Chayei HaTalmidim: The Lives of the Scholars
An Exploration of Metaphor and Imagery of Women in the Talmud

Text Immersion: Yevamot 63a

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah and Marriage
A Study of Hilchot Ishut:
Connections Between Love and Spiritual Development
and their Reflections in Jewish Text

Text Immersion: Maimonides Hilchot Ishut

by
Karen Devor Sherman

Advisor
Dr. Joel Gereboff

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Introduction

Commentators of the past and present have explored the purpose and meaning of love and marriage in Jewish tradition. Though the nature and characteristics of marriage may have changed over time, the relationship between two partners was and remains a fundamental value of Judaism. For Maimonides, marriage is viewed as a partnership in which each individual can nourish his or her own personal connection to God. While each partner has a unique relationship with God, that relationship can be nurtured and developed through the relationship with one's spouse. Connections between marriage and spiritual development are found not only in rabbinic commentary and scholarship but are also reflected in our liturgy. As modern students and teachers of Torah, we can explore the connections between marriage and spirituality in our own relationships and in our work with engaged and married couples. The messages we take away from Maimonides as well as the images we glean from our liturgy provide beautiful opportunities for us to explore the potential of loving partnership to help nurture our relationships to God.

Maimonides and Commandment

Known in rabbinical literature as Rambam, Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon was one of the greatest rabbinic authorities of the post-Talmudic era. Rabbi, scholar, spiritual leader, halakhist, physician, astronomer, and philosopher, his legal and philosophical writings provide the basis for much of our study of Jewish law. In *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Mainomides offers his own opinions of Jewish law and commandment. His *Mishneh Torah*, compiled in 1180, is a codification of Jewish Law[1] in which he emphasizes the immortality of the soul.[2]

In *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Maimonides offers his own principles to guide an understanding of the commandments. In this work, he explains his idea that the commandments come from God's will.[3] He acknowledges that some of the commandments are not even based on rational principles but are commandments simply because God willed them. He explains that there are two purposes of the Law. One purpose is to maintain the well-being of the soul (intellect). This is acquired through true beliefs, such as the existence, unity and incorporeality of God. The second purpose is to maintain the well-being of the body (morality). This is acquired through personal and political morality.[4] The Rambam claims that these beliefs give people the motivation to obey the commandments. Otherwise, most people would obey the commandments only if they are promised rewards or threatened with punishment. Philosophers however, are not like most people. Philosophers obey the commandments because it is the right thing to do regardless of consequences.[5] *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* teaches Maimonides' view of the purpose of the commandments as well as the motivation for obeying them.

Maimonides and Marriage

While *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* details Maimonides' views on commandment, his *Mishneh Torah* is his commentary on the Mishna. *Sefer Nashim*, the Book of laws Governing Relations with Women, is the fourth book of the *Mishneh Torah*. It contains five halakhot. One of those is *Hilchot Ishut*, the Laws of Marriage.[6] Chapters 14 and 15 are of particular interest in looking at the connections between marriage and spiritual connections to God. Most of the laws seem to have no relevance regarding connections to God, yet this was Maimonides' central message. Chapter 14 describes some of the responsibilities and

consequences of marriage, including the following: a husband's responsibility to fulfill his wife's conjugal rights; the consequences for a rebellious wife (one who does not want to have sexual relations with her husband); a husband's obligations regarding the *ketubah* and his provision of support and contributions of property following a divorce; a husband's obligation to redeem his wife if she is taken captive; and the rules outlining the amount of money a husband must spend on his wife's burial.

Chapter 15 describes a husband's responsibility to fulfill the commandment to procreate. It outlines this responsibility according to the number and gender of children and lists exceptions that are made for scholars of Torah. Torah scholars are permitted to delay the mitzvah of marriage because they are engaged in the mitzvah of studying Torah. This chapter also describes the consequences for women who can't bear children and women who miscarry. It concludes with the commandment for husbands and wives to honor each other. It is this commandment that is most consistent with Maimonides' universal message that marriage to a partner is the basis for a spiritual connection with the Divine.

Marriage and Spirituality

Throughout Maimonides' commentaries on Torah and commandments, an underlying theme is his belief in the connection between marriage and spirituality. Torah and mitzvot are to be followed because they serve as a mechanism for ensuring effective social relationships within society. However, the relationships themselves serve a higher purpose. In his chapter on marriage, sex and family in Judaism, Michael Berger analyzes the view of Maimonides on these topics.[7] Berger explains the Rambam's belief that the relationship between husband and wife mirrors the relationship between each of those individuals and

God. Berger refers to another of Maimonides' works, *Hilchot De'ot.* Here Maimonides discusses the development of spiritual perfection. Marriage as described in *Hilchot Ishut* is one path toward the spiritual perfection defined in *Hilchot De'ot.* Marriage can help each partner nourish his or her individual spiritual connection with God.

What might it mean to have a spiritual connection with God? There is no single definition of spirituality in Judaism, according to Rifat Sonsino,[8] though several definitions have been proposed. Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer defines spirituality as "...noticing the wonder, noticing that what seems disparate and confusing to us is actually whole."[9] In other words, spirituality is perceiving connections even where no connections seem to exist. Arthur Green defines spirituality as having connections to God and holiness. For him, spirituality is "...the striving for life in the presence of God and the fashioning of a life of holiness appropriate to such striving."[10] In this definition, action is as important as emotion. In yet another definition, Kerry Olitzky defines spirituality not as emotion or action, but as a process: "Spirituality is the process through which the individual strives to meet God."[11] There is no agreement on a singular definition, but connections exist between those offered. While some focus on awareness, others on emotion, others on action and still others on process, all agree that spirituality is a deeply personal phenomenon that makes life more meaningful and in some way transforms a person's life. For Maimonides, intimacy with a partner is a critical aspect of that transformation. The love for a human partner, leading to the institution of marriage, transforms a person and leads that person to God.

