

BS"D Parashat Vayishlach 5783

Halachic Marriage

One of our grandsons was married this week; following is a translation of my message at the ceremony.

Halachic marriage is performed in two stages. The first is called "erusin" (mistakenly translated as engagement) which alters the personal status of the couple from "unwed" to "wed" (or betrothal). It is implemented by the chatan (groom) while presenting the kalla (bride) with a gift of even nominal monetary value, after declaring before the kalla and two halachically acceptable witnesses that the gift is being given with the intention of performing "erusin".

The second and last stage is "nisu'in" (marriage) when the kalla enters into an area belonging to the chatan or in his possession. This final stage brings into effect all the mutual halachic responsibilities between husband and wife.

From earliest times, the two stages of marriage were separated with an interlude of weeks, even months, when the bride returns to live with her family and the groom with his. This provides the parents with adequate time to prepare the wedding arrangements and a home for the new couple.

So, what we have is stage one "erusin," then an interlude followed by the last stage of "nisu'in," when the couple live together and establish their independent family.

The accepted practice today is to perform the "erusin" and "nisu'in" in succession, with a short interlude between them for reading the ketuva (marriage contract).

Questions: What is the source in the written Torah for the two stages and for the interlude between them?

Answer: The source goes beyond the written Torah; it is the Creator himself, as follows:

There are many sources that compare the spiritual relationship between the ultimate Creator – HaShem as a chatan (groom) – who has married the nation of Israel sharing mutual responsibilities to one another.

The first station that the Jewish nation arrived at after leaving Egypt was a desert oasis called Mara. The Midrash informs us that at Mara, HaShem commanded the nation with three mitzvot – honoring father and mother, Shabbat and establishment of a legal system. Three mitzvot out of the 613 given to the Jews at the conclusion of HaShem's revelation at Mount Sinai. That is less than one half of a percent of the 613 mitzvot in the Torah; indeed, a modest value of Torah mitzvot.

Seven weeks later, we arrived at Mount Sinai where Hashem commanded us with the additional 610 mitzvot, when according to "chazal" HaShem uprooted the mountain and held it over the heads of the Jewish nation to serve as a chuppah (canopy). This was the nisu'in of Hashem and Am YIsrael.

Here is the historic-Halachic precedent of erusin – interlude – nisu'in. So, in effect, every halachic marriage is a repetition of the original marriage bond between the Creator and his beloved creation – Am Yisrael. However, there is much more to a formal halachic ceremony; it is called Love! So, where is the love between HaShem towards His nation Yisrael?

In the third chapter of Mishna Ki'la'yim, Rabbi Akiva is cited as having said:

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All the scriptures (23 books) are sanctified, however, the book of *Shir Hashirim* (Song of Songs, composed or compiled by King Solomon is sacrosanct (inviolable).

What makes Song of Songs so unique, and why was it Rabbi Akiva of all the rabbis in his time who identified with the feelings of King Shlomo?

The book contains eight chapters of a dramatic love story between the husband and wife who search for each other without much success, until the happy end.

Rabbi Akiva understood the intensity of Hashem's love for his people in the metaphor between the two partners as expressed by King Shlomo in chapter 8:7-8, and when he applied the appellation *sacrosanct*.

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Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm,

for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

And it was most fitting that the man who so closely identified and understood the profound feelings of King Shlomo was Rabbi Akiva. For he was the man who experienced pure, unconditional love of his wife Rachel who sacrificed so much in order to encourage him to become the great Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva expressed his never-ending awareness and gratitude to Rachel, when at the huge homecoming welcome after 24 years of concentrated Torah study in Yerushalayim he called out to all the assembled while pointing to his beloved Rachel, "My Torah (knowledge) as well as your Torah are all in her virtue".

Conclusion: erusin + nisu'in + love = a holy Jewish marriage!

Mazal Tov!

Shabbat Shalom

Nachman Kahana

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