

The Birds And The Bees And Their Cousins

A teaching on Parashah 29, Acharei Mot

by Kevin Phipps

When I was 18, after I graduated high-school, I became a camp counselor. I had not had any girlfriend in a while, and always seemed to have difficulty in that area of my life. I was flattered when this girl at the lake started giving me some attention. A “spark” grew between us right away. I began returning her flirtations toward me, and news of the friendship that was developing began to spread amongst the campers first, and then the counselors. Later that day, as everyone gathered for dinner, one of the other counselors informed me she was a camper, something I did not expect. This informed me of her age, which was considerably younger than I imagined by looking at her. In my hormone driven immaturity, I decided it didn't matter. I knew there would be limitations to our friendship, but there ought to be no problem with our relationship continuing. After all, love is all that matters, as our culture teaches us, and despite social restraints, if we continued to follow our heart, the differences of our age would work themselves out eventually. This friendship lasted for three and a half years without anything inappropriate happening, but there was much difficulty and frustration during that time before the relationship just kind of ended due to the differences that developed between us.

I tell you this story to illustrate how in our culture, we grow up believing that an emotional connection between two people, regardless of who they are, or other details and circumstances do not matter. Even when a relationship is morally or socially unacceptable, you must always “follow your heart”, and eventually “love” will find its way. Isn't this the basis for most romance novels and movies? Even many children's movies and stories follow the same logic.

I had the wisdom and self-restraint to not allow anything to happen more inappropriate than the friendship itself. But, I could have saved myself from a lot of frustration, if I had the wisdom to know that there were more important details to consider than the feelings I had for this girl. She offered me a friendship that I had not had in a while, and I did not see happening in the future. At that time, my trust should have been in God. He had the right woman planned for me, who I knew nothing about, and I needed to wait for God's timing to take place, and for Him to provide for me that relationship my heart longed for so strongly.

In this week's parashah, we read of various restrictions God placed on our sexual relationships. As we read these restrictions we can see that just as the menorah, the family trees in Israel, were also intended to have branches. Today, we can point to genetic deformations, which can occur when sexual relations occur between people whose genetics match too closely. We have all read of the Montagues and Capulets in Shakespeare's “Romeo and Juliet”, and the tragic results of two close knit family groups which would have nothing to do with one another. Such division was not God's desire for Israel. These are some social and physical benefits to these sexual laws, but I think there is something more important at work here on a spiritual level, which reaches into our culture today.

I want to start out by giving a few reminders from Scripture. In Bereshit/Genesis, we read that God made man and woman, in His image He created them. He made men with certain unique qualities and distinctions, with specific roles on earth and in His Kingdom to go with

those qualities and distinctions. Likewise, God made women with their own unique qualities and distinctions, with specific roles on earth and in His Kingdom to go with those qualities and distinctions. God made men and women different and unique, but equally valuable and loved by God. There is nothing about men which is better or more important than women, and there is nothing about women which is better or more important than men. We are different, but equal in the eyes of God, and both His children and builders of His Kingdom. What is more than this, is God created men to find interest and motivation in various ways to many of the distinctions which make women who and what they are. God also created women to find interest and motivation in various ways to many of the distinctions which make men who and what they are. Through this men and women are naturally drawn together, and through the unions which are created through that, God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" takes place. This is all God's design, and this is the means by which new human life is created. Life is always good, as God is the God of all life. Human sexuality is good, precious, beautiful, and powerful. It is also an integral aspect of living a holy life, and sexual behavior as God designed it is actually an act of worship to the God who created it.

If this is true, then why do we think of human sexuality in such a negative light today? I'm sure most of you are feeling a bit uncomfortable even with this teaching. Sexuality is equated with sin, shame, and embarrassment, as something worldly and dirty. Even married couples approach their own sexual behavior with a bit of embarrassment and nervousness, as they are now expected to do something which has been taboo all their lives. There are even parts of Torah, such as Song of Solomon, which make some of us blush, and wonder why such imagery is in God's Word. Why is this?

I think there are two reasons for this. One is the fact that Ha Satan has taken the beauty of human sexuality and twisted it to be something which is shameful and sinful. Second is that many of us have grown up in the midst of a culture saturated with Ha Satan's twisted counterfeit of sexuality, to the point that even as Believers, we have forgotten or have no concept of what sexuality was meant to be by God. Many of us have been hurt in one way or another by this evil form of sexuality. In one way or another, we turn our backs on sexuality altogether, rather than try to find out what may be of God, and what is not. The Exxon Valdez spilled millions of gallons of black, crude oil all over the coastland of Alaska several years ago. Most people would have seen such an ugly mess, and left it alone, leaving many creatures to perish, and leaving what was once a beautiful coastland black with oil.