According to Michael Berger, Maimonides says that marriage is not only about love but also about friendship and companionship.[12] Maimonides wants us to be in love with God. Loving God is an ideal, and marriage is a means toward that ideal. In other words,

being in love with another human being is a means toward loving God. But the marriage is also about a partnership that leads to action. Husbands and wives are companions who inspire each other to action. While one of those actions is spiritual development, the partners also inspire each other and make it possible for each of them to fulfill mitzvot.

How does Maimonides propose that marriage partners become closer to God? Partners accomplish this through a combination of love, honor and respect. Husband and wife help each other nurture appropriate characteristics within the other. Those characteristics are slightly different for men than for women. A man's love for his wife is a model of the love he should have for God. His love is a pure love, defined as *ahava*. Similarly, a woman's love for her husband is a model of the love she should have for God. But a woman's love for her husband and for God can be better defined as fear or awe (*yirah*).[13] A woman should fear or be in awe of her husband, which is like her fear or awe of God. This emotion is her first step toward spiritual perfection. Though men and women are to reach God through different pathways, in both cases loving each other leads to loving the Divine.

Honor and respect also are pathways to becoming closer to God. Chapter 15:19 says that a man should honor/respect (*kabed*) his wife more than himself and should love (*ahava*) her more than he loves himself. Chapter 15:20 says that a woman should honor (*kabed*)her husband more than is sufficient (Berger translates as "exceedingly"[14]), and that she should be in awe of him (*yirah*). In her eyes, he should be like a prince or a king. For Maimonides then, a husband and wife who love, honor and respect each other in respectfully appropriate ways will learn to love, honor and respect God.

These ideas are at the same time beautiful and problematic when considering today's assumptions about gender, marriage, and spirituality. They are beautiful in the sense that one type of love can lead to another, and that honor and respect for each other reflects an honor and respect for the Divine. But the pathways to Divine love proposed by the text pose problems for our modern views on gender. While some argue that Maimonides espoused views that are egalitarian, others claim that he holds different expectations for men and women. In this text, the latter seems to hold true. Husbands are required to honor and love their wives, while wives are commanded to be in fear or awe of their husbands. This difference in gender that is disturbing in our time was likely more socially appropriate in the Talmudic and post-Talmudic periods and grounded in ontological assumptions about the differences between men and women. Even more disturbing is the connection of these emotions to God. Why are men commanded to honor and love God, while women are commanded to fear/be in awe of God? These are likely not two separate responsibilities, for we see evidence in other texts that men also fear or are in awe of God (e.g. Abraham in Genesis 22:11 and Job in Job 1:8-9). It seems that both men and women are obligated to fear God; for the Rambam, men have the additional obligations to honor and love God.

Maimonides' assumptions of marriage and spirituality can also be problematic. While it is beautiful to think that love for a partner can lead one to a spiritual life defined by either awareness, emotion, action, or process, how might these ideas apply to people with same-sex partners, and people who do not marry at all? Are people in same-sex relationships and people who are not married bound by the same obligations to fear, honor and love God and if so, what pathways are available to them to connect to the Divine? What pathways are there, other than marriage, that can enable one to nurture a connection to God? The text can

be read either way – as the only path or as only one path toward spirituality. Furthermore, what of the assumption that spirituality is an ideal? Surely there are partnerships where only one partner feels a connection to God, or in some cases perhaps neither partner feels such a connection at all. What alternatives to spiritual development exist, if any, for a partner or partners who have not yet experienced a desire to become close to God? The text seems to assume that every individual possesses and has identified the desire for a spiritual connection to God.

Love and Spirituality in Jewish Texts

Connections between love and spirituality in our liturgy and other texts communicate the message that love and spiritual development are an integral, perhaps even daily, component of Jewish life. Themes of love and connection to God are plentiful in our tradition. The theme of love is prevalent in prayers such as *Ahava Raba* in the weekday morning service and *Ahavat Olam* in the weekday evening service. Other prayers reflect the concept of love even when love is not a central theme. One of the most central prayers of our tradition provides a clear textual illustration of the connection between love and connection to God. Deuteronomy 6:5 reads: "Love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."[15] Modern commentators Eugene Borowitz and Frances Weinman Schwartz write that the combination of the Deuteronomy text and the text of the *Shema* illuminates the special connection between human love and Divine love: "To say that Adonai is the Only One, the Unique, the Whole, the Primary, is to indulge in a passion of admiration and exclusivity that parallels what can happen between two people."[16] This is

consistent with Maimonides' model of human love as a reflection of or a model for Divine love.

Another text illustrates the similarity between the intimacy shared by two loving partners and the intimacy shared by God and Israel. Talmud *Pesachim* teaches that the relationship between God and the people of Israel is a marriage.[17] God, the groom, is betrothed to the community of Israel. Israel, the bride, is arrayed in beauty and awaits her groom. The Torah represents the *ketubah*, the wedding contract between God and the people of Israel. This beautiful symbol of the intimate relationship between God and the Jewish people also includes the concept that the relationship requires a legal document in order for it to be binding. God and Israel, just like human partners, are bound together in a relationship of obligation.

