

What Does God Do All Day? One Rabbi's Opinion

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What has God been doing since creating the universe so many millennia ago? Have you ever wondered that? What does God do all day? What does God occupy God's time with...especially since God seems to have retired from the large-scale, public miracles, plagues, signs, and wonders that we read about in this morning's parasha and over the past few weeks, leading up to the exodus from Egypt. The Talmud reports that a certain sage, Rabbi Yose ben Halafta, who lived in *Eretz Yisrael* in the 2nd Century, was asked this very question by a prominent, aristocratic Roman matron. The Matron asks him, "Exactly what has your God been doing since completing the work of creation?" Without missing a beat, Rabbi Yose, who was a pupil of the great Rabbi Akiva, said, "God sits on the Heavenly Throne and makes matches." Not the kind that you use to light your Shabbes candles; but matches between loving spouses. Yente the Matchmaker only had the Anatevka to worry about, but God, the ultimate matchmaker, knows no boundaries or borders! The Roman matron, however, is not particularly impressed. She said, "That's it? Just because of that you believe in this God and worship Him?" *Af ani yechola la'asot ken!* "Even I could do that," she said. "I have many slaves. In no time at all I'll match them all up for marriage. You just watch and see!" Rabbi Yosi cautioned her: "Though you may think this is an easy task, *kasheh hi lifnei Ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu ki'Kriyat Yam Suf*, for God it is as demanding as splitting the Sea of Reeds!" Undeterred, the Matron lined up numerous slaves--the Talmud says 2,000 of them--and began pairing them off...you go with this one, you go with that one...and eventually married them all off that very night. The next day, one slave had his head bashed in, another had lost an eye, a third hobbled around with a broken leg. She said to them, "What happened to you?!" And they said to her, "I don't want this one that you matched me with!" That one is a disaster! We are totally incompatible! The Matron then went to Rabbi Yose, threw up her hands and said, "There is no God like your God, your Torah is true, and pleasing, and praiseworthy!" Rabbi Yose replied, "As I told you, matchmaking may appear to be easy, but for God it is as demanding as splitting the sea."

This morning of course we read about that "demanding" miracle, *Kriyat Yam Suf*, the splitting of the sea, to make way for the Jewish people to cross safely to freedom. It's like God saved the best for last...Blood, frogs, lice, hail...none of that compares to the grandeur of splitting the sea; of holding up those walls of water long enough for Israelites to cross, and then releasing them to crash down on Pharaoh's pursuing army. And this story got around! It made its way around the ancient Near East! Many years later in the Book of Joshua when an Israelite reconnaissance mission is sent to Jericho, they find lodging with a woman named *Rachav/Rahab*. Rachav says to the Israelites:

Ki shamani et asher hovish Hashem et mei Yam Suf mipneichem, betzeitchem mi'Mitzrayim!

"We have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt!"

This is why Rahav offers to help these Israelite spies...because she knows that their God does incredible, extraordinary things...like splitting seas and making *shidduchs*, making successful matches...two of the most incredible, extraordinary things imaginable.

I was talking through this idea with my daughter Mia, and she brought up that widespread adage that if you make three matches in the course of your life, you are guaranteed *olam ha'ba*; you are guaranteed eternal life. I asked her if she was surprised that 'all you have to do' to be guaranteed eternal life is to make three successful matches! That doesn't seem like a whole lot to do in order to have such a great reward. But then we remembered that story of the Roman matron. Making just one successful shidduch is hard enough, not to mention three!

I don't need to tell most of you that marriage is a delicate, tricky, and sometimes precarious arrangement. It takes a lot of work, a great deal of attention and cultivation for the duration. People make a life-long commitment when they are young, and in the throws of passion and rapturous romance. And then, lo and behold, they discover that they change, emotionally as well as physically as time goes on. Interests change, jobs change, we move around more now than people ever did in prior generations, and somehow that marital commitment has to be flexible enough, adaptable enough to withstand all that change and development, but also firm enough and sturdy enough not to break because of it. Add a global health crisis into the mix, and the challenge only becomes greater!

The data about how the pandemic has effected marriages is just beginning to emerge. Earlier on it seemed that a spike in divorces was all but inevitable. But recently, the Institute for Family Studies released a report that said 58% of those surveyed reported appreciating their spouse more since the beginning of the pandemic. In the last seven months, 51% said that the conditions of pandemic have deepened their commitment to their partners. It seems to me that as we walk this delicate line called marriage, where all kinds of forces try to destabilize us and cause us to lose our balance, we can either jump off the balance beam altogether, or use all of our focus to put one foot in front of the other, maintaining our center of gravity and moving forward one step at a time.

There is an interesting law near the end of the Torah in the Book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 24. The Torah stipulates that a person may not be sent away to the army during the first year of marriage. That entire year, they are exempt from military service, even if a war is going on. Their first priority is to remain at home, to nurture their relationship, to be free from other distractions while they focus on their marriage. I can't help but think about what is about to be a year of essentially staying home! What kind of year has that been for you and your spouse or partner? Has it been a time of getting aggravated and annoyed by being in each other's space so often? Has it been a year of being testy and short tempered? Or has it been a year of reacquainting with one another; of rediscovering communication, the gifts of companionship and intimacy? It looks like we may be in for several more months of hunkering down before we are past the scourge of this pandemic. Perhaps you can dedicate yourselves to using that time when you're not away from home for many hours at a time, not running in a million different directions to pay a little more attention to your partner. My teacher Rabbi Ismar Schorsch once wrote: "The institution [of marriage] is always in jeopardy. Even God is rattled by the odds against sustained success. The ordinary, crafting of a good marriage, is as demanding as the extraordinary, rescuing of the Israelites at the Sea of Reeds."

Unlike the rest of the world, which was created in six days, marriage is an ongoing work-in-progress. It keeps God busy all the time. And it should keep us busy too. This bizarre,

unprecedented time can be a gift or a loss. I hope we all embrace it as the former, and renew the love that drew us to our partners to begin with. May God bless each one of you with a renewal of love, companionship, depth, and joy in your marriage. Shabbat Shalom!