her statement "Give me children, or else I die?"

Although Rachel's feelings were real and painful, her words were not delivered in a way that matches this step. Sometimes, it is impossible to soften ones startup, but it should be possible for most situations. This is especially true if you if you follow the recommendations on the handout.

Gottman recommends that people should:

- Complain but don't blame
- Make "I" statements instead of "you" (i.e. I want us to save more vs. You are careless with money.)

This is one of the most important of his recommendations. When Rachel said to Jacob "Give me children," it is possible Jacob interpreted this as "you are the reason why I am not having children." Using Gottman's advice Rachel may have said "I am in such pain over not being pregnant. What can we do about this?"

Ask Class:

I am going to give you a "you" statement and ask you to change it into an "I" statement.

- 1) You are not listening to me (vs. I would like it if you would listen to me)
- 2) You just don't care about me (vs. I am feeling neglected)
- 3) You are such a slob, your dirty clothes are everywhere (vs. I would appreciate it if you would put your laundry in the hamper instead of on the floor)

He also recommends to:

- Describe what is happening, don't evaluate or judge.
- Be clear.
- Be polite (i.e. use "please" and "I would appreciate it if.")
- Don't store things up or wait too long before bringing up an issue.

For some people it can be very difficult to bring up a conflict immediately. It may seem like they are being pushy or rude or perhaps they are just uncomfortable with conflict. Still, conflicts get worse for a couple when one person keeps an issue inside. Perhaps her jealousy towards Leah resulted in Rachel keeping her pain inside? Maybe that is why her words to Jacob were so strong.

Also Gottman's research showed that:

- Discussions invariably end on the same note as they begin.

### Practice Time

Using an idea of your own or an idea taken from the handout "Conflict Resolution Role-Play." Find a partner and role-play a situation where you demonstrate the skill of softening your startup.

### 2) Learn to make and receive repair attempts

Gottman knows that it is tough for couples to communicate perfectly in situations where there is conflict. Therefore he recommends words that can help get a conversation about conflict back on track even if a discussion starts off poorly or you find yourself in an endless cycle of blaming. Gottman calls these "repair attempts."

Couples that love each other should make a commitment to use these repair attempts when one member of the partnership is losing control or communicating poorly.

Examples of repair attempts - Ask for three volunteers to read the following examples:

- I'm getting scared/worried; Please say that more gently; That hurt my feelings.



Ask Class: Who would be saying these words? Under what circumstances?

(Answer: the partner who is experiencing her partner being rude or out of control.)

Ask other students to read the next examples:

- I need your support right now; Can I take that back? Can we take a break?
- Sorry; Let me try again; Please forgive me; I really blew that one.

Ask Class: Who would be saying these words? Under what circumstances?

(Answer: the partner who is being rude or out of control who realizes how badly he or she is communicating.)

Ask other students to read the next examples:

- Let's compromise here; I see what you are talking about; Let's find our common ground.
- I might be wrong here; Let's agree to disagree here; We are getting off track.
- I see your point; I love you; That's a good point; My part of the problem is....

### Practice Time

Using an idea of your own or an idea taken from the handout "Conflict Resolution Role-Play." Find a partner and role-play a situation where you demonstrate the skill of learning to make and receive repair statements.

Gottman's third step towards healthy conflict resolution is to:

### 3) Soothe yourself and each other

It is important to stay fairly calm during a discussion.

According to Gottman, discussions of conflict can lead to partners feeling "overwhelmed both emotionally and physically. Most likely you think thoughts of righteous indignation ('I don't have to take this anymore') or innocent

victimhood ('why is she always picking on me?') Meanwhile your body is in distress. Usually your heart is pounding, you're sweating, you're holding your breath."<sup>155</sup>

"If your heart rate exceeds 100 beats per minute you won't be able to hear what your spouse is trying to tell you no matter how hard you try. Some people may need to take a twenty minute break if the conversation gets too heated."<sup>156</sup>

Breathing deeply or thinking of a place or an image that is soothing may also help a person keep calm.

Don't confuse calm with not being an engaged listener.