Humans bind themselves to God in another way when they put on *tefilin* in preparation for morning prayer. After *tefilin* are placed on the arm and forehead and the accompanying blessings are recited, the last step is to wind the strap three times around the middle finger. At this point, the following blessing is recited: "I will betroth you to me forever, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in kindness and in mercy. I will betroth you to Myself in faithfulness, and you shall know Adonai."[18] The text comes directly from the book of Hosea 2:21-22. In the seventeenth century, the rabbis chose to include this verse as part of the blessing for putting on *tefilin*,[19] making a statement about the connection between people, prayer, and God. Reuven Hammer teaches that the straps of the *tefilin* around the fingers remind us of a wedding ring, and that the seven windings around the arm are a symbol of the seven wedding blessings.[20] He writes that the act of putting on *tefilin* suggests a relationship of affection and intimacy with God.

Contained within the boxes of *tefilin* are the words from the *Shema* and *V'ahavta* prayers. As Jews are commanded to recite these prayers twice each day, this provides opportunities each day to speak about and reflect on the intimate relationship between God and the Jewish people. The words of the *Shema* and *V'ahavta* focus on a love relationship with the One God. Not only are we instructed to love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our might, we also are instructed to recite these words when we lie down and when we rise up. Reflecting the words of the prayer, Maimonides teaches in *Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah) that a person must direct his ears and all his deeds to God in his sitting down and his rising up.[21] Berger explains that this means that we should be consumed with thoughts of God just as one who is in love might be consumed with thoughts of that person.[22] The commandment to love God, indeed to think about God, is repeated twice each day, once while wearing *tefilin*, reminding Jews repeatedly of the intimate connection between God and ourselves.

The liturgy for Shabbat reflects the love between God and Israel in the poem *Lecha Dodi*. Composed by Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz in the 16th century, this poem welcomes Shabbat as a bride: "Beloved, come to meet the bride; beloved come to greet Shabbat... As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, your God takes joy in you."[23] Shabbat is welcomed like a bride, and God is like the bridegroom. One of the verses exclaims that on Shabbat, we are like the bride and God rejoices in us. Reuven Kimelman explains that the poem describes the mutual love that God and Israel have for each other, and the love that God and Israel both have for Shabbat.[24] He comments that the poem is about the love of a bride and groom, and adds that "*dodi*" is not just an earthly husband but is also the "divine groom."[25] Continuing the marriage metaphor, Kimelman explains that God, Shabbat and Israel are three partners in

marriage. The Hebrew word meaning "to sanctify" (*l'kadesh*) also means "to betroth." Thus, when God sanctified Shabbat and Israel, God took them both as brides. Kimelman concludes that on Shabbat, both human and divine meet.[26] If the literal marriage relationship leads to a deeper intimacy between God and humans, then that intimacy might be heightened on Shabbat, the metaphoric wedding day.

The book of *Shir Ha-Shirim* includes poetic texts that have been interpreted to reflect the love and intimacy between God and the Jewish people. Harlan Weschler even refers to the relationship between God and Jews in *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a "grand romance."[27] It is a romance of love and of choice. One of the most striking of the *Shir Ha-Shirim* texts reflects the longing that people have for God and their desire to grow closer to God.

> I was asleep, but my heart was awake. Hark! My lover knocks! Let me in, my sister, my darling, my love, my innocent girl. My head is wet with dew, my curls with the spray of night.[28]

Kravitz and Olitzky explain that this verse tells the story of a young woman who is recounting a dream filled with yearning. The woman's lover is standing outside her room and is asking permission to enter.[29] In addition to its literal and narrative message, these scholars claim that the text is also an allegory about experiencing a sexual union with God.[30] People seek to be as intimate as possible with their Creator. Joseph Soloveitchik writes that the Beloved refers to the Almighty, the one who "...wandered the paths of vineyards... in search of her Lover."[31] God longs for a life with the Lover, a life filled with "desire and joy."[32] This seems to imply that the desire is mutual. God wants to be close to us as much as we want to be close to God. This is a concept we have seen in previous literature. If we consider the Maimonides teaching that loving each other leads to loving God, then this Song of Songs text exemplifies the emotionally intimate relationship we share with the Divine.

References to the connections between human love and Divine love are found in modern scholarship and curricula as well as in Jewish text and liturgy. The spirituality of relationship is beautifully captured in the following teaching of Martin Buber: "When a man is intimate with his wife, the longing of the eternal hills wafts about them. The relation to a human being is the proper metaphor for the relation to God."[33] Bradley Shavit Artson mirrors the sentiment of Maimonides when he writes that our love of each other is an expression of God's love: "God loves through us, and we love God, in part, by loving each other."[34] Harold M. Schulweiss teaches that God can be found in the partnership between two people: "The image of God is burnished through relationship... Godliness is experienced through attachment with an other... When two honor the Image of the Divine within each other, there God resides."[35] Contemporary scholarship continues the teaching that love between two people is a pathway to spirituality and a means for each individual to become closer to God.

Conclusions

Jewish tradition is rich with teachings on the connections between love and spirituality. For Maimonides, a universal goal is to know another person and to love God. Thus, the institution of marriage can help each partner nourish his or her own personal connection to God. The relationship each partner has with a spouse, a relationship that should be characterized by friendship and companionship, serves as a pathway toward a closer relationship with God. Marriage can help lead to spiritual perfection. In *Hilchot Ishut*, Maimonides outlines the responsibilities of husbands toward their wives and the responsibilities of wives toward their husbands. These include the obligation to honor one's

spouse; men also are required to love their wives (*ahava*), and women are required to fear or be in awe of their husbands (*yirah*). Through a combination of love, honor and respect, husband and wife help nurture appropriate characteristics within the other, thereby helping each one develop a closer relationship with God.

