

5785 – Genesis 23-25 - Chayei Sarah (The life of Sarah)

RING, ROUND, AND ROOF¹

The man took a gold ring, a half-shekel its weight, and two bracelets upon her hands, ten shekels of gold their weight. (Genesis 24:22)

How is a woman betrothed? The groom (or his agent) gives her money or anything of value in the presence of two witnesses, and says to her, "You are hereby consecrated to me."

Although the betrothal can be effected with anything that has a minimum value of one perutah, the custom is to betroth with a ring.⁽¹⁾ (Talmud, Kidushin 2a; Shulchan Aruch,² Even HaEzer ("Stone of Help") 27:1)

The circle marks the boundary between the defined area within and the unquantifiable expanse without; between the measurable and the infinite, between the known and the unknowable. Indeed, the circle itself is a mystery, its value known only as the enigmatic π ³, a string of numbers that stretch on to fathomless infinity.

In the teachings of *kabbalah*, the circle represents the "encompassing light" that frames our reality. *Kabbalah differentiates between two types of divine "light": a) a pervading "inner light" (ohr penimi); and b) a transcendent "encompassing light" (ohr makif).*

"Inner light" describes a flow of divine energy that conforms to the parameters of our lives. The workings of nature, for example, or the processes of history, are, in truth, divine influences upon our existence—but these are divine influences that have assumed a form and "nature" that we can comprehend and internalize.

But then there are the supranatural (*something beyond what is natural*), suprarational (*something beyond what is rational*) manifestations of divine light. We call these "miracles" "existential mysteries" and "mind-blowing experiences"; *we cannot understand them or assimilate them, only accept them and open ourselves to them.* This is not to say that the "encompassing light" is something that is "outside" of our being. It penetrates our reality "from head to foot, to its innerness and the inside of its innerness"⁽²⁾—it is as basic (indeed, more basic) to our existence as the "inner light." Yet even as it suffuses our being, it remains aloof from us and be-

yond us, holding us in its embrace while eluding our attempts to grasp it and define it.⁽³⁾

The soul of man, which was created in the image of G-d, also emits both an "inner light" and an "encompassing light." It manifests itself via finite and definitive faculties, such as its senses, talents, intellect, and feelings. But it also exhibits "encompassing" powers such as will, desire, faith, and the capacity for self-sacrifice. **These are suprarational and supranatural powers which defy the constraints of physics and reason, and even the axioms⁴ of self-interest and self-preservation.**

THREE CIRCLES

Marriage is the most suprarational and supranatural endeavor undertaken by man. **For two individuals to become "one flesh" is to violate all the laws of ego and identity, to overcome the basic existential rule that one and one makes two.** Thus, it is in marriage that we most emulate G-d, creating life and eternalizing the temporal (by reproducing, man and woman not only create a child but also that child's potential to have children, and for his children to have children, *ad infinitum*). When two become one, they transcend the finite and the mortal, unleashing the single human faculty that is infinite and divine.

Marriage thus requires the activation of the "encompassing" powers of all those involved. There are three partners to a marriage—man, woman, and G-d⁽⁴⁾—and **each party contributes the supra-existential dimension of its existence.**

A marriage therefore consists of three circles: the feminine circle, the masculine circle, and the divine circle. The wedding ceremony begins with the bride's encircling of the groom. Seven times she walks around her husband-to-be, enveloping him in the encompassing light of her soul, committing herself to a bond that transcends reason and ego. The groom then does the same by encircling her finger with a ring, thereby consecrating her as his wife.

And all this occurs under the *chupah* (wedding canopy) which represents G-d's embrace of the couple with His encompassing light, empowering them to transcend the confines of self and unite in the "eternal edifice" of marriage.

(1) According to *Midrash Aggadah*,⁵ this is why Eliezer gave Rebecca "a gold ring" at the well—he was acting as a legal agent (*shaliach*) to betroth her on Isaac's behalf.

1 Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story, Genesis*, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 201-204.

2 The Shulchan Aruch, literally: "Set Table," sometimes dubbed in English as the Code of Jewish Law, together with its commentaries, it is the most widely accepted compilation of *halakha* (Jewish law) ever written. It was authored in Safed, Ottoman Syria (today in Israel) by Joseph Karo in 1563 and published in Venice two years later.

3 The number π is a mathematical constant that is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter, approximately equal to 3.14159. π (3.14) R^2 = *area* of a circle.

