



Banque d'Images, ADAGP / Art Resource, NY — La branche (The Branch), Marc Chagall (1887-1985)

Editor's Note: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and a member of the House of Lords, was a keynote speaker at an international conference at the Vatican titled "The Complementarity of Man and Woman," sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Nov. 17-19, 2014. This text is an abridged version of his Nov. 17 address and is reprinted with permission.

I want to begin our conversation by telling the story of the most beautiful idea in the history of civilization: the idea of the love that brings new life into the world. There are, of course, many ways of telling the story, and this is just one. But to me it is a story of key moments, each of them surprising and unexpected.

The first, according to a report in the press on Oct. 20, 2014, took place in a lake in Scotland 385 million years ago. It was then, according to this new discovery, that two fish came together to perform the first instance of sexual reproduction known to science. Until then, all life had propagated itself asexually, which is far simpler and more economical than the division of life into male and female, each with a different role in creating and sustaining life.

When we consider, even in the animal kingdom, how much effort and energy the coming together of male and female takes, in terms of displays, courtship rituals, rivalries and violence, it is astonishing that sexual reproduction ever happened at all. Biologists are still not quite sure why it did. Some say it offers protection against parasites or immunities against disease. Others say it is simply that the meeting of opposites generates diversity. But one way or another, the fish in Scotland discovered something new and beautiful that's been copied ever since by virtually all advanced forms of life. Life begins when male and female meet and embrace.

MONOTHEISM, MONOGAMY & EQUALITY

The second unexpected development was the unique challenge posed to *Homo sapiens* by two factors: Since we stood upright, which constricted the female pelvis, and we had bigger brains, which meant larger heads, human babies had to be born more prematurely, and so needed parental protection for much longer. This made parenting more demanding, the work of two people rather than one. Among most primates, fathers don't even recognize their children, let alone care for them. Elsewhere in the animal kingdom motherhood is almost universal but fatherhood is rare.

So what emerged along with the human person was the union of the biological mother and father to care for their child.

Then came culture, and the third surprise.

The most obvious expression of power among alpha males, whether human or primate, is to dominate access to fertile women and thus maximize the passing on of your genes to the next generation. Hence polygamy, which exists in 95 percent of mammal species and 75 percent of cultures known to anthropology.

That is what makes the first chapter of Genesis so revolutionary with its statement that every human being, regardless of race, culture, creed or class is created in the image and likeness of God. We know that in the ancient world it was kings, emperors and pharaohs who were held to be in the image of God. So Genesis is saying that we are all royalty. We each have equal dignity in the kingdom of faith under the sovereignty of God.

From this, it follows that the norm presupposed by the story of Adam and Eve is: one woman, one man. Monogamy, however, did not immediately become the norm, even within the world of the Bible. But many of its most famous stories, about the tension between Sarah and Hagar, or Leah and Rachel and their children, or David and Bathsheba, or Solomon's many wives, are all critiques that point the way to monogamy.

And there is a deep connection between monotheism and monogamy, just as there is, in the opposite direction, between idolatry and adultery. Monotheism and monogamy are about the all-embracing relationship between I and Thou, myself and one other —be it a human, or the divine Other.

What makes the emergence of monogamy unusual is that it is normally the case that the values of a society are those imposed on it by the ruling class. And the ruling class in any hierarchical society stands to gain from promiscuity and polygamy, both of which multiply the chances of one's genes being handed on to the next generation. So monogamy goes against the normal grain of social change and was a real triumph for the equal dignity of all.

THE MISSION OF MARRIAGE

The next remarkable development was the way this transformed the moral life. What was new and remarkable in the Hebrew Bible was the idea that love, not just fairness, is the driving principle of the moral life. Three loves. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might." "Love your neighbor as yourself." And, repeated no less than 36 times in the Mosaic books, "Love the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger." Or to put it another way: just as God created the natural world in love and forgiveness, so we are charged with creating the social world in love and forgiveness. And that love is a flame lit in marriage and the family. Morality is the love between husband and wife, parent and child, extended outward to the world.

In ancient Israel, an originally secular form of agreement, called a covenant, was transformed into a new way of thinking about the relationship between God and humanity and between God and a people. A covenant is like a marriage. It is a mutual pledge of loyalty and trust between two or more people, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, to work together to achieve together what neither can achieve alone. And there is one thing even God cannot achieve alone, which is to live within the human heart. That needs us.

What covenant did, and we see this in almost all the prophets, was to understand the relationship between us and God in terms of the relationship between bride and groom, wife and husband. Love thus became not only the basis of morality, but also of theology.

All this led to the home and the family becoming the central setting of the life of faith. In the only verse in the Hebrew Bible to explain why God chose Abraham, God says: "I have known him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen 18:19). Abraham was chosen not to rule an empire, command an army, perform miracles or deliver prophecies, but simply to be a parent. In one of the most famous lines in Judaism, which we say every day and night, Moses commands, "You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house or when you walk on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deut 6:7, 11:19). Parents are to be educators, education is the conversation between the generations, and the first school is the home.