The themes of love, marriage, and spirituality emerge not only in text but also in liturgy, in modern scholarship, in teaching and in counseling. The words of our daily and Shabbat liturgy provide continuing opportunities to reflect on the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Modern scholars offer their own insights into the ways that modern relationships can aid in spiritual development. Engaged and married couples can reflect on these concepts and use them to help develop and nurture their relationships with one another and their relationships with God. In doing so, they have the opportunity to deepen their connections to Judaism and the Jewish people.

For those who accept the idea that our personal relationships can lead to a closer relationship with God, what might this mean? Whether as individuals or in a partnership with another person, how might we use these teachings to deepen our connection to God? We can begin by taking steps to develop our personal relationships, thereby developing our relationship with God. This might mean changing the way we view one another, improving our communication with the other, or cultivating faithfulness (Hosea 2:22), righteousness, justice, kindness, and mercy (Hosea 2:21). Furthermore, if we view gender differences in Maimonides' teachings as having meaning in their own time but not in ours, then we might search for the value in all the qualities of love, honor and respect. We might even go so far as to regard our partner as royalty and admire him or her as if he or she were a beloved and capable leader. Alternatively, if we are involved in relationships that do not aid our spiritual

development, we can acknowledge that these relationships might need to be improved or repaired or changed. Finally, we can search for personal relevance in text and in liturgy. Each time we read certain passages or recite certain blessings, we can take those opportunities to reflect on the ways in which our spiritual union with God is reflected in our spiritual unions with each other.

What does it mean to deepen our connection with God through our own spiritual unions? If we hear a knocking, what is our response? Joseph Soloveitchik explains that when the Beloved knocks on the door of the "love-intoxicated, anxiety-stricken"[36] Lover, the Lover completely misses the opportunity out of pure laziness. Tragically, she is overcome by a "strange inertia."[37] Her Beloved is standing there at her door, burning with desire and beckoning persistently, and the Lover completely misses the opportunity to respond. As a result, her existence becomes a "desert, a storehouse of emptiness."[38] We learn from Jewish tradition in the words of Tanakh, Maimonides, and our liturgy that our relationship to God can be strengthened by means of a relationship with a human partner. For without God, our lives too would be empty storehouses. When we hear the knocking of our Beloved, whether that Beloved is God or another human being who, in loving partnership, can help deepen a connection to God, let us not miss the chance to respond.

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[4] Hyman, Arthur. *Maimonides*. In Fred Skolnick and Michael Berenbaum (Eds), Encyclopedia Judaica. Second Edition, vol. 13. New York: Thompson Gale, 2007, p. 392.

[5] Ibid.

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[13] Ibid., p. 176.

[14] Ibid., p. 172.

[15] Jewish Publication Society. Hebrew-English Tanakh. Philadelphia, 1999. Deuteronomy 6:5.

[16] Borowitz, Eugene and Schwartz, Frances Weinman. The Jewish Moral Virtues. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999, p. 316.

[17] Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 95a.

[18] Frishman, Elyse. Mishkan Tefila: A Reform Siddur. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007.

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Touger, Rabbi Eliyahu (Ed.). Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah, The Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah. New York: Moznaim Publishing Corp., 1994. Chapter 3:2.

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[25] Ibid.

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[27] Weschler, Harlan J. What's So Bad About Guilt? New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990, p. 174.

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[30] Ibid., p. 61.

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CHAYEI HATALMIDIM

THE LIVES OF THE SCHOLARS:

EXPLORING METAPHOR AND IMAGERY OF WOMEN IN THE TALMUD

Karen Sherman

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Professor Joel Gereboff

Introduction

The phrase may not appear in Talmudic literature, but it would not be uncommon in modern times to hear, "That woman is as large as a house!" In a modern context, this phrase insults and degrades a woman, making an exaggerated, unflattering comparison to a house. The listener might then form a judgment of the woman based on that comparison. Today, this judgment would not be positive or desirable. But this same comparison may have served a different purpose in Talmudic times.

The rabbis of the Talmud use metaphor, simile, imagery, and other linguistic devices to describe women in their own times. They often use the word *bayit* (house) to refer to women. Whether or not this is a positive image will be explored later. Women are not compared only to the *bayit*. In positive contexts, good women are compared to Torah and to a gift. In negative contexts, evil women are compared to a rainy day, to *Gehinnom* (the equivalent of hell), to *tzara'at* (skin disease), and to something that is worse than death.

Why did the rabbis describe women in terms other than the literal? What purpose did this serve in their time, and what effect does their use of language have on our reading and understanding of the text? What is the role of language in rabbinic literature, and what do we learn from the rabbis' treatment of women through language? Responses to these questions will be considered through a review of women in selected texts from the Talmud, an exploration of the relationships between men and women in the Talmud, and an analysis of how women are described using different forms of language in rabbinic literature. Throughout this exploration, we will see that metaphor and imagery are frequently used to establish the rabbis' idea of the ideal life. A focus on the uses of metaphor and imagery will

reveal that these strategies helped men understand how to view and treat women within their social context.

The Role of Women in Talmud

What is the value in discussing the role of women in the text, especially considering that the texts were written by men and for men? The redactors of the Talmud were trying to understand their world. Through the texts, they explored, debated, and attempted to resolve tensions in their own lives. Their relationships with women constituted a central tension, one that they attempted to resolve through their attention to women in the text. While women may not have written or studied the texts, they certainly constituted a central topic contained within them. As men sought to live ideal lives, they used discussion and arguments in the text to work through the tensions between them and the women with whom they lived.

