

Relationships – the matrix of life

The Bible is a book primarily about relationships. If we miss what G-d's word has to say to us about relationships, we've missed the point of scripture completely. Few would challenge the famous quote "no man is an island"; as G-d said about Adam at the creation: "it would not be good if the man be alone". Yet man still struggles with his tendency to isolate himself from G-d and others and to sabotage the very closeness that he wants to develop between his fellow man and his creator. What are these things called "relationships"? And what markers identify healthy relationships?

Relationships are living connections between people, in such a way that what is produced by those people coming together yields more than just a sum of those individuals; a whole that somehow is greater than the sum of the parts. Relationships have to do with life and living and are extraordinarily personal. In an auto parts store, there might be various car parts related to each other by function, make, year, model and various other criteria, but a bunch of car parts together in one place (despite however well organized they are) is just that – a bunch of parts put together. Even if those parts are put together into a running engine, no one of those parts is truly unique or required; as long as a replacement part can be obtained from elsewhere, the engine will run with that replacement part. But true relationships are person specific. You can't just substitute one person for another in the father-son relationship, or the husband-wife relationship without that relationship ceasing to be what it was. Relationships are organic, and so the metaphor of the **body** of Messiah is highly appropriate.

Relationships work on 2 planes at the same time: the horizontal plane between human beings, and the vertical plane between human beings and G-d. Healthy relationships move well through both domains at the same time. Restricted movement on the vertical axis results in secular humanism and in the end, the glorification of man. When there is not enough movement on the horizontal axis, the result is a poor individualistic excuse for spirituality and the fragmentation of community, effectively a dismembering of the body of Messiah. Great difficulty in functioning in either of these horizontal or vertical dimensions indicates a problem. That doesn't mean that everybody has to be a social butterfly and a spiritual Superman or Wonder Woman, but certainly, G-d must not be a stranger to us and we must not be strangers to each other, especially in the assembly of believers. Active and effective participation in either one of the horizontal or vertical dimensions should have a reinforcing effect on the other dimension. One primary example of this is that our ability to show genuine love to our fellow human beings is heavily dependant on what kind of shape our relationship to G-d is in. G-d must first pour His love into our hearts. We must then allow that poured out love in us to neutralize the toxic acids of bitterness (or other emotional contaminants) within us and to let His love repair any holes or damage in our hearts. Then (and only then) can our hearts hold G-d's love without leaks and spills, and when we attempt to pour that love out to others, we can be sure that there are no contaminants in what we are pouring out to them.

Many of us have read the quote of Yeshua: "I am the vine and you are the branches", and that for us branches to bear fruit, we need to remain connected to the vine. The branches all being connected to the vine is readily understood. One other fact about the imagery of this passage seems to be overlooked though. At the same time that the branches are connected to the vine, the branches are all connected to each other! If a branch is separated from the vine, it is also separated

from the other branches, no longer having access to the life-giving sap flowing through the whole plant. A cut rose given as a gift might look pretty and alive but being separated from its roots it is dead and withering even while you look at it. Also, anyone who has ever tried to grow corn plants soon learns that individual corn plants do not grow well by themselves. For corn to grow well, a number of corn plants have to be planted together, and somehow (it is unknown exactly how), the corn plants all being near to each other invigorates the growth of the individual plants. So the next time someone says you are being "corny", it is a actually a compliment! Or maybe like a G-rated version of "Children of the corn"!...

So, now that we've looked at what relationships are, how do they work, how are they established, what makes them endure and what make them grow?

Healthy relationships involve the negotiation and sometimes renegotiation of boundaries. At times, we may need to withdraw and allow time for rest or healing to occur before we can resume a prior level of activity with another or others. At other times though, it might be just that movement toward others that leads to the needed healing. Wisdom is needed in differentiating these two scenarios.

Mature relationships, be they friendships, marriages, or whatever kind, need to be consciously committed to and maintained. When someone is truly a friend or partner, they are not just there for us to go on a "good times" joyride with and then when we are no longer having "fun" and the party's over and we are no longer entertained, we drop them faster than a hot potato. There is a difference between friend and acquaintance and we need to know what that difference is. Certain boundaries must be maintained and respected and lowered only when trust is demonstrated: "cast not your pearls before swine". However, when we are called to demonstrate love, we need to be willing to make ourselves vulnerable or to move out of our "comfort zones".

One of the governing principles in the establishing & nurturing of relationships is the covenant – the b'rit. The existence of covenants between G-d and man is well known, but the fact that covenants can exist between human beings and that these covenants operate on basically the same principles as the covenants between G-d and man is less well known. In Genesis 21, Abraham and Abimelech entered into covenant together to settle a dispute over a well. In 1 Samuel 18, Jonathan entered into covenant with David in the interest of protecting David from the murderous rage of king Saul. To end a loosing war, the king of Damascus made a covenant, a b'rit, with king Ahab in 1 Kings 20. A covenant in scripture was a treaty, a binding agreement that both parties invested into willingly and with the utmost seriousness. Covenants spell out the terms of the relationship between the parties involved. Commitment is a main ingredient supplied by the parties. Those who enter into a covenant do so in order to achieve a certain goal or goals, often to rectify a problem situation or prevent bad circumstances from arising. The chief purpose of the covenant is to facilitate relationship or aspects of relationship. No covenant is without a purpose for why one enters it.

