

PARASHAS KI SEITZEI

Perfect Bliss

What are proper grounds for divorce according to Jewish law? The Torah is somewhat cryptic on this question. "Should she not find favor in his eyes," we read in this week's Torah portion, "for he found in her a wicked thing, then he may write her a bill of divorce." What does this mean? How did she "not find favor in his eyes"?

There is a divergence of opinion on this matter among the Sages of the Talmud. Shammai, known for his strict interpretation of the Law, insists that only infidelity presents grounds for divorce. Hillel, however, contends that the courts would not reject a husband's petition to divorce his wife because she burned his lunch. Rabbi Akiva would even honor the petition of a husband who seeks a divorce because he has found a prettier woman.

We are immediately struck by the incongruity of these statements. These Sages are among the most prominent in the Talmud, and students of the Talmud are intimately familiar with their respective outlooks on many life issues. Hillel is celebrated for his humility, compassion and unflappable patience. How could this gentle scholar condone burnt meals as grounds for divorce? And what about Rabbi Akiva, the stellar scholar who strove for the highest goals in order to be worthy of his wife, who gave his wife the credit for everything he and his thousands of disciples accomplished? How could Rabbi Akiva consider finding a prettier woman grounds for divorce?

The commentators explain that, on the contrary, the very sensitivity of these Sages to the high worth of women accounts for their interpretations. The wife is the essence of the home, the spirit that infuses it with life, zest and warmth. She is the emotional anchor of the marriage, the fountainhead of domestic love and harmony. A man's wife is his soul mate, his life, his universe. Without her, the Talmud tells us, he is incomplete.

How is it possible, says Hillel, that a husband should become enraged when his wife accidentally burns his lunch? Can't he see the love and devotion that the food symbolizes even if it is somewhat charred? How is possible, says Rabbi Akiva, that a husband should find other women attractive? Shouldn't all other women pale beside his wife who is the sunshine of his life? The answer is as obvious as it is tragic. All is not well on the marital front. Something is amiss. Something has gone awry. The marriage is malfunctioning. Certainly, every effort must

be made to rectify the situation and repair the marriage, but unfortunately, the possibility of divorce is also an option that cannot be ignored.

A king commissioned the leading artist in his realm to deliver a painting of perfect bliss. He gave no other instructions. The artist set out to find what people considered perfect bliss.

"A victory parade with thousands of cheering people," said a general.

"Finding the solution to a very perplexing problem," said a scholar.

"Making a lot of money," said a merchant told.

"Spending a lot of money," said a young bon vivant.

Finally, the artist used his own judgment. When the king unveiled the painting, he saw an elderly couple sitting on a park bench in the dappled sunlight and smiling devotedly at each other.

The king stroked his chin thoughtfully, then he nodded.

"Well done," he said.

In our own lives, it is virtually impossible to avoid being swept along by the imperatives of contemporary society. We need larger houses, faster cars and more complex and lucrative investments, because we are convinced these things will deliver perfect bliss. And so we pursue the shimmering mirages of material success with all the energy and single-mindedness that the frenetic pace of today's world demands. Husbands and wives become like ships passing in the night, with little more than a friendly wave to sustain their marital relationship. But we may be searching in all the wrong places. If we would only invest a fraction of all this effort into our relationships with our wives, we would easily reap boundless spiritual rewards and achieve that elusive goal of finding perfect bliss..