The Talmud speaks of women as they relate to the lives of men. Jacob Neusner writes that the Mishnah is interested in this relationship at points of transfer of women, including marriage and divorce.[1] It is at these points that transfers of property take place. The Mishnah, Neusner writes, attempts to work through the requirements of a system in which ownership of women changes hands and property changes hands with them. Jeffrey Rubenstein agrees that the Talmud speaks of women, especially on the topic of marriage.[2] He writes that Talmudic stories provide a way for men to think about their marriages. Lest we think that the Talmud might influence men to make changes in their relationships with women, Rubenstein adds that the purpose of Talmudic stories is to stimulate thought and not necessarily to change behavior.

Perhaps the discussion of women in the text can change our behavior. The way we understand women in the text can influence our own views of the relationships between men and women in rabbinic times and today. According to Marjorie Lehman, women are significant in the Talmud in many cases because of the role they serve in illuminating larger concepts. She writes that women are used as literary devices that the rabbis use to "think with."[3] Lehman argues that the contradicting views of women in the text provide evidence of the rabbis' ambivalence toward women. While they sometimes see women as passive objects, the rabbis also are aware that women are contributing members of society who can exercise some degree of choice. Furthermore, though women did not write the texts, today's men and women study the messages of the texts. Charlotte Fonrobert claims that even though women's voices are often silent in the texts themselves, the Talmudic texts do indeed belong to women.[4]

The Role of Metaphor in Talmud

Metaphor has the potential to affect our understanding of material we read or hear. It can open our eyes to new possibilities in meaning, providing a unique comparison to set a particular concept in a specific context. In her dissertation on metaphor and marriage, Gail Labovitz explains that metaphor is an integral part of our conceptual system. She further notes that metaphor is fundamental to reasoning, that it serves as one of "our means of understanding and structuring our everyday interactions with the world around us and our experiences in/of it."[5] Used in rabbinic literature, metaphor can help us understand interactions between the rabbis as well as interactions between the rabbis and the wider society in which they lived and functioned. Labovitz claims that the rabbis used metaphor as

a means of helping them understand gender and marriage relationships.[6] Perhaps the use of metaphor helped them express ideas, fears and their concept of the ideal life in a way that could not be expressed by direct language alone. Regarding the use of metaphor, Rachel Adler writes: "The language for speaking to and about God is metaphoric. It points toward truths and encounters that can never be wholly captured in words."[7] Perhaps this is true for rabbinic literature as well. The rabbis might not have been able to wholly capture their concept of the ideal life without the use of metaphor and imagery.

If metaphor was useful to help the rabbis express and understand their concept of the ideal life, then it might have been even more useful in their discussions of the ideal life with women. Though it objectified women, the *bayit* metaphor expressed the rabbis' idea that women represented the stability and comfort of the home. Labovitz writes that through metaphor, women and women's bodies are associated with houses and dwelling-places, and that it is through these metaphors that the rabbis construct their ideas of gender, sexuality and marriage.[8] She notes that within rabbinic literature, metaphors imply that women are ownable and that marriage is equivalent to the acquisition of property.[9] Similar to slaves, animals and property, women can be acquired, owned, bought and sold.[10]

The status of women also is communicated through the use of metaphors related to food and sex. Labovitz introduces sources that point to the metaphor of women as sexual food for men.[11] She notes that the discussion of forbidden food in Yoma 67a and 74b really refers to adultery and a woman's forbidden partner.[12] She also mentions that food metaphors sometimes are used to indicate sexual sin, and that eating is used as a metaphor to describe adulterous women.[13] Labovitz claims that these discussions illustrate the rabbis'

ambivalence toward women's sexual agency.[14] They serve as an instruction regarding proper sexual behavior.

Daniel Boyarin argues that the metaphors related to food and sex are not unique to rabbinic Judaism, and that they are used to convey messages not always related to gender relationships or sexual behavior.[15] He believes that when food metaphors are used in a Talmudic discussion of improper sexual behavior, the metaphors are used not to teach about the sexual behavior *per se* but to teach that such behavior leads to immoral or physically deficient children. Elsewhere, when a discussion on how to prepare food might be read as referring to sexual relationships, Boyarin argues that this is really an instruction on how to prepare food in accordance with the laws of *kashrut*. In this passage in Nedarim 20a-b, Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yochanan ben Dahabai use food metaphors to discuss the consequences of improper sexual behavior. Labovitz explains that this discussion is really a metaphor for gender relationships; it teaches that just as one can prepare food in any manner, a husband may treat his wife however he wishes.[16] Furthermore, Labovitz claims that these metaphors are used to convey ideas about male power and control over women.[17] Our reading of these metaphors influences our understanding of the rabbis' experience. How do we understand the rabbi's comparison of women to issues of ownership, property, and sexual behavior? Moreover, what do these metaphors tell us about the rabbis' experience of the relationships between men and women?

Relationships between Men and Women in the Talmud

Men in the Talmud find themselves in a difficult predicament. On one hand, they understand the teaching of Genesis that it is not good for man to be alone.[18] On the other hand, rabbinic literature teaches men that the study of Torah is paramount and that its value far surpasses other pursuits. Men understand the value of marriage, the concerns about improper sexual activity, and the commandment to procreate; at the same time, they need their wives to enable them to study Torah.