Model for the class what an engaged listener looks like:

- body turned facing your partner
- eyes looking directly at partner when he/she speaks
- arms on table or on you lap
- feet directly on floor

Model for the class what a disengaged listener/ someone who is not calm looks like:

- body shifting constantly
- arms crossed
- poor eye contact
- teeth clenched

They could probably model this pretty well themselves. Have students model for the class what they look like when their parents are lecturing them about staying out too late. Then have them model what they look like when a friend is passing on juicy gossip about a person they have a crush on. Students can list the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 178-180.

differences.

**Ask Class:**

- 1) Based upon this information, why do you think Gottman recommends that someone be calm and engaged when discussing conflict? (Answer: Basically they should echo what was previously said, someone who is not calm is in a much poorer position to be able to respond in a receptive way to his or her partner.)
  
- 2) Can you imagine taking a break during a conversation with your loved one if it is getting too heated? Would it make a difference if you both had agreed to take such a break in advance based upon your understanding of conflict resolution? (The goal of these questions is to reinforce that conflict resolution is most effective when both members of a couple are operating with the same set of agreed upon rules and objectives. A break works best for couples who have agreed far in advance of any conflict that breaks may better help them achieve conflict resolution.)

**Practice Time**

Using an idea of your own or an idea taken from the handout "Conflict Resolution Role-Play." Find a partner and role-play a situation where you demonstrate the skill of soothing yourself and each other.

#### 4) Compromise

As described on the handout:

The only solution to marital problems is to find a compromise. In an intimate loving relationship it just doesn't work for either of you to get things all your way, even if you are convinced that you are right. If you always expect to get your way, you are not in a partnership.

In order to compromise both you and your spouse must keep an open mind to your spouse's opinions and desires. You don't have to agree with everything your spouse says or believes, but you have to be honestly open to considering his or her position.

A person in a committed, loving relationship understands that the relationship is more important than getting his or her way. If compromising is difficult, a person could:

- 1) ask for more information from his or her spouse about his or her view of the situation; and
- 2) explore his or her own reaction to a situation to determine if there are any other factors making compromise difficult.

#### Practice Time

Using an idea of your own, your past role-play, or an idea taken from the handout "Conflict Resolution Role-Play." Find a partner and role-play a situation where you demonstrate the skill of creating compromise.

## 5) Be tolerant of each other's faults

As described on the handout:

Too often a marriage gets bogged down in "if only-s." If only your spouse was neater, smarter, richer, more handsome, then all of your problems would vanish. As long as this attitude prevails, conflicts will be very difficult to resolve.

Until you accept what you perceive as your partner's flaws, or attempt to communicate your concerns with your spouse, you will not be able to compromise successfully. Instead you will be on a relentless campaign to change your spouse.

When you are married to someone you get all of his or her characteristics. You have chosen all of them – even the items that you don't necessarily want. Embrace the totality of your spouse and the necessity to communicate with her or him if you are frustrated.

Conflict resolution is not about one person changing; it is about negotiating-- finding common ground and ways that you can accommodate each other.

### Practice Time

Using an idea of your own or an idea taken from the handout "Conflict Resolution Role-Play." Find a partner and role-play a situation where you demonstrate the skill of being tolerant of each other's faults.

C. APPLICATION TO TEXTS AND THEIR LIVES (20 MINUTES IN TOTAL)

C1. Texts (10 minutes)

Examine Genesis 16:1-6 using Gottman's model.

[Facilitator's Guide -

We have studied stories from Genesis about Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Now let's briefly review one of these stories using the modern framework for conflict resolution that we have just practiced.

Let's examine Genesis 16:1-6 again. (have students look at the text.)

