**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur *#*21*:*  Are Matches Made in Heaven?**

**Adapted by Leora Bednarsh**

The *gemara* tells us (*Sota* 2a; *Sanhedrin* 22a) that a heavenly voice proclaims before every baby is born who his future mate will be, thus clearly indicating that matches are made in Heaven. But this conclusion is complicated by another passage in the *gemara* (*Mo’ed Katan* 18b) analyzing the permissibility of betrothal on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed.*Shmuel permits this based on the category of *davar ha-aved*, avoiding potential loss, which is generally considered adequate justification for working on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed*:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Shmuel said: It is permitted to betroth a woman on the intermediate days of a Festival, lest another come and betroth her first... Did Shmuel [really] say [that we are concerned] that perhaps another man will come and betroth the woman first? But didn’t R. Yehuda say that Shmuel said: Every day a Divine Voice issues forth and says: The daughter of so-and-so is destined to be the wife of so-and-so; the field of so-and-so will belong to so-and-so [such that the match is predestined and there is no reason for concern]?

Rather [Shmuel’s statement should be understood as follows]: Perhaps another man will come and betroth her first by means of praying for divine mercy.

In other words, Shmuel is concerned that a rival may beseech God to cancel the decree of the Divine Voice, and the first man therefore needs to hurry and betroth the woman before the other one has a chance to pray that he should take her from him.

[This is] like this [incident], in which Rava heard a certain man asking for mercy, who said: Grant me so-and-so as a wife. Rava said to him: Do not pray and ask for mercy in this way. If she is fit for you and it has been decreed that she will be your wife, she will not go away from you. And if she is not [destined to be your wife], you will come to deny the Lord [when you see that your prayer is not answered]. After [the man realized that he would not marry her], he [Rava] heard him say [in prayer]: Either let him die before her or let her die before him. He [Rava] said to him: Did I not say to you not to pray for this matter?

According to our text of Rashi’s commentary, the man prayed that either the woman or he himself die before she married another man, because he could not bear the thought of witnessing her marriage to another.

Rav said in the name of R. Reuven ben Itzterobili: From the Torah, and from the Prophets, and from the Writings, we learn that a specific woman is destined to be married to a specific man is by God. From where is this derived? From the Torah, as it is written: “Then Lavan and Betuel answered and said: The thing comes from the Lord” ([*Bereishit* 24:50](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Genesis.24.50)). From the Prophets, as it is written: “But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the Lord” ([*Shofetim* 14:4](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Judges.14.4)). From the Writings, as it is written: “House and riches are the inheritance of fathers; but a prudent woman is from the Lord” ([*Mishlei* 19:14](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Proverbs.19.14)).

**One is Destined to Marry His Designated Mate**

The first part of this passage, which concludes that it is halakhically permissible to betroth on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed* because a rival may use the power of prayer to override the heavenly decree, implies that one's fate is not absolute; a match made in Heaven is subject to change. However, the second part of this passage, the story of Rava, implies the opposite. Rava advises the man not to pray for a specific match because prayer is not capable of changing the heavenly decree. Why, then, is it permissible to betroth on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed*?

This difficulty is addressed by a number of commentators. The printed version of Rashi’s commentary explains that a match made in Heaven is not subject to change under any circumstances and that, as per the story of Rava, even prayer is not powerful enough to change the heavenly decree and allow someone to marry a spouse who was not designated for him. If so, why hurry to betroth on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed*? According to Rashi, the fear is not that another man's prayers will succeed in allowing him to marry your soulmate, but rather that a spurned suitor, if his frustration is increased by the tension of waiting until the holiday has ended, might become crazed enough to pray that your intended wife die, as did the man who refused to heed Rava's advice.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Tosafot offers a different solution to this problem.[[3]](#footnote-3) Tosafot holds that while prayer does not normally have the power to change one's heavenly fate, as Rava explained, there are moments of Divine favor when prayer has the power to override the normal workings of Divine providence. In those moments, a sincere prayer can change even a match decreed in Heaven. According to Tosafot, it is permissible to betroth on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed* because of a slight chance that a rival's prayer could succeed if one delays. Nonetheless, Rava attempted to dissuade the man from praying for a particular match, because most of the time those prayers are ineffective and lead only to frustration.

