



Finding an Inner *Beshert*

BY ERIK GLEIBERMANN

BEFORE THE ONSET of the High Holy Days, a time when Jews perform *teshuvah*, a turning back to evaluate our past actions, I recently found myself recounting conversations from the year with my many friends still persevering in the quest to find romantic partnerships. All of us—whether older, younger, gay, straight, partnered or single—wrestle with the same questions. Why is it often so difficult to find the right one? How do we know when we have found *the one*? Am I healthy enough to build a partnership even if I do find the one? Is the person I already chose really the one?

This issue of the one, the soul mate, the *beshert*, is a deep challenge that extends well beyond the quest for romantic partnership. I find that the idea of *beshert* has a deeper resonance as much with the broadest Yom Kippur themes of love and atonement as with who shares my bathroom and my bed.

Tremendous expectation surrounds romantic partnership in the Jewish tradition as well as in modern culture at large. The hallowed primacy of coupling has its roots right in the opening of our Torah story. What are the first words God speaks to Adam and Eve? *P'ru u'rvu*, “Be fertile, increase, and fill the earth.”

The rabbis traditionally uphold Isaac and Rebekah’s arranged pairing as the loving ideal, but word from the street is that more of us prefer the damp heat of Jacob and Rachel’s lustful attraction. Jacob breaks into tears of infatuation and steals a kiss off Rachel about five seconds after first seeing her. He indentures himself for seven years to receive her hand, and when he doesn’t get quite what he bargains for, sacrifices another seven. I guess that’s what you do when convinced that you’re destined to be with someone.

The Jewish idea of “chosenness” resonates deeply in our identity as a people, and resides too in our beliefs about finding a mate, as though love partnership might reflect in miniature the chosen collective destiny. How beautiful. But I wonder if the hope for such exalted connection doesn’t set us up for disappointment. I have an ex-girlfriend who said when we broke up that she didn’t experience us as soul mates. She wasn’t judging the relationship. Our bond just didn’t have that wordless ethereality she craved. I wanted to ask her, “Do you ever wonder if instead of needing a soul mate you just need someone you can love?”

If *beshert* signifies some sanctified bond destined to be, I don’t believe in it. That outlook feels too metaphysically exclusive. I prefer to believe more mundanely, but no less reverently, that love is abundantly available and with the right *kavanah* (intention) it can be created—a consciously crafted rather than wondrously received relationship.

One creative approach to *beshert* might begin with exploring its elements in our existing non-romantic relationships. I am not implying we substitute *(continued on page 64)*

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world, but what the gay Jew's unique destiny is. Was there a class of *kedeshim*, of Israelite sex-priests who offered experiences of Divine communion to men and women alike? Were there Israelite spiritualities maintained by marginal women who lived outside of the familial structure, and in congregations of their own? Scholars tell us that the answers to these questions are probably affirmative, even though we may never reconstruct what these people's lives were like. But as a personal (rather than historical) matter, to include such modes of being within my own identity as a Jew is both thrilling and threatening. Thrilling because it means that I have a history—that God has made gay people for millennia, and they have constructed spiritual lives alongside of, and despite, the orthodoxies of their day. But threatening because this is the path of the outsider.

Notwithstanding the hysteria of the homophobes, there are not enough queer Jews in the world to threaten the foundations of the Jewish community. But in terms of personal identity, one is enough. If the act of boundary-crossing, at once the formative move of the Hebrew (*ivri*, crossing-over) people and the antithesis of normative Jewish life, is to be admitted as an act of devotion to God, then what becomes of the prescribed codes of worship, or the sense of security that comes from fi-

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delity to the permitted? The *nomos* gives meaning, and security—what is lost when it is transgressed? Personally, for example, I find that adherence to the dietary laws, even in their arcane details and historical accidents, provides me with a sense of closeness to God. But if I am to truly be a boundary-crosser, is it the love of heaven that keeps my dishes separate—or is it merely cowardice?

One reason that eros is so carefully patrolled by law is that, blessed by the simplicity of love, it is easy to forget distinctions. Labels, binarisms, genders, and transgressions matter little when my partner is in my arms and love is the most natural thing in the world. Yet while such moments of innocence are delightful, they are also infantile. *Shatnez*, the Biblically-proscribed blending of wool and linen, which was prohibited precisely because it was sacred to the Egyptians (possibly like forbidden sexual unions), also looks, from a distance, to be cloth like any other. Only on closer inspection do its transgressed distinctions become apparent—whether as a path to God or to chaos. ■

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(continued from page 57) other relationships for primary partnership, but recognize that the nurturing qualities we associate with primary partnership may already live in other connections—with a longtime friend, a close colleague at work, a mentor who helps guide our life in a fulfilling direction.

Maybe we can even find beshert in partnerships we do not always consider partnerships, anyplace where we have chosen deeply. My work as a teacher is beshert. I tried to abandon that profession once, but realized I am irrevocably attached to helping sixteen year olds explore their emerging selves. I also have beshert poems that somehow selected me as a scribe. Maybe you have a beshert painting, song, possession, or article of clothing. That seasoned pair of shoes in which you crossed canyons, passageways, or ancestral cemeteries. Maybe you have worn those soles into beshert.

Beshert ultimately may not really be about someone else, but about myself, places I choose within. It may be like a state of consciousness, an openness to intimacy willing to root in the earth.

I know it's cliché to claim you have to love yourself before you can love another, but I like the idea of beginning with a beshert of self. A friend once told me that if you are in the pain of being single and hear a passionate romantic love song on the radio, don't turn it off. Reinterpret the song as a lyric to yourself or to God.

If you're not into popular love songs try doing this exercise with the Bible. Try *Shir HaShirim*, the Song of Songs. What if we read the poem as a passionate dialogue of *ahavat nefesh*, soul love with the self? *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3). Or try one of the most fundamental commandments of our tradition: "love the stranger as yourself." We might consider the stranger as the stranger within, some part of us we have yet to discover, shamed away or rejected in pain long ago.

When you take this interior approach, the *teshuvah* process can take on a new dimension. We can return to ourselves with forgiveness. Many spiritual paths follow this approach. In the twelve-step tradition, when it comes time to "make amends to those we had harmed," we are encouraged to begin with ourselves. How have I have harmed myself? How might I make restitution from a place of compassion? As this New Year begins I want to say to myself, "Forgive me for those harsh moments this past year when I judged your worthiness or pressured you with unrealistic expectations."

I love the Jewish path because it is a relationship path where all life can be a reciprocal love conversation with the many shattered pieces of the universe. In the quest for beshert, many of us do seek that one single person with whom to share our most intimate longings. But that relationship may also be only the most visible dimension of an intimate fabric transcending any one of us. I am grateful for this kind of interconnected world. It means I receive countless invitations to dance. ■

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