

Talmud portion (with commentary)

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I thought that perhaps I would avoid the mistake the wealthy woman in the following story makes:

A matron asked [a question of] R. Yose bar Halafta. She said to him, "In how many days did the Holy One Blessed be He create the world?" He said to her, "In six days." She said to him, "What has He been doing since then until now?" He said to her, "The Holy One Blessed be He has been making matches: the daughter of so-and-so to so-and-so. The wife of so-and-so to so-and-so." She said to him, "This is the extent of His art?! I can do the same thing. How many menservants, how many maidservants do I have! In no time at all, I can match them up." He said to her, "If [this is] easy in your eyes, it is as hard for the Holy One Blessed be He as splitting the Red Sea."

R. Yose bar Halafta went away. What did she do? She took a thousand menservants and a thousand maidservants, lined them up in row upon row facing one another, and she said, "This man shall marry that woman, and this woman shall marry that man," and so she matched them all up in a single night. The next day, the ones thus matched came to the lady, one with his head bloodied, one with her eye knocked out, another with her leg broken. She said to them, "What [happened] to you?" One woman said, "I don't want that man," and a man said, "I don't want that woman."

(Immediately she sent to have R. Yose bar Halafta brought to her. She said to him, "My gods are not like your God. Your Torah is true, pleasant, worthy and worthy of praise.") (**Genesis Rabbah 68:4**)

Commentary

Here the matron questions Rabbi Yose bar Halafta (who is frequently portrayed in rabbinic literature as teaching women). The story is pretty straightforward until you come to the end. Why is it in parentheses? Because it isn't contained in every manuscript. Consider this with your study partner. How is the story changed when that part is left out? Could the matron then as plausibly be a Jew as a non-Jew? What kind of woman is she? Is the story plausible as "history" or is it a fable? Could there have been a real incident from which this story grew?

The concept that it is as difficult for God to make matches as it was to part the Red Sea is also found in **B. Sotah 2a** and **B. Sanhedrin 22a-b**.

There, in Sanhedrin, we have some lovely material about the depth of the connection between husband and wife, particularly the pain one spouse feels upon the death of another. There, we also have cited the teaching that when a man divorces his first wife even the altar in the Temple weeps, that anything can be replaced except the wife of one's youth, etc. (Yes, it's sexist. They were men writing about men and for men. Having said that, let's get past their sexism and recognize that if we translate their ideas into our own world and include women, we'll see and feel how powerful their insights were. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater!) Feel free to check out the surrounding material to the following passage which sheds light on the Midrash cited, above:

Rabbah bar Bar Hannah said in Rabbi Yohanan's name: To effect a union between man and woman is as difficult as the dividing of the Red Sea, as it is written, "God makes the solitary dwell in houses, He brings out the prisoners unto prosperity. (Psalm 68:7)" But is it really so? Did not Rav Judah say in Rav's name: Forty days before the embryo is formed, a heavenly voice goes forth and says: The daughter of so and so for so and so? *There is no difficulty: this applies to the first marriage; the earlier statement to the second.* (**B. Sanhedrin 22a**)

Here we have a chance to explore a theoretical issue. We have two opposing views. One says that matching people is incredibly difficult. The other maintains that matches are predestined and done automatically, ala a mail sorter, before birth. Both views are probably right. We experience match making as incredibly arduous and impute our difficulties to God. God, on the other hand, finds it easy. These are two valid views which should have been allowed to stand in tension.

But "uh-oh!"...here comes the anonymous editor of the Bavli, the stamma, as David Weiss-Halivni calls it. (I call it "Mr. Footnote Guy" because this material is like a footnote that was placed in the body of the text itself.) The material in the italics is classic stammaitic material: late, in Aramaic, anonymous and has a "split the difference" quality to it. Even if you can't read Hebrew, you'll readily begin to recognize this material as the separate stratum that it is. If you know Hebrew but not Aramaic, check to see if lots of words end in the letter aleph. If they do, that's probably an Aramaic sentence.

The stamma, aka "Mr. Footnote Guy", tries to reconcile the two views by making them apply to different periods of time, a standard approach. But is it productive? Does it matter? Discuss this with your partner. When have you experienced Rabbi Yohanan's vision of matchmaking? When have you experienced Rav's? How are both of them true?

Of course, this passage came to mind because I was going to match cyber-hevruta members with study partners and then I realized that was foolish and I ought to let people make their own matches. Truly, the Talmud is a great teacher!

I look forward to hearing your insights!

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