Fortunately, there were people who decided to go about the timely and tedious task of cleaning the water, every creature, rock, and blade of grass, saving life, and restoring the beauty the oil took away. In the same way, I think it is important for God's people to go back to God's Word with a clean slate, and have a renewing of our mind concerning human sexuality. We need to remove what is not of God, and relearn what is of God so that we can return to a concept of our sexuality which is closer to what God intended.

We also need to go back to Scripture to get a better concept of what love is and what our relationships are intended to be. If I asked a dozen people on the street what love is, I would probably get close to a dozen different definitions of love, based on personal experience, knowledge of Scripture, and upbringing. What is interesting about this is that the church reduces the Torah to the commands to love God and love your neighbor, assuming that if you have love, you will end up fulfilling the law. However, I've never seen a traditional Christian

arrive at not eating pork simply out of his love for God. The Torah is not built on love, it hangs from it, therefore, love is defined by the laws of Torah, not the other way around. When I read God's Word, I read of a completely different type of love than what I am familiar with from the world.

***For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed.[Yochanan/John 3:16]
But God demonstrates his own love for us in that the Messiah died on our behalf while we were still sinners. [Romans 5:8]***

This is a love that is not based on feelings, it is based on the character of God. It is His greatest attribute, since God is love. Emotional, intellectual, social, or even spiritual connections we make with a person are not the basis of love or a sexual relationship with that person. What the other person has done for us or will do for us is no basis either. Whether or not the person deserves love is no basis for it either. One man in the Bible had a wife who left him to become a prostitute. God told him not only to forgive her, but also find her and bring her back as his wife. She did not deserve such love, but he gave it to her because God commanded it of him and loved him first. This is how we ought to love others, especially the one we have a sexual relationship with.

Put this together with this week's parashah, and we see that there is more to a sexual relationship than our own desires. There is a bigger picture God is looking at, and as a result there are some people who are off limits. Having love for a person, or considering someone a "soul mate", is not enough. We cannot "follow our heart", if our wicked heart leads us to death. The particular laws we find here in Vayikra concerning our sexual relationships are there because they were actual practices done in the pagan cultures of the land God was bringing His people, Israel. God expected more of His people because He loved them, wanted the best for them, and had a purpose for them. They could not be the light to the world God intended them to be if their light was too dark to see amidst the darkness of the world around them.

***You people are to be holy because I, A DONAI your God, am holy.
[Vayikra 19:1]***

The entire book of Vayikra can be summed up in this verse. Vayikra teaches Israel how to be holy and consecrated unto God. What is interesting about this is how Vayikra does this while describing activities of normal life, like eating, sexual pleasure, and how to deal with other people. What it does not say is just as important. It does not tell us that to be holy involves selling everything we own, live in a monastery in the middle of nowhere, remove all carnal pleasures, eat nothing but tofu and water, and beat yourself over the head with a wood plank while telling God how unworthy you are to be in His presence. While some people may be led to put off certain distractions of life to hear God better and make certain changes in their life, complete asceticism is not the normal way to holiness. God wants us to live life, and live life to the fullest, but with God as our God. When God is our King, this changes how we see the world, how we think, how we act and react within the world, but all while living life in joy, peace, and love. If my son is running around the house with scissors in his hand, I am going to take them away from him, not to take away his joy, but to keep him from the anguish of going through the rest of his life partially blind should he fall and put the scissors in one of his eyes.

It is not removal from the world God is looking for. It is a different perspective. If you are a woman, even a young woman, don't get your concept of femininity from the newsstand. The fashion and beauty industry is one of the largest in the world. Cosmetics are expensive, but integrity is free. I made that up, but what I didn't make up is what Solomon tells us. "Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears Adonai is to be praised." This is just as much for women as men. In fact, Proverbs 31 is written for men, not women. When a man is looking for a potential wife, he ought be looking for more than a pretty face. When he looks at you, is it Maybelline, or is it the Holy Spirit? If you are a man, even a young man, your concept of masculinity is not a man with a bad shave on a horse smoking a Marlboro. It is not a racecar driver selling Budweiser. It is not even the knight in shining armor of the romance novels. We don't have a concise passage on the "virtuous man" like women do, but we have plenty of examples of Godly men throughout Scripture, from Avraham, Moshe, and David, to Kefa and Shaul. These were not perfect men. They were ordinary men, serving an extraordinary God, who worked through their imperfection to do amazing things, which changed the world.

If you are a woman, be proud of who and what you are in this world and in the Kingdom of God. If you are a man, be proud of who and what you are in this world and in the Kingdom of God. Likewise, give women the honor and respect they deserve as women made in the image of God. Women, do the same for men. Our sexual relationships with each other need to be guided by the wisdom of God, not the fluctuations of our emotions. We need to think of human sexuality according to the principles of Scripture, not the norms of society. Together as the men and women God created us to be, we will be a light to the world and build the Kingdom of God.