4 An *axiom* is a self-evident statement or rule that is accepted as true without proof.

5 *Midrash Aggadah* is an anonymous midrashic commentary on the Torah, first published by Solomon Buber in 1894 based on a rare manuscript that he discovered in Aleppo. The manuscript was missing several parts, including the end, where the name of the scribe and date of writing were usually recorded. Scholars believe the text dates back to the 12th or 13th century.

*Lekach Tov*⁶ ("Good Lesson") and *Chizkuni*⁷ also say that Eliezer acted as a *shaliach* for Isaac, though in their view, the betrothal was effected by the gifts Eliezer gives to Rebecca in 24:53. In any case, the ring and two bracelets gifted to Rebecca symbolize her marriage to Isaac and her role as mother of the future nation of Israel.

(2) *Tanya*, chapter 48.

(3) Thus, while the features and qualities of the created reality are expressions of *ohr penimi*, our existence itself derives from the *ohr makif*. Correspondingly, we understand the manner in which the laws of nature operate, but we have no comprehension as to why these laws exist.

(4) See Talmud, *Sotah* 17a and *Kidushin* 30b.

1. In the teachings of kabbalah, the circle represents the "encompassing light" that frames our reality. Kabbalah differentiates between two types of divine "light": a) a pervading "inner light" (*ohr penimi*); and b) a transcendent "encompassing light" (*ohr makif*).

a. Kabbalah is the name applied to the whole range of Jewish mystical activity. While codes of Jewish law focus on what it is God wants from man, **kabbalah tries to penetrate deeper, to God's essence itself.**⁸

There are elements of kabbalah in the Bible, for example, in the opening chapter of Ezekiel, where the prophet describes his experience of the divine: "... the heavens opened and I saw visions of God ... I looked and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north-a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber" (1:1,4). The prophet then describes a divine chariot and the throne of God.

The rabbis of the Talmud regarded the mystical study of God as **important yet dangerous**. A famous talmudic story tells of four rabbis, Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuyah, and Akiva who would

meet together and engage in mystical studies. Azzai, the Talmud records, "looked and went mad [and] Ben Zoma died." Elisha ben Abuyah became a heretic and left Judaism. Rabbi Akiva alone "entered in peace and left in peace." It was this episode, the later experiences of individuals who became mentally unbalanced while engaging in mystical activities, and the disaster of the false Messiah Shabbetai Zevi that caused seventeenth-century rabbis to legislate that kabbalah should be studied only by married men over forty who were also scholars of Torah and Talmud. The medieval rabbis wanted the study of kabbalah limited to people of mature years and character.

b. *Ohr penimi* ("inner light")—manifests itself via finite and definitive faculties, such as its **senses, talents, intellect, and feelings**.

Ohr makif ("encompassing light")—manifests itself as powers such as **will, desire, faith, and the capacity for self-sacrifice**.

1) Isaiah 40:31

³¹but those who hope in the LORD **will renew their strength**.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

2) Isaiah 41:8-10

⁸"But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, ⁹I took you from the ends of the earth ... I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. ¹⁰So do not fear, for I am with you ... I am your God. **I will strengthen you and help you ...**

3) Psalms 73:24-26

²⁴You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. ²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail, but **God is the strength of my heart** and my portion forever.

4) Philippians 4:11-13

... ¹¹I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. **I have learned the secret of being content** in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do all this **through him who gives me strength**.

5) Ephesians 3:16

¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches **he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being ...**

6) Deuteronomy 30:19-20

¹⁹This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curs-

6 Midrash *Lekach Tov* ("Good Lesson") is a commentary on the Torah and Megillot incorporating literal explanations and elaborative stories, written in the late 11th and early 12th centuries.

7 Chizkiyahu ben Rabbi Manoach wrote *Chizkuni* in honor of his father. It was printed in Venice in 1525. He focuses primarily on Rashi, quoting 20 other commentators. It is a comprehensive commentary on the Torah, and his style is very clear and accessible. He himself invented the name "Chizkuni," an allusion to his name, Chizkiya.

