



Why Did the Torah Permit Polygamy?

The Original Divine Model of Marriage was Monogamous

The other day, while I was teaching how the relationship between husband and wife reflects the relationship between Hashem and His people, Israel, one of my students asked how then the Torah permitted polygamy in the first place. I explained that Hashem created Adam with only one wife – Chava, thus the original model of marriage was monogamous. Our holy forefathers only took additional wives for specific reasons. Avraham married Hagar only at Sarah’s selfless initiative. She cared that Avraham would be able to fulfill his divine mission to be a father of many nations, even though she hadn’t yet been blessed to bear Avraham’s children. Therefore, she convinced him to take Hagar as a concubine. Yitzchak never had any wife but Rivkah. In fact, their relationship is considered an ideal marriage of equal partners (Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky). Ya’acov only married Leah because he was tricked by Lavan who had exchanged his beloved Rachel for Leah. When he married Bilhah and Zilpah, it was only at the request of Rachel and Leah, who desired to bear children through them. Thus, we see that polygamy by our role-models in the Torah was always through the initiative of their first wife and or due to extenuating circumstances.

Polygamy: Never a Torah Ideal

Throughout Tanach, most polygamous relationships were problematic. Therefore, two cowives are called צרות/tzarot – ‘rivals’ (I Shemuel 1:6). Polygamy is a recipe for strife, jealousy, never-ending grief, distress and confrontation. We know this from the relationship between Sarah and Hagar, Chana and Penina, and from the rivaling of half-siblings, like the sons of Ya’acov and King David. Due to King Solomon taking too many wives, his kingdom was split, eventually resulting in the destruction of the Temple. The first example of polygamy teaches us how marrying more than one wife is regarded as immoral in the Torah. Lamech designated Ada to bear his children and deal with the housework, while Tzila would remain beautiful, child-free and available. Rashi characterizes Lamech’s marriage to two women at once (Bereishit 4:19) as part of the morally reprehensible practices that brought Hashem to destroy the world through the flood. “So was the custom of the generation of the flood, one [wife] for propagation and one for marital relations. The one who was for marital relations would be given a potion of roots to drink, so that she should become sterile. Then he would adorn her like a bride and feed her delicacies, but her companion was neglected and was mourning like a widow” (Rashi, *ibid.*). “To divide the wifely roles of mother and lover is to objectify women based on utility (Rabbi Ari Kahn, aish.com). What kind of reflection of the relationship between Hashem and Israel would such a triangle relationship generate? Certainly not one of unity and ultimate devotion.

Ya’acov’s Four Wives Builds the Nation of Israel

Ya’acov was destined to marry four wives because Ya’acov’s family built the Jewish nation. By taking several wives and giving birth to numerous children, Ya’acov was able to transform his extended family into a nation with a special covenant and relationship to Hashem. Thus, Ya’acov’s wives and children became the microcosm of the Jewish people. When Rachel and Leah offered their handmaids to Ya’acov, it was because, “The Matriarchs were prophetesses who were aware that twelve tribes would be born to Ya’acov, and that these twelve would descend from four wives” (Rashi, Bereishit 29:34). This is learned from Leah’s naming of Levi, “Now this time my

husband will be attached to me, for I have borne him three sons; therefore, He named him Levi" (Bereishit 29:34). Thus, Leah proclaimed that Ya'acov could no longer harbor any complaints against her, since she had provided him with her full share of three sons (one quarter of the 12 tribes). The Matriarchs possessed an intuitive superconscious realization that they had the task and privilege to propel the historical process forward to eventually culminate in establishing the Israelite nation. Creating the Jewish nation is the patient product of generations of cultivation and nurturing through immense struggle and pain. Great indeed are the women who are perceptive enough to comprehend that their labor of child rearing also constitutes nation building. (Based on <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/download/file/fid/3305>).

The Four Holy Wives of Ya'acov Represent the Unity of the Four Dimensions

The Zohar goes even deeper explaining that Ya'acov had to marry four wives in order to reveal all the manifestations of existence. These aspects are represented by the four primeval rivers in Eden, the four archangels, the four directions, the four elements, and the four camps of the Shechina, and the four letters of Hashem's name:

זוהר חלק ב דף רנו/ב

ורזא דמלה, יעקב נטיל ארבע נשין, וכליל לון בגויה, ואף על גב דאוקימנא להאי מלה ברזא אחרא, דאיהו קיימא בין תרין עלמין, ורזא דכלא, כד יעקב נטיל האי היכלא דאיהו שתיתאה, נטיל וכליל בגויה כל אינון ארבע נשין, ארבע מלאכין, וכלהו דבקי בהיכלא דא, אלין אינון ארבע רישי נהרין, דכתיב (בראשית ב י') ומשם יפרד והיה לארבעה ראשים, אלין ארבע רישינו, אינון ארבע נשין דנטיל לון יעקב, ונטיל היכלא דא.

