



DEVARIM

Shoftim-Elul

Is There a Secret to Love?

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IS THERE A SECRET TO LOVE?

MINING THE MYSTERIES OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

ABSTRACT

The deepest crisis we face today is a personal one: How do I find and maintain healthy and enduring love in this crazy world?

Where is the best place to discover the secret to lasting relationships? Therapists, self-help books, Dear Abby? Most of us would never think of looking at the most obvious place – yet the most unexpected: Our own history. Of all nations and peoples in the world, which one has endured throughout the ages? The Jews must have done something right in marrying and building families that have lasted through the harshest conditions! What secret did they know in how to build everlasting relationships?

The answer can be found in (what some may think as) an unlikely place – the month in which we find ourselves now, Elul, whose sign is Virgo, and one of the acronyms making up the word Elul is *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, meaning “I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me.”

These four words capture the elusive ingredients of a relationship – the fusion of two distinct entities becoming one. The mystery of how they can actually retain their distinct personalities without becoming lost in the union. In the process we also discover the answer to a theological quandary: How can mortal humans have a loving relationship with an immortal G-d? How is it possible for the finite to touch the infinite?

1. Advice to the Lovelorn (Humor)

Some years ago, a student confided in a rabbi colleague of mine that he had been in a relationship with a woman for five years but was not sure he should marry her.

The rabbi was incredulous: “You are not sure after *five years*?”

“See rabbi,” the young man answered, “my problem is that she is kind of a Ford and I’m looking for a Ferrari.”

Answered the rabbi, “Your problem is that you are looking for a *car*!”

*

This reminds me of a letter which was once printed in a “Dear Abby” column and which went something like this:

Dear Abby: I am a 60 year old man looking for a wife between the ages of 20 and 50. She doesn't have to be beautiful, but she has to have a steady income and she has to own a late-model American automobile. If you can help me find her, would you ask her to send a photo of the car?¹

You laugh, but “Dear Abby” has seen it all in her long and colorful career.

“Dear Abby,” of course, is the popular advice column started in the 1950s by a Jewish woman named Pauline Phillips, who renamed herself Abigail Van Buren (after the wife of King David and the US President), and became famous for giving advice to the lovelorn and assorted confused others.

In the many years that she had been writing the column (her daughter is writing in now) she had been asked just about every question under the sun. But they don't come close to the Israeli version of personal ads seeking a relationship. Here is a selection of a few from actual Israeli newspapers:

Shmuel Gabbai , 36.

I take out the Torah Saturday morning.

Would like to take you out Saturday night.

Please write POB 81.

Couch potato latke in search

of the right applesauce.

Let's try it for 8 days.

Who knows?

POB 43

¹St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 8, 1991, <http://www.webcitation.org/61hkn10Nb>.

Divorced Jewish man seeks partner to attend shul
light shabbos candles, celebrate holidays,
build Sukkah together, attend brisses, bar mitzvahs -
Religion not important.

POB 658

Orthodox woman with get, seeks man who got get
or can get get.

Get it?

I'll show you mine

if you show me yours.

POB 72.

Sincere rabbinical student, 27, enjoys
Yom Kippur, Tisha B'av , Taanis Esther ,
Tzom Gedalia , Asarah B'Teves , Shiva Asar b'Tammuz.
Seeks companion for living life in the 'fast' lane.

POB 90.

Nice Jewish guy, 38.

No skeletons.

No baggage.

No personality.

POB 76

Female graduate student,

studying kaballah, Zohar,

exorcism of dybbuks,

seeks mensch.

No weirdos, please.

POB 56.

Jewish businessman, 49, manufactures Sabbath candles, Chanukah candles,

havdallah candles, Yahrzeit candles.

Seeks non-smoker.

POB 787.

I am a sensitive Jewish prince whom you can open your heart to

share your innermost thought and deepest secrets.

Confide in me. I'll understand your insecurities.

No fatties, please.

POB 86.

Jewish male, 34, very successful, smart,
independent, self-made,
looking for girl whose father will hire me.
POB 43*

2. Defining Relationship

Beyond the humor and the light side, the fact is that the deepest crisis we face today is a personal one: How do I find and maintain healthy and enduring love in this crazy world?

