

The Biblical Marriage Covenant

By Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael December 1, 2012

Today, I want to talk to you about the biblical marriage covenant. "Why 'biblical' marriage," you may ask? Isn't all marriage biblical?" Well, it used to be that way, but it seems not anymore, as an increasing number of states legislate "marriage" to mean things that God never intended. But that is not why I chose to speak about marriage today. The reason I did is that counseling couples toward marriage, and ministering to families after marriage (including to children), are among the most important things that happen in any Messianic Jewish congregation, and they are high on the priority list of what I do as Ohev's pastoral leader. The covenant of marriage is a large topic to try and do justice to in 20 or so minutes, so fasten your seat belts, and here we go!

Genesis 2:18-24: "ADONAI, God, said, "It isn't good that the person should be alone. I will make for him a companion suitable for helping him." So from the ground ADONAI, God, formed every wild animal and every bird that flies in the air, and he brought them to the person to see what he would call them. Whatever the person would call each living creature, that was to be its name. So the person gave names to all the livestock, to the birds in the air and to every wild animal. But for Adam there was not found a companion suitable for helping him. Then God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the person; and while he was sleeping, he took one of his ribs and closed up the place from which he took it with flesh. The rib which ADONAI, God, had taken from the person, he made a woman-person; and he brought her to the man-person. The man-person said, "At last! This is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She is to be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." This is why a man is to leave his father and mother and stick with his wife, and they are to be one flesh."

Some translations say "man" instead of "person," and "cleave" instead of "stick," but no matter. The resulting "one flesh" makes the leaving and cleaving "covenantal" and, because it is introduced so early in Genesis, I refer to it as a "creation" covenant, to distinguish it from other covenants that were made later on. We commonly call this "creation" covenant "marriage" and, although Maimonides does not specifically refer to Genesis 2, he includes marriage in his compilation of six-hundred thirteen commandments with this statement:

"By this injunction we are commanded to take a woman to wife [only] by a binding ceremony: either by giving her something [of value], or by handing her a writ of marriage, or by intercourse [accompanied by a declaration of marriage]. This is the commandment regarding the marriage ceremony." ¹

Although Genesis 2:24 speaks of a "man" leaving his parents to join with his wife, the covenant of becoming "one flesh" cannot be fulfilled unless the wife similarly leaves her parents. The "leaving" of parents in the Genesis Scripture is not a reference to where newlyweds decide to

¹ Charles B. Chavel, The Commandments: Sefer Ha-Mitzvoth of Maimonides in two volumes, vol. 1, p.229, "The Law of Marriage," (London: The Soncino Press, 1967).

live. The Scripture is speaking of their need to leave the controlling influence of their respective parents – control that their parents rightly had over them when they were young, but which is improper and interfering if it continues when a child (man or woman) grows up and becomes married.

I believe the reason Genesis 2:24 reads the way it does, is that a man's responsibility to leave his parents is different from a woman's. It is the man's responsibility to take the initiative in leaving, but it is the woman's parents' responsibility to release her to her intended husband. The implication of her parents not doing so is, of course, obvious and, after marriage, problems result if either or both of the marrieds allow their earlier ties to their parents to continue.

Proverbs 22:6 says: *"Train a child in the way he [should] go; and, even when old, he will not swerve from it."* And Ephesians 6:1 says: *"Children, what you should do in union with the Lord is obey your parents, for this is right."* But there is another Scripture, 1 Corinthians 13:11 that says:

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, argued like a child; now that I have become a man, I have finished with childish ways."

There is a time in God's scheme of things when children and their parents must change the way they relate to each other so that this Scripture can be fulfilled. Upon marrying, children must be willing to step away from their parents, and parents must be willing to let them go by releasing them to their mates and to God. Although there are other times and reasons to release children as well (e.g. when children grow up and move out on their own), the primary time for parental release and for children leaving the nest, is when our children marry.

