

Rabbeinu Taam was once presented with a fascinating Halachic question: A young man asked the father of a young (minor) girl for his daughter's hand in marriage. The father agreed and Kiddushin was performed by the groom with the father of the young girl. The problem was that the father had more than one minor daughter and neither he nor the groom had mentioned the girl's first name! As such, it was unclear which daughter the groom had intended to betroth and which daughter the father had consented to give away. Was their any valid Kiddushin binding any of the girls? Which one? Rabbeinu Taam considered the possibility of deciding the case on the basis of the well known tradition of not marrying off our younger daughters before our older daughters. The father must have meant - and the groom surely intended to marry - the oldest of the man's minor daughters. [Tosfot, Kiddushin 52a]

The first and original source for the Minhag of not marrying off our younger daughters before marrying off our older daughters is the argument Lavan made to Yaakov, insisting that Yaakov had to first marry Leah and only subsequently would be allowed to marry Leah's younger sister, Rachel.

How do we know that this tradition of "the older daughter first" continues after the advent of Mattan Torah?

This tradition of marrying off our older daughters first is supported by the explanation for a discrepancy between the Parsha of Pinchas that we read this week and the Parsha of Massei which we will read from the Torah next Shabbat, God willing. The names of the daughters of Tzelafchad are listed in two different orders. In Parshat Pinchas (Rashi in Massei explains) they are listed in the order of their wisdom - from most wise to least so. In Parshat Massei they are described as having married within their Shevet of Menasheh. When they married they did so in the order of their birth, from oldest to youngest. That order is different from the order of their relative wisdom. Apparently, even after Mattan Torah and even in the absence of a father who would be the primary focus of the tradition (their father, Tzelafchad was, of course, deceased) there is still an important pattern of marriage-in-order-of birth that siblings are advised to follow.

What is the meaning and reason behind this tradition? Another question: Why is it non-binding? With an older sister's express consent, a younger sister may marry before her older sister. Why may the Minhag be set aside? A third question: Why is this Minhag not applied to young men? Why may a younger brother marry before his older brother, without question or concern?

Let's look at this last question, first. The tradition of insisting upon marrying off the older sibling first does not apply to young men. It is a longstanding reality that men are the outgoing (as far as approaching a woman to marry is concerned) active seekers and go-getters in a manner that does not cause (as much as it does in the case of young women) the fear of being forever alone to creep into their hearts when others around them - friends or siblings - marry before they do. That is why there is no Minhag concerning the order in which our sons marry. In no way should we ever minimize or be inattentive to the sadness and loneliness that many single men suffer and endure. However, in most instances, the fear and the sense of being forlorn are greater in the case of a woman who is not yet married than they are in the case of a single man.

Back to question one: Why such a Minhag? As in the case of Leah, who feared that she would never have the good fortune of marrying a suitable young man, for our daughters such fear and trepidation are exacerbated and lead to even greater worry and sadness when a younger sister marries ahead of her. The pain that the marriage of her sister might cause is reason to make every effort to marry off our older daughters before marrying off our younger daughters. The admirable and correct belief that "all is providentially decreed, that it is Min Hashamayim" does not necessarily help assuage the natural fear in the heart of the young lady. It may intensify it.

As far as setting the custom aside: Because an older sister feels for her beloved younger sister who she wishes to protect from any pain or hardship, the older sister may grant permission to her younger sister to marry before her.

The Torah's different orders in the listings of the names of Tzelafchad's daughters is indirectly (if not directly) reminding us how sensitive we must be to the aching and pained hearts of Bnot Yisrael who wish with all their being to marry and raise a family in Klal Yisrael but have not yet been blessed with having met their true and proper mate. The nature of the "Shidduch Crisis", as it is correctly referred to, is such that some of the young ladies of our Jewish communities experience a profound loneliness and a sense of being absent from the active, vital Family of Israel. They know that they have not yet been blessed with something that is so basic to and is so much a part of all that we aspire to as Jews - the opportunity to help build the Jewish nation by building a Jewish family.

To care and to be conscious of the pain in the hearts of the daughters of Klal Yisrael who are desirous of marriage is merely a good start. It should be impetus to get involved in worthy efforts to bring deserving young people together. Try to suggest an appropriate match for an eligible Jewish lady, today. Get involved in Shidduch Clubs and Shidduch Meetings and the planning of events that offer people the possibility of meeting their "Bashert". The Mitzvah of bringing a life of shared joy into fruition is so great that it is rewarded in this world and will remain with us into our Olam Habba.

Shavua Tov.

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