Ask:

- 1) What stages of the five-step conflict resolution model can be found in this text? Lets explore this using the handout "Applying Our Conflict Resolution Model to Genesis 16:1-6"

## Facilitator's Guide to Applying Gottman's Conflict Resolution Model to Genesis 16:1-6

	Information Found In Text	What They Could Have Said
<b>Soften your startup</b>	<p>16.2 Sarah asks Abraham using I language. Although she begs him, she does so along with explanations why. Her words are very direct and intense.</p> <p>16.5 Sarah seems very upset. She blames Abraham for her problem and also suggests God is favoring Abraham over her. Sarah's words do not use I statements or explain in detail what had occurred and how she was feeling.</p>	<p>16.2 Sarah might have been a bit less intense with her opening words. The Torah is very direct, if it weren't perhaps she could have started with "I have been feeling so sad that we don't have children and I want to talk to you about a solution to our problem."</p> <p>Ask Class: do you think Sarah was holding this conflict inside or not? (A: If she was, she should have brought it up much earlier.)</p> <p>16.5 Sarah: "Hagar is telling everyone that I am a terrible person because I couldn't conceive and she did on the first try. I am so angry with her and feel useless. I feel as if God is favoring you and punishing me. I am even angry with you. I know I told you to conceive a baby with her, but somehow I feel this is now your fault. I am so upset."</p>
<b>Learn to make and receive repair attempts</b>	<p>16.2 None mentioned</p> <p>16.5 None mentioned</p>	<p>16.2 Abraham does not need to make repair attempts since he accepts her recommendation immediately.</p> <p>16.5 Abraham : Please be a bit calmer. I want to listen to you, but I don't understand enough about what you are saying. Plus I am confused. I listened to you when you suggested that I have a baby with Hagar. It sounds as if now you are telling me that I did something wrong. It makes me feel sad to hear you blaming me for something you suggested and I did."</p> <p>Sarah: "I am sorry for reacting so extremely, but I am very upset."</p>
<b>Soothe yourself and each other</b>	<p>16.2 Although no explanation of their demeanor is given, our research would lead us to believe that both were in a calm place when they had this discussion because Sarah spoke using I statements and Abraham listened and took her suggestion.</p>	<p>16.2 Question for class: can two students come to the front of the class and model the body language and words used in 16.2?</p> <p>16.5 Abraham: "Before we go any further, take a deep breath and tell me what happened</p>

	16.5 None mentioned. Sarah is very upset and blames Abraham for her problem. Abraham seems open to listening to her. Sarah does take Abraham's suggestion in 16.6	and how you are feeling." Or "Sit here for a few minutes with me. Let me give you a hug. Let's take a short break; I see you are upset and your words are upsetting me. After a few minutes tell me more of what is going on here and let's work this out together."
Compromise	16.2 Sarah provides a solution to their problem. Abraham listens and in 16.3 does what she asked.  16.6 Abraham provides a solution to her problem and she takes it.	16.2 One could imagine A and S discussing the situation a bit more before setting on Sarah's suggestion.  16.6 One could imagine A and S discussing what is going on in much more detail. For example, what should they do about Ishmael? How could they confront Hagar in a manner that could resolve the conflict with her? Abraham's solution is good because it empowers Sarah and perhaps made her feel less helpless, but it is far from a comprehensive compromise.
Be tolerant of each other's faults	16.2 No mention of faults  16.5 Abraham ignores Sarah's blaming him and seems to concentrate on her pain and anguish. His response shows that he is working on resolving the conflict and not changing Sarah in her stressed state.	
Other Comments		

## C2. Application to their lives (10 minutes)

Write the five stages of conflict resolution on the board:

Soften your startup

Learn to make and receive repair attempts

Soothe yourself and each other

Compromise

Be tolerant of each other's faults



Ask:

Can you apply these steps to your life and the other relationships within it, even if it is not a romantic relationship? How?

[Facilitator's Guide –

If students do not bring up application to parents, siblings, and friends, ask them how the model could possibly apply with these groups? Try to talk out a situation that they provide or give one to them such as how to resolve the conflict over who gets to use the computer at night, you or your brother?

Explain that although it is best that the people in close relationships have a discussion about using this model for resolving conflicts, that the model can still be used without anyone else knowing you are using it.

In cases where they are having a very difficult time communicating with other people, their teachers, rabbis, cantors, and educators are available for them to talk to. In certain cases it may be appropriate for them to go to a counselor with the person/people they are having problems to learn conflict resolution models together.

Jewish texts, such as the story of how Joseph's frustrated brothers sold him into slavery, clearly describe the need for conflict resolution between people beyond romantic couples.]