The concept of becoming "one flesh" is not only covenantal, but also mystical and not easy to comprehend. Mark 10:6-8 attempts to explain it by stating:

"However, at the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man should leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two are to become one flesh. Thus they are no longer two, but one."

Also, Ephesians 5:31-33 relates the phenomenon to Messiah and the Body of Believers by stating:

"Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and remain with his wife, and the two will become one." There is profound truth hidden here, which I say concerns the Messiah and the Messianic Community. However, the text also applies to each of you individually:"

This "oneness" of flesh possibly reminds us of the plural unity that we see in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are many other passages in the Bible about marriage – too many to cite, but here are two having to do with sex in marriage that are worth remembering:

1 Corinthians 7:1-2: *"Now to deal with the questions you wrote about: "Is it good for a man to keep away from women?" Well, because of the danger of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband."*

Hebrews 13:4a: *"Marriage is honorable in every respect; and, in particular, sex within marriage is pure."*

Now as for marrying or not marrying, some interpret Genesis 2:24, as being God's commandment that everyone marry. I do not see it that way, especially in light of Paul's remark in 1 Corinthians 7:8:

"Now to the single people and the widows I say that it is fine if they remain unmarried like me;"

And in verses 32 to 35 of his letter, Paul says:

"What I want is for you to be free of concern. An unmarried man concerns himself with the Lord's affairs, with how to please the Lord; but the married man concerns himself with the world's affairs, with how to please his wife; and he finds himself split. Likewise the woman who is no longer married or the girl who has never been married concerns herself with the Lord's affairs, with how to be holy both physically and spiritually; but the married woman concerns herself with the world's affairs, with how to please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to put restrictions on you- I am simply concerned that you live in a proper manner and serve the Lord with undivided devotion."

Scripture mentions several other reasons that some do not marry, which I will mention only for the sake of trying to be complete; they are in Matthew 19:12 which states:

"For there are different reasons why men do not marry- some because they were born without the desire, some because they have been castrated, and some because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever can grasp this, let him do so."

I believe that Scripture teaches that the norm of creation is to marry and procreate, but Scripture also allows for not doing so, and teaches that, in some cases, singleness is God's higher will for an individual. Still, marriage is portrayed in Scripture as a *simcha* (a happy event) – well, perhaps not in *Hosea's* case. But since it is a *simcha* for most of us, let's sample just a few of the most prominent weddings in the Bible:

Genesis 24:67: *"Then Yitz'chak brought her into his mother Sarah's tent and took Rivkah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. Thus was Yitz'chak comforted for the loss of his mother."*

1 Samuel 25:40-42: *"When David's servants reached Avigayil in Karmel, they said to her, "David has sent us to you to bring you to him to be his wife." She got up, bowed with her face to the ground, and said, "Your servant is here to serve you, to wash the feet of my lord's*

servants." Avigayil then hurried, set out and rode off on a donkey, with five of her female servants following her; she went after David's messengers; and she became his wife."

Ruth 4:10-13: *"Also I am acquiring as my wife Rut the woman from Mo'av, the wife of Machlon, in order to raise up in the name of the deceased an heir for his property; so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his kinsmen and from the gate of his place. You are witnesses today." All the people at the gate and the leaders said, "We are witnesses. May ADONAI make the woman who has come into your house like Rachel and like Le'ah, who between them built up the house of Isra'el. Do worthy deeds in Efrat; become renowned in Beit-Lechem. May your house, because of the seed ADONAI will give you from this young woman, become like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Y'hudah." So Bo'az took Rut, and she became his wife. He had sexual relations with her, ADONAI enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son."*

In deciding to give this message on marriage, I had not intended to speak about divorce, not only because it is controversial, but also because it is not a subject that any of us like to think about. But as I began to write, I realized that what Scripture has to say about divorce is part of what it has to say about marriage – it is the flip-side of the covenant, if you will – and cannot be avoided if one is to understand the entire biblical picture. I am currently collaborating with our *Shaliach* Dan Juster on writing a *mitzvah* on divorce for our book "New Covenant Torah," and believe me, it is not an easy subject. So I will endeavor to address it here only briefly – just enough to acquaint you with some of the Scriptures that speak about it, and to give you some understanding of the principles involved.

