Thoughts on Parashat Bereishith: In Honor of the Wedding of Rabbi Hayyim Angel and Maxine Siegel

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"This is the book of the generations of man (Bereishith 5:1)"

The Sifra on Vayikra 19:18 records a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai. Rabbi Akiva states that the verse, "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" is a great principle of the Torah. Love, as best exemplified by the love of husband and wife, is the cornerstone of human happiness. Indeed, the wedding blessings refer to bride and groom as "re'im ahuvim", the quintissential beloved friends. When two people genuinely love each other, their lives are transformed; they come to understand the meaning of life. Strengthened by this love, they relate with deeper compassion and sensitivity to their friends and neighbors.

Ben Azzai, while agreeing with Rabbi Akiva's basic point, suggests that another verse contains an even greater principle of Torah: zeh sefer toledot adam, zeh kelal gadol mizeh (This is the book of the generations of man--this is an even greater principle). This verse, drawn from Parashat Bereishith, includes the words that God created human beings in His image. Ben Azzai's opinion has generally been explained as referring to these latter words of the verse i.e. since humans are created in God's image, we are called upon to respect all human beings--regardless of their particular backgrounds. Ben Azzai, according to this interpretation, is offering a universal vision of inclusiveness and commitment to humanity in general, not just to our own friends and neighbors. This is an even greater principle than loving one's neighbor as oneself, in the sense that it enlarges our perspective, and helps us view ourselves as part of the greater human family.

This interpretation of Ben Azzai assumes that he was referring to the latter part of the verse i.e. that human's were created in God's image. Yet, the actual citation in the Midrash has Ben Azzai quoting the first part of the verse: zeh sefer toledot adam, this is the book of the generations of man. I suggest that we should understand Ben Azzai's view based on the first words of the verse.

According to this interpretation, Ben Azzai is saying that the greatest principle of Torah is to realize that our life is a book. We each write our own book--with all its successes and failures, with all its acts of kindness and all its shortcomings. In 120 years, we each bring our book before the Almighy. The book tells what we've done, what the essence of our life has been, how and why we have been worthy of the years that the Almighty has granted us. Ben Azzai is teaching that life needs to be lived with this perspective--that we are answerable and responsible to God for the gift of life that He has bestowed upon us.

When a bride and groom come under the wedding canopy, they each bring the first chapters of their individual books with them. They bring their memories and their accumulated wisdom; they bring years of study and spiritual growth; they bring their family traditions and their personal insights. Under the wedding canopy, they now begin a new chapter in their book of life. The new chapters will be co-authored.

When we are blessed with a bride and groom who have so much love, so much talent, so many achievements, such great ideals--we can be confident that the new chapters that they write together will be a masterpiece of the first order. We pray that they will write a long book, filled with many happy and meaningful chapters. We are sure that they will produce a classic that will be a source of inspiration and joy for many, many years to come.

***The Angel for Shabbat column congratulates Rabbi Hayyim and Maxine Angel on their marriage, and wishes them a long and happy life together. They are a great source of pride and joy to their families, the Shearith Israel community, and to the larger community. May Hashem bless them with all good things.

Angel for Shabbat