#### D. WRAP UP AND SUMMARY OF COURSE (10 MINUTES)

Review objectives of the course with students and have students summarize the core concept of the course:

- 1) The ability to resolve conflict effectively is an essential dynamic in a successful marriage and any other significant relationship.
- 2) Jewish texts demonstrate how important conflict resolution is for people in a marriage relationship.

[Facilitator's Guide -

This mini-course was created in order to share some of our ancient texts with you on the subject of marriage.

Ask:

1. As we conclude this class let me ask you, in a marriage relationship, does love conquer all?
2. Can you provide examples from Jewish texts that support your answer to this question?

Ideally, this discussion along with repeated opportunities throughout this and other classes and periods of reflection will help students to process the lessons taught throughout the mini-course. The facilitator should be as patient as possible in allowing students to formulate their own ability to communicate the core concepts of the course.

The facilitator is encouraged to also inform the students that they should not think that now they know all there is to know about having a successful marriage. Although the ability to resolve conflict effectively is critical to a marriage's success, there are other variables. Couples also must commonly address such challenges as finances, children, sex, and work stress. These subjects are related to having skills in resolving conflict effectively, but have additional characteristics that have not been discussed in this mini-course.

There is no doubt that conflict resolution skills assist couples in almost every area of communication. Since marriage is guaranteed to result in a couple having conflicts with each other, it is essential that they have these skills.

Some may consider it sad that love is not enough to ensure a successful marriage, but others (such as the designer of these lessons) believe that a couple that knows how to resolve conflict experiences a more sophisticated form of love than those who cannot.

What better demonstrates love for each other than taking the time to work out difficult conflicts? Such work enables couples to live a shared, healthy life together. Such work refuels the love that began the relationship. In addition, conflict resolution teaches partners about each other in ways that other forms of communication do not.

It may seem odd, but saying, "I love you so much that I am going to share with you what is bothering me," is a sign of a wonderful relationship. This is especially true when the receiving partner says, "I love you so much that I want to hear what is upsetting you, even if it is a sensitive subject for me."

It is my hope you integrate these lessons from this mini-course into your life so that your relationships today and in the future will flourish.

Amen.]

## ***Talmudic Quotes on Marriage***

[One] who loves his wife as himself, honors her more than himself.<sup>157</sup>

A man should spend less than his means on food, and drink for himself, up to his means on his clothes, and above his means on honoring his wife and children.<sup>158</sup>

If your wife is short, bend down and listen to her<sup>159</sup>

Honor your wife, for by this you enrich yourself. A man should be ever careful about the honor due to his wife, because no blessing is experience in his house except on her account.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Yevamot* 2b

<sup>158</sup> *Chullin* 84b

<sup>159</sup> *Baba Metziah* 59a

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*

## **Resolving Conflict in a Loving Relationship<sup>161</sup>**

- 1) Soften your startup
- 2) Learn to make and receive repair attempts
- 3) Soothe yourself and each other
- 4) Compromise
- 5) Be tolerant of each other's faults

### **Notes to Assist You With Each Step**

- 1) Soften your startup

This step is about how you bring up a touchy issue.

Gottman recommends people:

- Complain but don't blame
- Make "I" statements instead of "you" (i.e. I want us to save more vs. You are careless with money.
- Describe what is happening, don't evaluate or judge.
- Be clear
- Be polite (i.e. use "please" and "I would appreciate it if").
- Don't store things up or wait too long before bringing up an issue.

Also...

- Discussions invariably end on the same note as they begin.

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<sup>161</sup> This handout contains direct excerpts from the book by John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York, Crown Publishers, Inc. 1999) 158-185.

### Notes to Assist You With Each Step continued

#### 2) Learn to make and receive repair attempts

If your discussion starts off poorly or you find yourself in an endless cycle of blaming, you can prevent a disaster if you know how to stop. Gottman calls these "repair attempts."

Examples of repair attempts:

- I'm getting scared/worried; Please say that more gently; That hurt my feelings.
- I need your support right now; Can I take that back? Can we take a break?
- Sorry; Let me try again; Please forgive me; I really blew that one.
- Let's compromise here; I see what you are talking about; Let's find our common ground.
- I might be wrong here; Let's agree to disagree here; We are getting off track.
- I see your point; I love you; That's a good point; My part of the problem is....