To help one remember a covenant and why it exists, the covenant often had a sign that identified it. A wedding ring is a sign of the marriage covenant, helping the one wearing it to remember the covenant with his or her spouse and why it exists. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant with Abraham, a visible reminder and quite personal (covenants always bring relationships to a more personal level). Shabbat

(the Sabbath) is a sign of the covenant between G-d and Israel, a reminder of the relationship that exists between G-d and His people.

It is possible though for one to enter into covenants that are not in one's best interest to be in. G-d warned Israel in regards to just this when He said "Be careful not to make a covenant with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare to you" (Exodus 34:12). In the days of Joshua, The Hebrews found out the truth of this the hard way. Israel was making headway in the Promised Land, and a people in the land called the Gibeonites devised a plan in order to hold onto their position in Canaan. The objective was to get Israel to enter into a treaty with them and have Israel seal this treaty with an oath to the L-RD – in other words, to enter into a b'rit, a covenant relationship. The Gibeonites dressed up in ratty clothes and worn-out sandals, and they stuffed moldy, dried out bread into their carrying sacs and pretended that they had just come on a long journey from a far-away land outside Canaan. The Gibeonites paid heavy lip-service to the G-d of Israel and said "If you guys ever come our way, promise that you'll never make war on us." Israel fell for it and fell for it because at that moment they were too focused on the horizontal dimension of their relationship with the Gibeonites and didn't pay enough attention to the vertical axis: they didn't ask G-d for help in testing the spirits. 1 John 4:1: "Dear friends, don't just believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from G-d".

Noble covenants must be entered into with the genuine motivation of love, and never with just a pretext of love. The Gibeonite episode gives us an example of the pretext of love. For its opposite, let's look again at the covenant between David and Jonathan. 1 Samuel 18:3ff:

Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself...and Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.

This is the same motivation for G-d's covenant with Israel. The purpose of the L-RD's covenant with Israel was simple: for Israel to be His people and for G-d to be their G-d. That was all; nothing mystical, nothing fancy. G-d's covenant with Israel was (is) a marriage and the Shabbat is a weekly honeymoon in which we remember how much he loves us, that He is our G-d and we are his people, married to him and not to any of the transient things of this world.

Covenants are maintained by the mutual commitment of the parties involved. Both sides let down their defenses and get "up close and personal" with each other and make a united front together, defending the investment that they have decided together is worth protecting. Getting up close and personal isn't easy. Sometimes people have B.O. and/or bad breath or we step on each other's toes. But if one's commitment to covenant is mature and strong and motivated by love, such insignificant irritations are overlooked.

Full equality of the two parties in covenant is neither possible nor necessary. The covenant parties may function differently within the covenant but both are aware of why the b'rit exists. They trust each other. And this is what sin is, the breaking of the trust of another person, be it G-d or man. Sin is the breaking of covenant.

When the terms of a covenant are violated, what happens? Does the covenant cease to exist? No, the damage can be repaired, the b'rit can be renewed. What Christians call the New Testament or Covenant actually means *renewed* or *rebuilt*. Messianic

believers took the name of the 1st century books of the Bible directly from Jeremiah 31, where Jeremiah referred to the B'rit Chadasha. *Chadasha* comes from the same root as *Chodesh* in Rosh Chodesh (New Moon). Do we get a brand new moon every 30 or so days? No, of course not, it is the same moon renewed, reconstituted. Our relationships with G-d and with each other may wax and wane like the phases of the moon, but if we continue in relationship and commitment, renewal will come.

Very soon, my wife and I are going to renew our vows, renew our covenant, once again making explicit what our relationship together is all about. Every 7 years, Israel was to meet together and read the Torah publicly, reaffirming again what they affirmed at Mt. Sinai, refreshing it in their hearts and minds.

How about you? Maybe it's time to look again at covenant relationships in your life. Perhaps there is a friendship covenant in your life that needs to be renewed or updated; that friend you haven't "touched base" with in quite some time. What kind of shape is our commitment to the covenant with the L-RD in? Have we been making people a priority or do we need to repent for failing to pray for others? (if you doubt that failing to pray for others is a sin, read 1 Samuel 12:23). Can we think about the last time the concerns of our own lives were the farthest thing from our minds, and for just a moment our hearts ached over a grief that someone else is going through? In this day and age when there are so many details to living and so many things clamoring for our attention, it's so easy to say that we don't have time, but if we regard something or someone as important, we'll make the time. And it doesn't take all that long. Just a few minutes one in a while going for that coffee together and saying "how are you" and really meaning it, and even waiting for the answer. How many of us have been to dinner at each other's homes, and how often? Maybe we're afraid we can never have the house nice enough or "what will they think if they see the dishes in the sink or that laundry that's not yet folded and put away"? But 50 years from now, is it really going to matter that there was a little dust on the end-table or there were some shoes in the entrance-way? But 50 years from now we will remember the warmth around the dinner table, we will remember our children playing together, we will remember laughing with a friend during pleasant conversation. Do we make people a priority?...