Jeffrey Rubenstein aptly describes this tension between two *mitzvot*.[19] In order for a man to fulfill the commandment to procreate with his wife, and in order for him to fulfill the obligation to satisfy her conjugal rights, he must spend time at home. In order for that same man to fulfill the commandment to study Torah, he must spend some time away from home in the *beit midrash*. Rubenstein writes, "Torah study competes with the wife for the erotic attention of her scholarly husband."[20] This tension is revealed in Ketubot 62b, where the Talmud delineates the conjugal duties of husbands based on their professions. The assumption that Torah scholars are men of leisure who are obligated to fulfill conjugal duties weekly presents a unique problem. A husband would not be able to engage in Torah study for any length of time if he is bound to the home by his obligations. The Mishna grants an exception for these scholars, giving them permission to leave the home for a month at a time if the purpose of their absence is to study Torah. The eventual message conveyed by this tension, says Rubenstein, is that pursuing a life of Torah involves significant trade-offs and sacrifices at home.[21] Families and relationships may suffer, but this is the result of a man's attempt to achieve the ideal life that combines family and study of Torah.

Boyarin agrees that there is a sexual component to the tension between marriage and Torah study: "A man's erotic energy is devoted to the love of Torah; there is none left for a woman."[22] Clearly, men need to make choices between lives at home with women and families, and lives in the *beit midrash* with teachers and fellow students of Torah. In the ideal life of the scholars, a balance would be achieved between the two.

Whether or not the ideal balance may be achieved, men and women need each other. Women need men because men help establish women's identities. Serenity Young writes that in most cases in literature of the Mishnaic period, women are understood not as individuals but as people who are legally and intimately related to males.[23] Married women therefore would enjoy a heightened social status because marriage was the expectation. A woman who does not have a husband has an identity that is unclear, if not problematic. Daniel Boyarin explains that the status and prestige of women are defined through the spiritual and intellectual achievements of their husbands.[24]

We might think that only women need men, but husbands also need their wives. While fathers are obligated to teach their sons Torah (among other things), mothers are the ones who have primary responsibility for the home. Because of this arrangement, husbands and fathers may have the time and freedom to study Torah. Furthermore, women are responsible for keeping Judaism alive at home. Marjorie Lehman teaches that wives define the festival observance in the home.[25] In fact, the wife's influence on her husband extends even further than Jewish ritual and practice. Lehman goes so far as to say that a man's identity depends on acknowledging women and the social framework in which she exists.[26]

The most poignant example of men needing their wives comes from the well-known Akiva story in Ketubot 62a.[27] As mentioned, the ideal life for a man is one in which is he

married to a woman who will enable him to study Torah. As the story goes, Akiva ben Yoseph is a young shepherd who falls in love with Rachel, the daughter of the very wealthy Kalba Savua. When Akiva asks Rachel to marry him, she consents only on the condition that he would agree to study Torah and receive a Jewish education. The two become engaged despite the fact that Rachel's father doesn't want her to marry a poor, uneducated man. Rachel tells her husband that she will stay home, care for their infant son, and support her husband so that he can leave home to study Torah. She even sells her hair and sends the money to him! Akiva acknowledges the love and support of his wife in front of all his scholars, and the two eventually reunite with and are accepted by Rachel's father.

The relationship between Rabbi Akiva and his wife Rachel is rabbinically ideal. Though her husband is away from the home, Rachel enjoys a special position and privilege as the wife of a Torah scholar. Though they are poor and cannot afford nice clothes or nice things for their home, Akiva and Rachel both believe that the study of Torah is more important than material wealth and even more important than residing together. Akiva does not reside in the home that Rachel keeps and maintains, yet she represents his stability and gives him the freedom to study. This relationship is consistent with themes of gender relationships within rabbinic literature. Women need their husbands in order to establish and maintain their own identities, and men need their wives if they are to be observant Jews who maintain that ideal balance between home and study. Since the study of Torah is especially valued, the wife who enables her husband to study Torah is especially valued as well.

Descriptions of Women in Rabbinic Literature

Women in rabbinic literature often are described in terms of marriage, sex and the home. Michael Satlow documents the well-known marriage metaphor in which the relationship between God and Israel is viewed as a marriage.[28] Marriage is like the covenant between God and Israel. Satlow explains that this was later understood to characterize the human marriage relationship as well. A husband should be to his wife as God is to Israel. Marriage should, to some extent, mirror the ideal covenantal relationship between God and Israel.[29] Although the relationship is not necessarily egalitarian, it is a relationship of mutual obligation, loyalty, and sanctity.

The frequently-used term "*bayit*" used for women implies that women serve the functions of a home. This term is used, among other places, in Gittin 52a, Baba Metzia 87a, and Shabbat 118b. Charlotte Fonrobert writes that women in rabbinic literature are synonymous with the home.[30] Not only is a woman's place *in* the home, she writes, but women *are* the home. The term *bayit* expresses *what* men want or understand women to be as well as *where* they want women to be. The fact that the rabbis speak of women's confinement to the house indicates their belief that women belong inside the house. Fonrobert specifies that the *bayit* metaphor really refers only to a married woman and not to an unmarried woman.[31] She explains further that when rabbinic literature says that a husband has exclusive rights to his house, it also means that he has exclusive rights to his wife's capacity to reproduce.[32] However, she is careful to point out that this same right does not belong to the woman.

Metaphors for married women become even more specific in Yevamot, where additional qualities of wives are considered. Yevamot 63a begins by describing the overall

importance of having a wife, and later sections go into more detail about the differences between a good wife and an evil wife. A wife is not only of utmost importance, she also ensures for her husband a life of happiness, blessing and goodness that might not be found outside of marriage.