No adequate solution will be found to this dilemma until we first understand what exactly a relationship is.

The Oxford English dictionary defines “relationship” as the state of being connected, or the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the way in which two or more people or groups regard and behave towards each other.

But doesn't help us really. It doesn't tell us what makes a relationship work ... what ingredients are necessary to make it happen.

3. Where to Turn for Answers

Now, my dear friends, I ask you: Where is the best place to discover the secret to lasting relationships? Therapists, self-help books, Dear Abby?

Most of us would never think of looking at the most obvious place – yet the most unexpected: Our own history.

Of all nations and peoples in the world, which one has endured throughout the ages? The Jews must have done something right in marrying and building families that have lasted through the harshest conditions! What secret did they know in how to build everlasting relationships?

The answer can be found in (what some may think as) an unlikely place – the month in which we find ourselves now, Elul, the last month of the Hebrew yearly cycle, the month before Rosh Hashana, the New Year.

4. The Secret of a Relationship

Elul, like every month of the calendar, has its own unique energy and power: Elul is the month of love and relationships. The sign of Elul is Virgo, and one of the acronyms making up the word Elul comes from the verse in King Solomon's romantic Song of Songs: *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, meaning "I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me."²

These four words capture the elusive ingredients of a relationship – the fusion of two distinct entities becoming one. And they answer for us the greatest mystery of them all: how two individuals can actually retain their distinct personalities without becoming lost in the union. In the process we also discover the answer to a theological quandary: How can mortal humans have a loving relationship with an immortal G-d? How it is possible for the finite to touch the infinite?

Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li defines the very essence of a relationship. It expresses a mutually symbiotic fusion of two forces – "I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me."

First there are two distinct personalities: "I" and "my beloved." Then the "I" (my personality) takes the initiative and reaches to "my beloved." In turn, "my beloved" responds "to me."

5. Relationship as Reflection

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li emphasizes another vital aspect – that a relationship is a reflection: You and your beloved mirror each other. Says King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs: "Like a face reflected in water, so one heart is to another."³

Love elicited is in direct proportion to love given. When "I am to my beloved" – "my beloved" will be "to me." The same way that "I am to my beloved," so will "my beloved" be "to me."

Thinking of love as your reflection in water is quite extraordinary: Look into the eyes of your beloved and you will see yourself.

Finally, Elul's *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* teaches us that love is about initiating. First "I am to me beloved," and that is the catalyst for "my beloved is to me."

2 Songs of Songs 6:3.

3 Proverbs 27:19.

Love is proactive, not reactive or passive. If you want love in your life do not stand on the sidelines, “protecting” yourself from being hurt and wait for someone to love you. You must learn to give – to initiate, to love. And when you do – love comes back to you. You must learn to say “I love you” before you hear those words said to you.

6. A Match Made In Heaven (Optional Story)

The Divrei Chaim, popularly known as the Sanzer Rebbe, HaRav Chaim Halberstam, ZTz”L (1793 – 1876), was a brilliant Talmud Chacham, Torah scholar, and patriarch of many of the greatest Chassidic dynasties of present day. Even as a boy his fame grew throughout Europe. The most esteemed families sought to have him included as one of their own, through marriage. There was a problem however, a physical flaw which prospective families might not dismiss so casually, he had been born with a grotesque “club foot,” which produced an exaggerated limp when he walked.

One day in 1810, Rabbi Yehoshua-Heshel of Komarna, the eldest son of Rabbi Baruch Teumim Frenkel, the author of *Baruch Ta’am*, once found it necessary to travel to the city of Tarnigrod, where he met the young Chaim Halberstam studying in yeshiva. Rabbi Yehoshua entered into a scholarly discussion with him, and immediately realized that he was dealing with a young man of extraordinary gifts. He asked the young man who he was, and when the latter replied by giving his name, Chaim Halberstam, his father’s name and other details of his ancestors, Yehoshua Heschel decided then and there to broach the subject of a possible match with his sister, Rochel Feige.