8 <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/kabbalah-an-overview>—The greatest scholar and historian of kabbalah in the 20th-century was the late Professor Gershom Scholem of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Scholem, himself a nonobservant Jew, was fond of explaining how he became attracted to so esoteric a discipline: "My decision to study Jewish mysticism came the day I visited the home of a famous German rabbi, a person with a reputation for scholarship in the kabbalah ... Seeing on his shelf some mystical texts with intriguing titles, I had, with all the enthusiasm of youth, asked the rabbi about them. 'This junk,' the rabbi had laughed at me. 'I should waste time reading nonsense like this?' It was then ... that I decided here was a field in which I could make an impression. If this man can become an authority without reading the text, then what might I become if I actually read the books?"

es. Now **choose life**, so that you and your children may live ²⁰and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

7) 1Kings 18:20-21

²⁰So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets (of Baal) on Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? **If the LORD is God, follow him**; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing.

8) Acts 2:37-42

³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "**Brothers, what shall we do?**"

³⁸Peter replied, "Repent and be (immersed), every one of you, in the name of Yeshua the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" ... ⁴¹Those who accepted his message were (immersed), and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and **to (the) prayers**.

2. *But then there are the supranatural (something beyond what is natural), suprarational (something beyond what is rational) manifestations of divine light. We call these "miracles "existential mysteries" and "mind-blowing experiences"; we cannot understand them or assimilate them, only accept them and open ourselves to them. This is not to say that the "encompassing light" is something that is "outside" of our being. It penetrates our reality "from head to foot, to its innerness and the inside of its innerness"—it is as basic (indeed, more basic) to our existence as the "inner light."*

a. Nehemiah 9:16-17

¹⁶But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. ¹⁷They refused to listen **and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them**. They became stiff-necked ... But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them ...

b. Job 5:9

⁹(God) performs wonders **that cannot be fathomed**, miracles that cannot be counted.

c. John 10:37-38 (NIRV)

³⁷"Don't believe me unless I do what my Father does. ³⁸But what if I do it? Even if you don't believe me, **believe the miracles**. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

3. *Marriage is the most suprarational and supranatural endeavor undertaken by man. **For two individuals to become "one flesh" is to violate all the laws of ego and identity, to overcome the basic existential rule that one and one makes two.***

a. *Existential* is an adjective meaning "**relating to existence**," but what does that even mean? What does anything mean? What is our purpose in the universe? These are *existential* questions.⁹

Existential is often used in relation to existentialism, a philosophical movement that suggests that existence (life, the universe, and everything) has no meaning except for the meaning that individuals create for themselves. *Existential* is also often used to describe a scenario in which someone or something's very existence or being is threatened or in question, especially in phrases like *existential threat*.

Example: *Though unlikely, an asteroid strike would be an existential threat to the planet.*

b. Genesis 2:22-24

²²Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' (*isha*) for she was taken out of man (*ish*)."²⁴That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become **one flesh**.

c. Ezekiel 37:15-23

¹⁵The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶"Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, 'Belonging to Judah **and the Israelites associated with him**.' Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, 'Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) **and all the Israelites associated with him**.' ¹⁷**Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand**. ¹⁸"When your people ask you, 'Won't you tell us what you mean by this?' ¹⁹say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph ... and join it to Judah's stick. **I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand**' ...

²¹"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²²I will make them

one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be **one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms**.²³They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

d. John 10:27-30

²⁷My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰**I and the Father are one.**"

e. Ephesians 3:1-6

...³the mystery (*sod*) made known to me by revelation ...⁵which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶This mystery is that through the gospel **the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body**, and sharers together in the promise **in** Messiah Yeshua.

4. *Marriage thus requires the activation of the "encompassing" powers of all those involved. There are three partners to a marriage—man, woman, and G-d—and **each party contributes the supra-existential dimension of its existence.***

Ohr makif ("encompassing light")—manifests itself as powers such as **will, desire, faith, and the capacity for self-sacrifice.**

a. Hosea 2:19-20

¹⁹I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in **righteousness and justice**, in **love** and **compassion**. ²⁰I will betroth you in **faithfulness**, and you will **acknowledge** the LORD.

b. 1Corinthians 7:1-5

¹Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" ... **each MAN should have sexual relations with his own WIFE**, and **each WOMAN with her own HUSBAND**. ³**The HUSBAND should fulfill his marital duty to his WIFE**, and likewise **the WIFE to her HUSBAND**. ⁴**The WIFE does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her HUSBAND. IN THE SAME WAY, the HUSBAND does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his WIFE**. ⁵Do not deprive each other except perhaps **by mutual consent** and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.