This is illustrated clearly in Yevamot 63a, where Tanchuma states in the name of Chanilai that a man who lives without a wife lives without happiness, without blessing and without goodness.[33] These qualities are then defined through biblical citations. The phrase "without happiness" refers to a quote from Deuteronomy that a man will rejoice in his wife.[34] Interestingly, the word for wife here is *bayit*, indicating again that the wife provides the stability of the household. Understood in this context, the man with a wife and a stable household enjoys a type or a level of happiness that an unmarried man does not. The phrase "without blessing" refers to a quote from Ezekiel that a man will enjoy blessing in his wife.[35] Again, the word *bayit* is used to refer to the wife/house that provides that blessing. The final phrase "without goodness" refers to a quote in Genesis that states, "It is not good for a man to be alone."[36] This is perhaps one of the strongest statements that men should have a partner to provide companionship. In this case, that companion also provides goodness that a man without a partner might not experience. In the eyes of the rabbis, the ideal life is one that includes a wife, and the ideal life is one of happiness, blessing and goodness.

While having a wife is important for a man, loving that wife is even more critical. Yevamot states that a man without a wife is not even a man![37] What greater threat could there be to a man's masculinity or self-worth as a human being! Yet it is not enough to have a wife; he must love her as well. The rabbis taught that a man who loves his wife as himself and honors her more than he honors himself "will know peace in his tent."[38] It might be a

given that the married man has the gifts of happiness, blessing and goodness, but for that man to have a peaceful home, he must also love his wife and honor her more than he loves and honors himself. Peace is the ultimate benefit of the partnership of marriage.

Even if a man is married, and even if he loves and honors his wife more than he loves and honors himself, the benefits of marriage extend only to those men who have good wives. Yevamot compares good wives to commonly-known positive images and compares evil wives to annoying and even deadly images. The most complimentary image is the comparison of a good wife to a gift. "It is written in the Book of Sira that a good woman is a gift to her husband."[39] In the very next sentence, the rabbis teach that an evil wife is like *tzara'at* to her husband. *Tzara'at*, usually defined as a skin disease, is so repulsive that if it is found on the walls of one's house, the house must be destroyed. If a woman is a *bayit*, then one can only imagine what must happen to the woman who is compared to such a condition!

In another teaching, an evil wife is even worse than *tzara'at*.[40] *Tzara'at* must be removed from the walls of a house, and maybe the evil wife herself must be removed. But the evil wife is also compared to the dripping on a rainy day.[41] That wife is difficult to avoid. She lingers around even when she is not wanted. She is a constant source of annoyance that is neither invited nor welcomed. Thus, the ideal life is to be married to a woman, but only if the woman is a good wife. Worse than *tzara'at* and worse than the dripping on a rainy day, the evil wife is "more bitter than death."[42] She is even compared to *Gehinnom* (the equivalent of hell). The man who learned that marriage is ideal would be better off not married at all than married to an evil wife.What are the rabbis trying to convey through their use of positive and negative images of women and wives? Satlow says that these verses

demonstrate the rabbis' ambivalence about marriage and the mixed nature of marriage in general.[43] He believes that the purpose of this commentary on women and wives is not to resolve the ambivalence but to have a forum in which to complain about it.[44] We will never know for sure what the rabbis were trying to teach or why they chose to teach it in this manner. Nevertheless, their message is clear. A good wife is to be desired, and an evil wife is to be avoided. Once we have an idea of how the rabbis might have viewed women and marriage, how does our impression of that view influence our contemporary reading and understanding of the text?

Influence of Metaphor and Imagery on our Reading of the Text

Many of the descriptions of women in rabbinic literature are metaphoric in nature. Why would the rabbis have chosen to describe women in this way, and what purpose does the use of metaphor serve? At minimum, describing women in metaphoric terms likely made it possible for the rabbis to discuss difficult subjects. Perhaps they used metaphor to describe sexuality because they were uncomfortable with direct conversations about sexuality. Furthermore, it is possible that the use of metaphor prevented them from saying outright things that would have been objectionable. They could use language that would have been considered inappropriate in a literal context but appropriate in a metaphoric sense. Perhaps metaphors helped the rabbis to better understand concepts and/or people who seemed foreign to them. Alternatively, perhaps using metaphor helped them draw closer to women when they otherwise seemed so distant.

Whether or not the rabbis used metaphor for these reasons, what is the effect of such use of metaphor on us as modern readers? How does it influence our understanding of the

text? What does it tell us about how they viewed women in their society? Metaphor provides us with a window into their lives and ours. It helps us to see not only how they understood their lives but also how they chose to express that understanding. We tend to read our own meaning into the text, from our own perspective and from a modern context. Jeffrey Rubenstein argues that any literary analysis of Talmudic literature should take into account contextual factors.[45] Context influences the text, and text is influenced by its context.

If read out of context, comparing a woman to a house is hardly flattering, and most would agree that it is offensive. However, a more accurate and meaningful reading would consider the text in its own context. While the comparison might objectify women in our context, it might have elevated women in theirs. The comparison of women to a house may have symbolized stability, comfort, familiarity and peace. These are all positive images that may have been associated with wives in Talmudic times. The descriptions of women and marriage carry with them positive or negative images that can be defined only by considering context in our exploration and understanding of the text.

Teaching Opportunities

With the awareness that the rabbis described women in both positive and negative terms, and with the awareness that they used metaphor and other imagery to do so, how can we utilize these teachings in contemporary Jewish contexts? This material is educationally rich with practical and personal lessons for various learning audiences. Learners may find different meaning and value in the text, depending on their need, context and situation.