#### 3) Soothe yourself and each other

It is important to stay calm during a discussion. If your heart rate exceeds 100 beats per minute you won't be able to hear what your spouse is trying to tell you no matter how hard you try. Some people may need to take a twenty minute break if the conversation gets too heated. Breathing deeply or thinking of a place or an image that is soothing may also help keep one calm.

#### 4) Compromise

The only solution to marital problems is to find a compromise. In an intimate loving relationship it just doesn't work for either of you to get things all your way, even if you are convinced that you are right. If you always expect to get your way, you are not in a partnership.

In order to compromise both you and your spouse must keep an open mind to your spouse's opinions and desires. You don't have to agree with everything your spouse says or believes, but you have to be honestly open to considering his or her position.

### Notes to Assist You With Each Step continued

A person in a committed, loving relationship understands that the relationship is more important than getting his or her way. If one is experiencing difficulty with compromise than one needs to:

- 1) ask for more information from his or her spouse about his or her view of the situation; and
- 2) explore their own reaction to a situation to determine if there are any other factors as to why it is difficult for them to compromise.

#### **5) Be tolerant of each other's faults**

Too often a marriage gets bogged down in "if onlies." If only your spouse were neater, smarter, richer than all of your problems would vanish. As long as this attitude prevails, conflicts will be very difficult to resolve.

Until you accept what you perceive as your partner's flaws or attempt to communicate your concern with your spouse about them, you will not be able to compromise successfully.

Instead you will be on a relentless campaign to change your spouse.

When you are married to someone you get all of his or her characteristics. You have chosen all of them – even the items that you don't necessarily want. Embrace the totality of your spouse and the necessity to communicate with them if you are frustrated with something about them.

Conflict resolution is not about one person changing, it is about negotiating, finding common ground and ways that you can accommodate each other.

### **Conflict Resolution Role-Play**

Since subjects such as those discussed by Jacob and Rachel are deeply complicated, try practicing conflict resolution about something lighter or use one of the following scenarios. In each the couple represents a loving pair living in the modern era that is having a conflict. These require you to take on roles (i.e. one is neat, one is messy.)

- A) One partner feels as if the other is not doing their share of the housework (i.e. cleaning, laundry, taking out garbage, etc.)
- B) One partner feels as if the other is not taking the time to get to know their friends.
- C) One partner feels as if the other is too cluttered and messy around the house.
- D) Even though one partner agreed that if you got a dog that they would be the one to clean up after the dog, the back yard is littered with poop.

## Applying Our Conflict Resolution Model to Genesis 16:1-6

Information Found In Text      What They Could Have Said

Soften your startup		
Learn to make and receive repair attempts		
Soothe yourself and each other		
Compromise		
Be tolerant of each other's faults		
Other Comments		



## Conclusion

I received a call from an old friend recently. Steve, now a thirty-six year old Jewish professional told me, "I've begun to think about marrying Susan." He went on to describe how his six-month relationship with his girlfriend had blossomed. "We are enjoying our time together and it just seems right. Still, I feel like I should be doing some more thinking about this. I'm in the process of finding a counselor to speak to, but I decided to call the 'soon-to-be rabbi' to get your input. Is there anything I should be considering before I propose to Susan?"

Steve had asked me for insight into his personal life in the past, but this was the first time he had called me with a specific question that he wanted me to address from my position as a rabbinical student. I commended my old friend on taking some time to think thoughtfully about his desire to marry Susan. I told him that his idea to speak to a counselor was a wise one. I explained my research into Jewish marriage models and shared some of the textual insights found in this paper on key issues such as communication and children.

Steve confided in me that he and Susan had "never had a serious argument" and that everything was "always so smooth with her." He assumed that this state of communication would exist throughout their relationship as a married couple. Jewish texts, especially the relationships within Genesis, indicate that this is one area for Steve to investigate further with Susan. On the subject of children, Steve was intrigued by the stories of Sarah and Rebekah's pain due to their inability to conceive. He wondered

aloud how his and Susan's age would impact their ability to get pregnant. Susan wanted children immediately, but Steve told me they had not talked about the subject thoroughly. I suggested he explore his and Susan's opinions and feelings on these subjects.

