

Cantor Shoshana Brown / From the Pulpit for Sept. 3, 2016

To See Ourselves through the Eyes of Another

In a recent issue of “The Atlantic,” there is an article entitled “How Beyoncé and Kanye Made Marriage Cool Again.” Apparently both pop stars have released albums that recount the ups and downs of married life, celebrating not just the joys of marriage, but the difficulties of it, especially the importance of being able to both forgive and ask for forgiveness to keep this commitment functional. The article’s author, Spencer Kornhaber, quotes a response that Kanye gave a reporter for “GQ,” who asked him why he had gotten married: “People think that I have the ability to make things cool if I’m doing it... This stuff’s starting to be cool... Family is super cool. Going home to one girl every night is super cool.”

It’s nice to know that my husband (Rabbi Mark Elber) and I are doing something “super cool.” But if, like Kanye West, I am of a mind to be a supporter of the institution of marriage, I thought I might be so bold as to share with Herald News readers what, in my experience, is most valuable about marriage.

This summer Mark and I celebrated our 15th wedding anniversary. Now 15 years is not such an impressive anniversary for couples in our age bracket; nonetheless, it feels like an accomplishment. Certainly these 15 years have been a pleasure and richly rewarding – but any married person who is at all honest will tell you that marriage is not all coasting downhill: if you are lucky there is a good amount of level ground, and inevitably there are a few grueling uphill climbs, sometimes with the wind against you. (Can you tell that I have been doing some cycling this summer?)

What is “marriage” in 2016? Two adult individuals freely commit themselves to make a life with one another, pledging to stick with one another through both the good times and the bad, to help one another, to “have one another’s back” as it were, to enjoy an exclusive sexual, financial, emotional, and familial relationship: this is cool – but it is also difficult. It requires bravery, self-sacrifice, patience, the ability to see oneself with honesty, the willingness to admit when one has been wrong or hurtful, to ask for forgiveness, and the ability, as well, to forgive.

But here is the cool thing: almost no one begins a marriage with all these qualities. No, the cool thing about marriage (even for those that don’t last) is that it is an educational process. In the Bible, when God sees that “it is not good for the ‘adam’

[in Hebrew this word means “human being,” and is closely related to the word for “earth,” – ‘adamah’] to be alone” (Gen. 2:18), God subsequently fashions for this “earthling” an ‘ezerk’negdo’. This Hebrew phrase is often translated into English as a “helpmate”- but the Hebrew is much richer in its paradoxical possibilities. While ‘ezer’ does unambiguously mean “helper,” the phrase ‘k’negdo’ can mean both “fitting, appropriate”, – and also “against him” or “up against him.” Thus the “helper” that God, in the Creation story, fashions for the ‘adam,’ might be sometimes a “fitting helper,” and at other times a “helper up against him.” In other words, sometimes, although we do not enjoy it, the most real help that our partner can give us is to be “up against us,” or “in our face.”

Because no one is always right. And no one can see themselves clearly all the time. We can fool a lot of people about ourselves – and perhaps fool ourselves most of all. But our spouse...eventually they know all our tricks, and, willingly or not, they more than anyone else in our lives will function as the mirror by which, if we are open and brave enough, we can see ourselves more clearly. (Even those in a bad marriage can see themselves more clearly vis-à-vis that relationship, gaining insight into when/how to get themselves out of something that is unhealthy for them.) I do not mean to say that there is any shame in being single, or that singledom is not a legitimate life-choice with some advantages of its own. But a good marriage offers a unique learning, maturing process, functioning as a home base from which one may go forth into the world to pursue one’s life’s mission, whatever that may be.

I remember learning of how Leonard Bernstein left his wife of 25 years, Felicia Montealegre, when he came out as a gay man (there was no marriage equality in the 1970’s). Two years later, however, even though he still felt himself to be gay, Leonard returned to Felicia, staying with her until her death by cancer two years later. He said (as I remember it) that he missed the kind of relationship that only marriage could provide: one where you knew and were known by someone so deeply, and through which you could learn about yourself more thoroughly than in any other relationship.

I feel fortunate to live in the era of “marriage equality,” so that this most profound of human relationships may be open to anyone, beyond discrimination. Yes, marriage is “cooler” perhaps than it has ever been. But it is still hard; it still requires bravery, fortitude, empathy, and at times self-denial. These are not virtues that our society excels at much these days. None of us should stand in judgement

over those who do not manage to stay married; it is a challenging endeavor, and no one really knows what goes on in another couple's marriage. After 15 years of marriage to Rabbi Mark, I can tell you that my life is immeasurably richer than before. But I have also come to appreciate that curious phrase in the Creation story about our life-partner being a helper that is "up against us." While ideally marriage adorns our lives with joy, companionship, and a reassuring sense of belonging, it also offers us, if we are heroic (and humble) enough to learn from it, one of the most profound life-lessons: to see ourselves through the eyes of another. Now that, I think, is truly super cool.

Cantor Shoshana Brown is musical director and co-spiritual leader of Temple Beth El of Fall River, MA.