This material could be valuable for formal and informal educational settings for youth. In the classroom, in youth group, and at camp, youth could explore the ways they treat each other and could even explore their own use of metaphor and imagery when referring to the opposite gender. A focus on the positive imagery could be especially valuable. Youth might learn that women are to be valued, that they could be considered gifts, and that they therefore should be treated with care. Even the negative imagery could be valuable. The Talmud teaches that rather than try to change the behavior of someone who is evil to another person, that person should be avoided and even removed from one's home. A related contemporary message might teach that friends who perpetuate evil should not be welcomed into one's home. The messages of metaphor are particularly useful educational tools. Youth tend to speak about the opposite gender in metaphoric terms that are not always complimentary. They could be challenged to explore the consequences of the use of metaphors and images. Often, metaphor is a tool to help speak comfortably about issues that might be difficult or embarrassing to discuss using direct language. Yet at the same time, even positive imagery can depersonalize and dehumanize. Lessons designed around these themes could give youth the opportunity to explore their relationships and their treatment of friends.

Similarly, these lessons that address relationships between men and women could offer valuable messages in adult education settings. Adults could be encouraged to think about how men and women relate to each other and what language they use when speaking about one another. They could be challenged to think about whether they use direct or indirect language and to think about how indirect language might compliment or offend others. Adult partners might also find value in exploring what happens when traditional male

and female images do not apply to their own relationships. For example, if a male partner does not view his wife as his "*bayit*" in the Talmudic sense, can he still view her as a gift in a contemporary sense? Alternatively, in relationships between men and men, do they see each other as gifts even though the Talmudic imagery refers only to women? Setting aside the focus on marriage, can a male who chooses to remain unmarried still have a life that is characterized by happiness, blessing and goodness? Adults could explore these issues on a deeper level and could be encouraged to think about how language and metaphor influence their own partnerships.

Older adults might find new meaning in these metaphors as their relationships change due to illness, death, and other types of loss. For example, what happens when a man's wife dies and she no longer represents his stability or familiarity in the home? If he viewed her as a gift when she was alive, how can that metaphor continue to be meaningful even when that gift is no longer with him? If he is no longer married, can he still find happiness, blessings and goodness in his home? Will he still have peace in his tent even if he is alone? If the relationship was a particularly difficult one, can he find comfort in knowing that the dripping of the rain will no longer trouble him? These issues could be addressed in study or support groups for older adults whose partners no longer represent the *bayit* they once knew.

These issues might be most valuable for work with couples who are preparing for marriage. These couples could be encouraged to think about their ideal balance in life—how will they balance work and home, what will represent stability for them, and how will they enable their partners to do the kinds of work that they find fulfilling? Each partner could be encouraged to consider what he or she requires in order to live the kind of life that he or she wants and expects to lead. Each one can think about what kind of support he or she needs

from his or her partner and how each one plans to support the other. Couples preparing for marriage can explore together their plans for creating partnerships that allow them as individuals to live the lives they want to lead.

Couples can use this information as a foundation to explore how they will resolve tensions in their own marriages. Will they, as the rabbis did, write down their conversations for future generations to read? This is possible through such means as journals or ethical wills. Will they, as the rabbis did, discuss their relationships with their peers? This was possible for the rabbis in the *beit midrash*, but in contemporary times could be possible in support groups, in *chavurot*, and in Torah study groups. Will they, as the rabbis did, seek good in their marriages and remove evil from their homes? This is especially possible if they view each other as gifts and use imagery that describes each other in complimentary ways.

Conclusion

The rabbis used the Talmud as a forum to express their desires for an ideal life and to explore the tensions in attaining that life. According to the teachings of Yevamot, a married man would enjoy happiness, blessing and goodness. As long as the man's wife was good and not evil, she would be like a gift to him. As long as she maintained his home and enabled him to study Torah, he could feel fulfilled. As long as he loved his wife as himself and honored her more than he honored himself, his home would be filled with peace.

Rachel Adler teaches that metaphor "...has a trajectory, during which it may accumulate meanings unanticipated (or even undesired) by its originators."[46] Adler acknowledges that we might read a message into or out of a metaphor, and our reading may be one that was not intended by the rabbis. Furthermore, Adler encourages students of

Talmud by saying that those messages can continue to move us. She explains that although metaphor can be incomplete, we readers fill in the gaps. We relate them to a reality that we can understand. Our reality may or may not view women as property or as food. In fact, from the perspective of our own reality, we might judge the views of the rabbis quite harshly. But if we attempt to read the Talmud from its own context and provide a trajectory that acknowledges our own, we might find new and even useful messages that are relevant in our own time and meaningful for our own relationships.

In our time, we can use the teachings of the rabbis to help us explore our own concepts of the ideal life. Speaking about other people using metaphor and imagery is helpful because it avoids having to speak directly about difficult subjects, but the terms we use impact our judgments of people as well as people's judgments of themselves. In the end, the way we speak about people also affects the way we treat them. In our relationships, do we treat our partners as a gift to be treasured or as a disease that must be eliminated? Today, there are varied and multiple concepts of the ideal life. Achieving a desired balance between enjoying the stability of the home and fulfilling an ambition to work or study demands honest conversation between partners and family members. The ideal life of the rabbis may be a thing of the past, but their teachings can be valuable in helping us to attain whatever we imagine to be the ideal life of today.

As we apply the teachings of the Talmud to our own lives and our own relationship, may we use metaphor and imagery to convey positive images of each other.

May we treat our loved ones as treasured gifts.

May our homes be filled with happiness, blessing, goodness and peace.

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