The young Chaim expressed his willingness to consider such a match. Yehoshua Heschel went immediately to his lodging place and dispatched an urgent letter to his father in Leipnick, announcing that he had found a suitable match for his sister, and that the prospective bridegroom was a paragon of Torah scholarship and religiosity, on the level of the greatest sages of previous centuries.

This letter included all the details of the youth’s identity and lineage. However, the writer held back one detail from his father: he gave no hint that the young man was lame. In the eyes of Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel the extraordinary genius of the youth made the lameness seem insignificant, and he had a strong desire that this match should come to fruition.

The “shidduch” was found acceptable to Rochel Feige and her father, and emissaries were sent to check out the prospective groom. When these emissaries returned from their mission, the

matter of the young prodigy's physical handicap reached the ears of Rochel Feige, the bride-to-be, and she rushed to her father with the distressing news.

When he heard the report from his daughter, R' Baruch expressed his wrath towards his son, who had held back this information. But what was to be done now? To cancel the *shidduch* was impossible, for undoubtedly the bridegroom's father would be unwilling to release him from their agreement.

Rabbi Yehoshua-Heshel, who bore the main responsibility for this distressing state of affairs, attempted to console his father, and proposed that the prospective bridegroom be invited to Leipnick. Rabbi Baruch's eldest son was certain that once his father had seen the young prodigy with his own eyes and had tested his knowledge and character, he would be happy with him, and then he too would see the physical handicap as an insignificant detail. Moreover, Yehoshua-Heshel was equally sure that his sister Rochel Feige would be pleased to marry such a great genius.

Meanwhile, the whole city of Leipnick was in an uproar. This is the right match for their grand rabbi's daughter? - a cripple!

In the house of the Rabbi too, all was confusion and turmoil reigned. The bride-to-be wept bitter tears; her father attempted to conciliate her and to encourage her with reassuring arguments. He promised her that if she still did not want the young man after having seen him, he would not force her into the marriage, but instead would offer the opportunity to her younger sister.

So, preparations went forward to receive the special guest. Everyone waited anxiously to see what would happen when he arrived.

The day came; the young scholar appeared in Leipnick and within minutes had discovered that his designated bride did not wish to go through with the marriage, because of his physical defect. His reaction was that he wished to speak a few words with the girl in private.

At this point, those who recount the story admit, "What he said to her was never revealed." The results, however, are well known. They did indeed marry, and they had many children who followed faithfully in the footsteps of their father, who had become the famous "Sanzer Rav" – the "*Divrei Chaim*." His sons assumed their father's mantle of greatness, and their sons after that. An international rabbinic and chassidic dynasty was established that exists to this day.

Years later, after many years of a fruitful and successful marriage, the Rebbetzin Rochel Feige passed away. At the Shiva, one of the Chassidim asked the Reb Chaim, "What did you say to your

bride when you met privately with her?”

The Rebbe said that as soon as he entered he cited a Talmudic statement⁴ that “forty days prior to a child’s conception, a decree comes forth from Heaven saying, so and so will marry so and so. Before I was born, my Neshamah, my soul asked to see my Bashert – my predestined wife, when my soul beheld you, it sang because you were so perfect. There was, however, one physical flaw.”

“What was that?” she asked, her curiosity having been piqued.

Some say that at this point, Rabbi Chaim asked the Rochel Feige to look in the mirror. When she glanced in that direction, her face went pale; in the reflection of herself that she saw, she was crippled in one leg.

Rabbi Chaim explained to her: “The truth is that it was you who were to have been born into the world with this defect. I had such pain when I saw this, because otherwise you were the picture of perfection. Knowing that outward appearances play a greater role for women than for men, it troubled me that you would have to live a lifetime with this impairment. Therefore, I asked Heaven if I could be afflicted with this physical imperfection instead of you. Heaven heard my plea. They saw how concerned I was, and they gave me the club foot. I have a limp today, so that you would not, I took it upon myself, so that you would not suffer.

“I, as your destined husband, took upon myself to bear the handicap instead...”

The young woman was quiet and left the room without saying a word.

Later that evening she approached her father and said that she had changed her mind. It would be an honor, she declared, to marry Rabbi Chaim Halberstam.