One of the difficulties in understanding the subject of divorce is that there is a New Covenant Scripture in which Yeshua appears to be contradicting Moses. In Matthew 19:7 he was asked:

"Then why did Moshe give the commandment that a man should hand his wife a get and divorce her?"

To which He answered in verse 8:

"Moshe allowed you to divorce your wives because your hearts are so hardened. But this is not how it was at the beginning."

On first appearance, what Yeshua says in verse 8 is a very strange. Is he saying that Moses encouraged the Israelites to do that which God prohibited? The answer is, of course, "no"! God does not want divorce and, in fact, we read in Malachi 2:15b-16a:

"Therefore, take heed to your spirit, and don't break faith with the wife of your youth. "For I hate divorce," says ADONAI the God of Isra'el,.."

Nevertheless, God never gave a commandment to the Israelites prohibiting divorce, and so what Yeshua was referring to when He said "*this is not how it was at the beginning.*" was the narrative in Genesis 2:24 that says:

"This is why a man is to leave his father and mother and stick with his wife, and they are to be one flesh."

In other words, Yeshua was referring to how God established marriage "*b'reishit*" – in the beginning – and not to some later commandment that Moses allegedly violated.

The various discussions and debates concerning divorce generally center around questions like: Who can initiate a divorce? For what reasons? And what are the implications for remarriage? These are the issues with which Dan and I are wrestling, and I am afraid you will have to wait for us to write our *mitzvah* to know where we stand on these things. Meanwhile, I think I can safely say this: God does not authorize anyone to break the covenant of marriage through divorce.

But what of Yeshua's words in Matthew 5:32 where He says:

"... But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of fornication, makes her an adulteress;"

Or Yeshua's similar words in Matthew 19:9?

"... whoever divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery!"

Isn't Yeshua authorizing the ending of marriages in which the husband or wife has committed adultery? The answer is: No! He is not giving permission for anyone to break their marriage covenant. Yes, He is authorizing divorce for the innocent party in such a situation, but only because the guilty party has already ended the marriage by breaking the marriage covenant. Under these circumstances, divorce does not break the covenant – it merely confirms, legally, that the covenant has been broken, and releases the innocent party to remarry if they so desire. Understand, though, that the innocent party is not obligated to seek a divorce. He or she has the option to forgive the breach of the covenant, and seek restoration of the marriage. The option is with the innocent party.

But there is the remaining question of why Deuteronomy 24:1-3 seems to support terminating marriages for seemingly trivial reasons; it reads:

"Suppose a man marries a woman and consummates the marriage but later finds her displeasing, because he has found her offensive in some respect. He writes her a divorce document, gives it to her and sends her away from his house. She leaves his house, goes and becomes another man's wife; but the second husband dislikes her and writes her a get, gives it to her and sends her away from his house .."

.. and so on! The Pharisees were not confused by this when they asked Yeshua about it; they were baiting Him! They understood (and we should also) that this passage of Scripture is not an authorization to divorce – it is a hypothetical meant to teach a point that is made in the verses that follow, that a husband cannot, after releasing his wife to another, later reclaim her.

Well, divorce is a heavy subject, and I would like to end this talk on a happy note because marriage is meant to be happy. So how shall I do it? I will tell you about my marriage to Marie, of almost thirty-nine years, that is truly happy. I wrote a poem to her, fifteen years ago, that I will share with you today; its title is, appropriately, "Marie," and it goes like this:

Marie, Marie, wife to me,
Without whose life I'd nowhere be.

Life...

Wife...

Selflessly...

Gift from God enduringly.

Marie, Marie, wife to me,
Devoted helpmate lovingly.

Love...

Dove...

Faithfully...

I thank God for you endlessly.