A third interpretation of this *sugya* is found in a manuscript of Rashi's commentary,[[4]](#footnote-4) which offers a different interpretation of the words “*kafarta bah*,” translated above as “you will come to deny the Lord.” Rashi suggests an alternate reading of the word *bah* not as an abbreviation for *ba-Hashem*, for the Lord, but simply *bah,* in her. According to this translation, Rava told the man that he should not pray to marry a specific woman, because if she is his intended, he will marry her regardless, and if she is not his intended, he will deny her – i.e., come to hate her. According to this reading, we must interpret the end of the story differently as well. The man was not a spurned suitor who prayer for either himself or the woman to die before her wedding. Rather, he had succeeded in marrying the woman he pursued, but as she was not his true soulmate, he ended up miserable and could not bear the thought of continuing this failed marriage. He therefore prayed that God kill either him or her, so long as he would be free from living with this woman whom he once desired so strongly.[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to this explanation, it is understandable that Shmuel permitted betrothal on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed,* because the prayer of a rival might in fact succeed in allowing him to marry your true soulmate. However, while a foolish prayer might override the heavenly decree, one cannot outwit fate. One who uses the power of prayer inappropriately to marry someone who is not his soulmate will come to regret it, and his marriage will be short-lived. Based on this, the *Sefer Chassidim* concludes that a man who succeeds in marrying a woman who is not his soulmate will die or divorce her soon after the wedding, and she will then return to her true soulmate in fulfillment of the heavenly decree.[[6]](#footnote-6)

These three interpretations agree that everyone has a designated mate whom he is destined to marry and that this fate is not dependent on one's actions or even prayers.[[7]](#footnote-7) The difference between them is only with regard to whether there are circumstances in which the power of prayer can override one’s fate. Rashi believes that there are no such circumstances, Tosafot holds that fate can be overridden only in rare circumstances, and the alternate text of Rashi's commentary holds that it can be changed only temporarily and unhappily.

**No Destined Mate**

The Meiri, however, in his commentary to this passage, rules that betrothal is permissible on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed* because if one were to delay, a rival might betroth the woman instead. He omits any mention of a fate sealed in Heaven. Why does he neglect to take this concept into account?

The answer is found in a passage in *Sota* (2a),[[8]](#footnote-8) which raises a contradiction between two teachings of the Sages. Rav states that a heavenly voice announces a man’s destined marriage partner at the moment of his conception, but Reish Lakish teaches that one’s spouse is assigned from Heaven in accordance with his deeds; a righteous woman is matched with a righteous man and a wicked woman is assigned to a wicked man. How, then, can one’s mate be decreed in utero, if it is not yet determined whether the embryo will grow up to be righteous or wicked?[[9]](#footnote-9) The *gemara* answers by distinguishing between a first match, which is fated from the time of conception, and a second match, which is determined later in life based on one’s actions. Most commentaries interpret, in accordance with the plain meaning of the text, that a distinction is being drawn between one’s first marriage and a second or subsequent marriage.[[10]](#footnote-10) One initially marries his destined soulmate, and only in cases of remarriage, when one must find another spouse who is not his soulmate, does Divine providence make matches based on the merits of the parties involved.

The Meiri, however, interprets this phrase differently and insists that Divine providence runs the world not on the basis of blind fate or mystical determinism, but rather by the principle of reward and punishment. If one has performed good deeds, God rewards him by helping him find a good spouse, and conversely God punishes a sinner by sending him a substandard marriage partner. What if one is married off at a very young age, as was the custom in the Talmudic era, before one has had the opportunity to choose a good or evil path in life? In that case, his spouse will be determined arbitrarily – by blind fate or the mechanistic forces of nature. This case of child marriage is what the *gemara* refers to as a first match, and the mechanistic workings of arbitrary fate are allegorically called a “heavenly proclamation.” The principle of reward and punishment, which determines the marriage partner of those old enough to freely choose a path in life, is referred to by the *gemara* as a second match.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Meiri’s interpretation is likely based on the opinion of the Rambam, who holds that Divine providence assigns marriage partners only on the basis of reward and punishment, and not fate or determinism.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Tashbetz summarizes these two opinions about the nature of heavenly involvement in matchmaking.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to the Kabbalists, he explains, our souls have existed since the very beginning of creation, and each soul is paired up in Heaven with a divinely ordained soulmate before it descends into this world. Divine providence then arranges that each person find his soulmate and marry her, thus guaranteeing them the potential to live happily ever after.[[14]](#footnote-14) The philosophers, on the other hand, believe that marriages, as well as everything else in the physical world, are determined by the mechanistic workings of the laws of nature and that only man’s exercise of free will can change his fate. Thus, one’s mate is determined by the laws of nature until such time as he exercises his free will and earns a better or worse fate.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the contemporary era, when marriage occurs during adulthood, the divergence between these two viewpoints is very consequential. According to the first viewpoint, each of us will necessarily marry his “first match” who was chosen in Heaven, before he was born, as his ideal soulmate. All one needs to do is to avoid upsetting the system by praying for a particular marriage partner, and instead trust that God will send him his soulmate.[[16]](#footnote-16) According to the second viewpoint, however, there is no specific mate destined for anyone. If one desires a good match that will lead to many years of marital bliss, it is incumbent on him to act righteously and improve his character in order to merit Heavenly assistance in finding a proper mate.