Talk about soul-mates!

Now that’s a powerful story about a union clearly made in heaven ...

Ani l’dodi v’dodi li.

Indeed, human relationships are a reflection of our relationship with G-d.

⁴ Sotah 1a.

7. Human Relationships

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li – “I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me” – originally refers to the relationship and marriage between the human and G-d. We reach to our beloved G-d (*V'obavto es Hashem Elokecho*, you shall love G-d⁵), and G-d reciprocates to His beloved people (*obavti eschem omar Hashem*, I loved you says G-d⁶).

Our relationship with G-d is reflected in our relationships with each other, and vice versa.

The mystery of divine unity – *Hashem Echod* – in a multifarious universe also helps enlighten us how to achieve unity in our relationships, while maintaining the integrity of our individuality, how to remain two distinct personalities without becoming lost in the union.

Divine unity manifests in human relationships – in the ways of love and marriage.

True love is total unity, and total unity is the fusion of two souls in one seamless union, in which both remain intact while joining as one.

Ultimately, we achieve unity in our relationships by opening ourselves up to G-d, we introduce G-d's unity into our lives, allowing us to find and join with our soulmate.

A good analogy for this is music:

The power and beauty of a melody is dependent on each note maintaining its “individuality” and playing its unique sound. Simultaneously, each note is completely fused with all the others, all complementing each other, without in any way compromising each one's distinct identity.

The same synthesis – harmony out of diversity – can be witnessed in the symmetry of every healthy organism and system, from the human body to the extraordinary design of nature.

A true relationship is total fusion of two – “I am to my beloved and my beloved to me.” Two distinct individuals, with different bodies and different souls, join together, in one seamless union. Neither is compromised or diminished.

A transcendent power enables the fusion, but it also manifests in the individual personalities. They remain intact by recognizing on their own individual terms that love is the ultimate expression of

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:5.

⁶ Malachi 1:2.

individuality. “I am to my beloved and my beloved to me.”

8. Elul Introspection

Elul is a time of introspection. Indeed, the very word Elul means to “search” – a time of soul searching about all aspects of our lives, especially where we stand in the area of love and relationships (both personal and with G-d) – *Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*, “I am to my beloved and my beloved to me.”

This is also the connection with the opening of today’s Torah reading: *Shoftim v’shotrim titen lecho b’chol she’orech...v’shoftu ha’am mishpat tzedek*, Appoint for yourselves judges and law enforcers in all your gates... and they shall administer honest judgment for the people.

The personal meaning of this⁷ includes the obligation to audit oneself, by placing “judges” and “law enforcers” at all our seven “gates” – our senses (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, one mouth) – which connect our inner lives with the world around us. *Shoftim* like Elul teaches us the need for accountability – *cheshbon hanefesh*. We must make sure that what enters and leaves us should be driven by the love and compassion of Elul, *Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*, “I am to my beloved and my beloved to me.”

Elul is also the time to audit our spiritual accounts and assess the year gone by. It is a time to prepare for the “Days of Awe” of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur by examining the failings of the past and making resolutions for the future. We have the power to actually repair and rebuild anything that may have been broken. And we do so by immersing ourselves in prayer and charitable activities.

Elul is a month of love. In *Elul* we find our way back to G-d and seek to repair the spiritual damage caused by the mistakes and transgressions of the past year. We feel G-d’s love for us as He responds to our initiative. We reach for Him from below, declaring, “I am for my beloved,” and He responds from above, showing us that “my beloved is for me.” Thus *Elul* defines our relationship with G-d as reciprocal – in other words, a mutually loving relationship.

This in turn empowers our personal relationships to be equally reciprocal and unifying. As we travel through this month of Elul, we are infused with power to examine our relationships and find strengths to discover healthy love or and deepen the bonds with those we love.

⁷ See Shach al haTorah on the verse.

Remember, we all have our flaws, our limbs, our wounds. Yet, we also have our souls, which are always intact and always provide us with resources to connect in true and new ways with our soul mates.

May we all use this month well, and may we all be blessed with experiencing “I am to my beloved and my beloved to me.” Amen.

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