Marriage and the family are where faith finds its home and where the Divine Presence lives in the love between husband and wife, parent and child.

THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY

What, then, has changed? Here's one way of putting it. I wrote a book a few years ago about religion and science and I summarized the difference between them in two sentences: "Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean." And that's a way of thinking about culture as well. Does culture put things together or take things apart?

What made the traditional family remarkable, a work of high religious art, is what it brought together: sexual drive, physical desire, friendship, companionship, emotional kinship and love, the begetting of children and their protection and care, their early education and induction into an identity and a history. Seldom has any institution woven together so many different drives and desires, roles and responsibilities. It made sense of the world and gave it a human face, the face of love.

For a whole variety of reasons —some to do with medical developments like birth control, in vitro fertilization and other genetic interventions; some to do with moral change like the idea that we are free to do whatever we like so long as it does not harm others; some to do with a transfer of responsibilities from the individual to the state; and other and more profound changes in the culture of the West —almost everything that marriage once brought together has now been split apart. Sex has been divorced from love, love from commitment, marriage from having children, and having children from responsibility for their care.

The result is that in Britain in 2012, 47.5 percent of children were born outside of marriage, and that statistic is expected to become a majority in 2016. Fewer people are marrying, those who are, are marrying later, and 42 percent of marriages end in divorce. Nor is cohabitation a substitute for marriage. The average length of cohabitation in Britain and the United States is less than two years. And who pays the price for this? The children. The result is a sharp increase among young people of eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, stress-related syndromes, depression, and actual and attempted suicides. The collapse of marriage has created a new form of poverty concentrated among single-parent families, and in most of these —92 percent in 2011 — women bear the burden. In Britain today more than a million children will grow up with no contact whatsoever with their fathers.

This is creating a divide within societies the like of which has not been seen since Disraeli spoke of "two nations" a century and a half ago. Those who are privileged to grow up in stable loving association with the two people who brought them into being will, on average, be healthier physically and emotionally. They will do better at school and at work. They will have more successful relationships, be happier and live longer.

And, yes, there are many exceptions. But the injustice of it all cries out to heaven. The Western abandonment of marriage will go down in history as one of the tragic instances of what Friedrich Hayek called "the fatal conceit" that somehow we know better than the wisdom of the ages, and can defy the lessons of biology and history.

No one surely wants to go back to the prejudices of the past. But our compassion for those who choose to live differently should not inhibit us from being advocates for the single most humanizing institution in history. The family —man, woman, and child —is not one lifestyle choice among many. It is the best means we have yet discovered for nurturing future generations and enabling children to grow in a matrix of stability and love. It is where we learn the delicate choreography of relationship and how to handle the inevitable conflicts within any human group. It is where we first take the risk of giving and receiving love. It is where one generation passes on

its values to the next, ensuring the continuity of a civilization. For any society, the family is the crucible of its future, and for the sake of our children's future, we must be its defenders.

‘REDEEMING THE DARKNESS’

The story of the first family, the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden, ends with three verses that seem to have no connection with one another. No sequence. No logic. In Genesis 3:19, God says to the man: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” Then in the next verse we read: “The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all life.” And in the next, “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”

What is the connection here? Why did God telling Adam that he was mortal lead the man to give his wife a new name? And why did that act seem to change God's attitude to both of them, so that God performed an act of tenderness, by making them clothes, almost as if He had partially forgiven them? Let me also add that the Hebrew word for “skin” is almost indistinguishable from the Hebrew word for “light,” so that Rabbi Meir, the great sage of the early second century, read the text as saying that God made for them “garments of light.” What did he mean?

If we read the text carefully, we see that until now the first man had given his wife a purely generic name. He called her *ishah*, woman. Recall what he said when he first saw her: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for she was taken from man” (Gen 2:23). For him she was a type, not a person. He gave her a noun, not a name. What is more, he defines her as a derivative of himself: something taken from man. She is not yet for him someone other, a person in her own right; she is merely a kind of reflection of himself.

As long as the man thought he was immortal, he ultimately needed no one else. But now he knew he was mortal. He would one day die and return to dust. There was only one way in which something of him would live on after his death. That would be if he had a child. But he could not have a child on his own. For that he needed his wife. She alone could give birth. She alone could mitigate his mortality. And not because she was like him, but precisely because she was unlike him. At that moment she ceased to be, for him, a type, and became a person in her own right. And a person has a proper name. That is what he gave her: the name *Chavah*, “Eve,” meaning, “giver of life.”

At that moment, as they were about to leave Eden and face the world as we know it, a place of darkness, Adam gave his wife the first gift of love, a personal name. And at that moment, God responded to them both in love, and made them garments to clothe their nakedness, or as Rabbi Meir put it, “garments of light.”

And so it has been ever since, that when a man and woman turn to one another in a bond of faithfulness, God robes them in garments of light, and we come as close as we will ever get to God himself, bringing new life into being, turning the prose of biology into the poetry of the human spirit, redeeming the darkness of the world by the radiance of love.

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