**Third View: Synthesis**

A third interpretation, which combines elements of the two approaches we have seen, is found in the *Be’er Sheva*[[17]](#footnote-17) and other *Acharonim.*[[18]](#footnote-18) The *Be’er Sheva* assumes, like Rashi and Tosafot, that everyone has an ideal heavenly soulmate assigned to him, and this is what the *gemara* refers to as a first match. He also assumes, like the Meiri and the Rambam, that Divine providence makes matches based solely on one’s spiritual accomplishments, within the context of reward and punishment. This is what the *gemara* describes as a second match. He explains that each of us has an ideal soulmate, but he is not guaranteed to necessarily find that soulmate. Only one who acts righteously will be rewarded with divine assistance in finding his true soulmate, while one who is not righteous will lose the privilege of marrying his soulmate and be assigned a less suitable spouse instead.

According to this interpretation, the obligation upon one seeking a mate to improve his moral and spiritual state is even more pressing, as it constitutes the key to finding his destined soulmate.

**Summary**

We have seen three approaches to understanding the role of Divine providence in matchmaking.

The first approach is that of Rashi and Tosafot, who hold that the realm of matchmaking transcends the normal principles of reward and punishment and that God will always ensure that each person initially marries his soulmate. The only possible exception to this rule is one who prays for a different marriage partner. According to Rashi this prayer would be ineffective, according to Tosafot it would be effective only in uncommon circumstances, and according to an alternate version of Rashi’s commentary it would be effective only temporarily, and tragically so.

The second approach, that of the Rambam and the Meiri, denies the concept of a divinely destined soulmate, and asserts that Divine involvement in matchmaking is no different than the exercise of providence in any other realm of human affairs. The righteous are rewarded with good marriages, and the wicked are punished with unworthy spouses.

The third approach, that of the *Be’er Sheva*, upholds the belief in a destined soulmate assigned to every individual, but holds that one must earn the privilege of finding one’s soulmate.

1. Betrothal would otherwise have been forbidden because it is similar to a business transaction (Ritva), or because of the principle that one may not combine two different celebrations, i.e., betrothal and the festival (*Keren Orah,* *Mo’ed Katan* 8a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi thus assumes that the threat of someone praying for your intended’s death is considered a potential loss that would permit betrothal on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed*. This raises the intriguing question of whether and how a third party's prayer can cause concrete damage to the one whose downfall he is praying for. Treatment of this question, however, is beyond the scope of this *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tosafot Ha-Rosh, *Mo’ed Katan* 18b; see also Tosafot, *Sanhedrin* 22a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. MS Escorial G-11-4, ed. Efraim Kupfer (Jerusalem, 1961). This interpretation is also quoted in Rashi’s name by the *Chiddushei Ha-Ran* ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This interpretation is found in *Chiddushei* *Ha-Ran*. Rashi himself, in the version preserved in this manuscript, does not comment on the end of the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Yehuda (ben Shmuel) Ha-Chasid (Germany, 1150-1217), *Sefer Chassidim*, ed. Reuven Margolis (Jerusalem, 1957), section 383. According to *Sefer Chassidim*, they will break up before they even consummate the marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to this conclusion, it is difficult to understand the phenomenon of singles who never marry. Many possible resolutions of this difficulty have been suggested, such as that the single may have chosen not to marry at all and God allows man to choose whether or not to perform a *mitzva*, or that the single’s soulmate may have died young. According to Tosafot, one can also suggest that the prayers of a rival were accepted and the Divine decree was annulled. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This passage also appears in *Sanhedrin* 22a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rashi questions whether this is indeed a contradiction, as God knows what will happen in the future even though it has not yet been determined. Rashi’s resolution of this problem is ambiguous. See *Be'er Sheva, Chochmat Shelomo,* and *Hagahot HaBach,* ad loc., who analyze Rashi’s position. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Tosafot Ha-Rosh, *Sota* 2a, and *Chiddushei* *Ha-Ran*, *Sanhedrin* 22a. This interpretation is consistently assumed by Rashi and Tosafot and corresponds to the usage of the phrases “first match” and “second match” in *Yoma* 90b. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Meiri, *Sota* 2a. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Responsa of Rambam, section 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Shimon ben Zemach Duran (Spain, 1361-1444), *Responsa Tashbetz* 2:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Although potential happiness is guaranteed, everyone is granted free will. Therefore, even one who marries his perfectly matched soulmate can decide to act wickedly and ruin his marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The Tashbetz explains that according to this approach, the reason that one is permitted to betroth on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed* is that a rival suitor may perform good deeds and earn the reward of marrying the woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It may also be obligatory to invest reasonable efforts in pursuit of a match, although *Sefer Chassidim* (section 385) holds that even this is not necessary if one puts his or her faith in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. R. Yissachar Ber Eilenberg (Poland and Moravia, 1550-1623), *Be’er Sheva, Sota* 2a. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Responsa Chatam Sofer 7:34 quotes a similar interpretation in the name of the Arizal (R. Yitzchak Luria). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)