Steve and Susan's story is not unique. Jewish texts, such as those discussed in this paper, can provide Jewish couples valuable insights into their relationship and eventual marriage. They can inform couples such as Steve and Susan as they contemplate becoming engaged, pairs that are currently engaged or married, and individuals. It is my hope that Jewish couples such as Steve and Susan embrace resources, such as the Torah and *Talmud*, within their Jewish tradition as they go forward in every stage of their lives together.

My thesis research has also enabled me to reflect upon my own relationships. I now find myself integrating the insights from Jewish tradition and text into my own life. This process is ongoing, challenging, and regularly refreshing.

There is an additional lesson to be learned from the study of marriage within Jewish texts for every Jewish person, regardless of marital status. This lesson is a theological one, as the relationship between God and the people is often described as a marriage.

Consider the words of Genesis and the *Talmud* and their description of the evolving marriage relationships between two people as a metaphor for a person's relationship with God. A couple's relationship is impacted by their communication skills, children, and a

myriad of other variables. Marriage relationships experience highs and lows, periods of euphoria and gloom, times of despair and of hope.

As with their personal relationships, people may have the unrealistic expectation that their relationship with God should always be strong, loving, and close. However, one's connection and relationship with God, just as the marriages between individuals in Genesis, can be filled with peaks and valleys. When we view our texts as a metaphor for the relationships between God and ourselves we prepare ourselves for times when we may not feel as close to God as we would like. No matter the short-term status of our relationship with God, we should try to remember that it always remains holy.

Our texts provide an additional metaphoric message regarding our relationship to the divine. There is a long-term commitment that the people in the relationships, such as those in Genesis, have to each other. Despite difficult and even painful times, these relationships stay joined. So too it is with us to God and God to us. Other biblical texts reference this unbreakable tie.

Hosea describes the children of Israel and God using terms describing a challenging personal relationship – a relationship that includes such difficulties as betrayal and adultery. Despite such problems, Hosea describes God's commitment to the Jewish people in beautiful poetry:

וְאֶרְשִׁיתִי לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאֶרְשִׁיתִי לִי בְצָדֶק וּבִמְשָׁפֶט וּבְרַחֲמִים.  
וְאֶרְשִׁיתִי לִי בְּאַמּוֹנָה וְיִדְעַת אֶת-יְהוָה.

And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in grace, and in mercies. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know God.<sup>162</sup>

In this section of Hosea God tells the people, that despite all that has occurred, God is betrothed to them. The text teaches that we can have a similar long-term committed relationship with God that can survive any circumstance. On this subject Abraham J. Heschel wrote:

Stronger than jealousy is God's longing for reunion and His hope for Israel's return... The reconciliation will take effect as a new betrothal. And these will be the gift and dowry for the bride: righteousness, justice, kindness, mercy. The pathos of love, expressed first in the bitterness of disillusionment, finds its climax in the hope of reconciliation.<sup>163</sup>

The Song of Songs, the biblical book describing romantic and erotic love, is another text that is considered a metaphor for the relationship between God and the people. There is a well-known quote from this book: "My beloved is mine and I am his."<sup>164</sup> This text is just one example of how the words of this text can be seen as "a description of the love relationship between the God and Israel. The idea that God and Israel were married at Sinai appears in Songs of Songs *Rabbah*, other *midrashic* texts, and liturgical texts from the Rabbinic and medieval periods."<sup>165</sup>

Although serving the needs of those considering marriage and in marriage relationships is the paramount objective of my thesis, as Jews, we should not ignore that our relationship with God is also connected to our personal relationships. Perhaps this is another reason why Jewish tradition has been so eager to perpetuate the institution of marriage, for

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<sup>162</sup> Hosea 2:21-22

<sup>163</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, Harper & Row, 1962) 63.

<sup>164</sup> Song of Songs 2:16

marriage facilitates one of the best ways for people to understand God. It is my hope and belief that the effort to better understand marriage from a Jewish perspective will, in fact, bring us closer to God.

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<sup>165</sup> Berlin and Brettler, Editors *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1570.

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