

JOFA JOURNAL

Marriage in the Jewish Tradition

By Blu Greenberg

So this is our June bridal issue. And why not, for as Orthodox feminists we have a lot to say about marriage and all that it should signify: traditional values, halakha, ritual, equal dignity, covenantal relationships and new beginnings.

Judaism advocates marriage. Barely out of the womb, the child hears our wistful formula, ... may she [he] enter into Torah, the marriage canopy and good deeds....Life confirms tradition: for most individuals though perhaps not every last person, marriage is the optimal way to live, has the most integrity, is sexually appropriate to continuity of life, and is the unit best geared raising children. No marriage is perfect, but imperfect marriage is still full of great joy, companionship, intimacy, Caring, and love. And love.

Yet today we are offered new paradigms: that some people are happier single; that the demographics of monogamous cultures means that some won't find a mate; that not everyone was created with a heterosexual impulse; that equality may be more just and fulfilling than the complementary models of yesteryear. We also know that marriage may be more difficult in a divorce culture, as per the droll New Yorker bridal salon cartoon: Mother, looking on, says dreamily to Seamstress fitting Daughter's gown, Oh I want her first wedding to be so lovely....

What then is our message as we navigate between old and new?

1. A long-term, faithful marriage remains a primary and overarching community value for the generations. Yet, we must find ways of articulating this value without being callous to those who live other models. This is difficult, especially on the college campus, but language needs to be developed to communicate this value, yet be fine tuned to the dignity of all.
2. The community should provide practical resources that shore up marriage (like the six-month marriage preparation course the Catholic Church offers), so that couples enter marriage with their eyes open, and with their techniques for speaking values and negotiating impasses in place.
3. For those who are ready for marriage, others - individuals even more than community institutions - should be involved in matchmaking.
4. Inasmuch as marriage based on equality is both more just and more likely to succeed, whatever can enhance equality should be instituted. Marriage entry and exit rituals, currently imbalanced, create a tension felt by many young Orthodox women. Halakhic accretions to the marriage ceremony and full resolution of the agunah problem will communicate a greater sense of equal value and equal standing that will echo throughout the marriage.

Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote that the very validity of the covenant rests upon juridic-halakhic principles of free negotiation, mutual assumption of duties, and full recognition of the equal rights of both parties concerned with the covenant. The suggestions made in this newsletter are steps on the road to achieving that goal in the Orthodox covenant of marriage.