The secret of the matter: Ya'acov took four wives and included them within him. Though we explained it through another mystery, NAMELY, that he stands between two worlds OF ATZILUT, CALLED 'RACHEL AND LEAH;' NEVERTHELESS, the secret of the whole matter is that when Ya'acov took this chamber, the sixth one, he included in it these four women, who were four angels, all attached to this chamber. These are the four sources of the rivers, as it is written, "and from thence it was parted, and branched into four streams" (Bereishit 2:10). These four branches are the four women Ya'acov married, who took this chamber (Zohar 2,156b).

The Zohar explains that the souls of Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah, were really four parts of one soul, called "Rachel." This concurs with the tradition that all four were sisters. Rachel and Leah were even twins (Seder Olam Rabbah 2). The rectification of creation requires the reunification of all four parts into one soul. This is similar to how Ya'acov absorbed Esav into his being by first buying the birthright, and then receiving the blessings. The four holy wives of Ya'acov represent Ya'acov's mission in the world to unify all these elements and thus rectify Adam, whose sin caused the fragmentation of the world. For the sake of this lofty rectification, Ya'acov had to marry four wives and deviate from the command not to marry two sisters. By joining together with one husband and overcoming the natural tendency of rivalry, Ya'acov's four holy wives became as one unified person, enacting the highest tikun of creation.

<http://rebbetzinchanabracha.blogspot.com/2016/12/how-could-yaacov-marry-two-sisters.html>

Restrictive Laws Concerning Polygamy Since Talmudic Times

Since Talmudic times, the sages disparaged marrying more than one wife. Already by the fourth or fifth century of the common era, the practice was discouraged or banned, and none of the rabbis named in the Talmud had polygamous relationships. In order to limit it, they decreed that polygamy was permissible only if the husband was capable of properly fulfilling his marital duties toward each of his wives. The opinion was also expressed, that if a man takes a second wife, he must divorce his first wife and pay her ketubah if she so demands (Yevamot 65a; Alfasi, Piskei ha-Rosh; Shulchan Aurch, EH 1:9). Similarly, according to Talmudic law, a man may not take a second wife if he has specifically stipulated in the ketubah that his first wife would be his only one

(Shulchan Aruch, EH 76:8). Taking a second wife is also forbidden wherever monogamy is the local custom, since it is presumed that she only wishes to marry in accordance with local custom (Shulchan Aruch, EH 1:9; Beit Shemuel, *ibid.*, 20; Chelkat Mechokek, *ibid.*, 15, 76:8). Generally, the husband can only be released from this restriction with his wife's consent (*loc. cit.*; Darchei Moshe, EH 1:1, n. 8; Shulchan Aruch, EH 76).

The Takana (Legislation) of Rabbeinu Gershom

Approximately one thousand years ago, the noted German scholar Rabbi Gershom, "the Light of the Diaspora" banned polygamy for Ashkenazi Jews. That ruling was subsequently accepted also by many Sephardic communities. This ban was instituted to prevent people from taking advantage of their wives and to avoid the inherent rivalry and hatred between rival wives.

Rabbi Gershom was also concerned lest the husband be unable to provide properly for all his wives. In exceptional circumstances, where a wife is physically or mentally incapable of accepting a get (bill of divorce) from her husband, the ban allowed the rabbinate to occasionally permit a man to remarry through "permission from 100 rabbis." Certain authorities believed that the validity of the ban applied only until the year 1240. Others, however, held that it had no time limit. Even according to the first opinion, the ban remains in force after 1240, since later generations accepted it as a binding takanah. Accordingly, the ban now has the force of law for posterity (Resp. Rosh 43:8; Shulchan Aruch, EH 1:10; Aruch ha-Shulchan, EH 1:23; Otzar ha-Poskim, EH 1:76).

The Law of the Land

At a national rabbinical conference called in 1950 by the chief rabbis of Israel, an enactment was passed making monogamy (apart from the above-mentioned permissions) binding upon all Jews irrespective of their communal affiliations. Thus, polygamy has been illegal in Israel since 1977, when a law made the practice punishable by up to five years in prison and a monetary fine (Penal Law Amendment (Bigamy) Law, 5719–1959). It is hard to understand why today in Israel there are still Rabbis who not only condone polygamy but even promote it. Rabbi Yehezkel Sopher, who heads the organization, Complete Jewish Family, placed an advertisement in a popular pamphlet, handed out at synagogue, calling for the return of plural marriage. He erroneously claims that the 11th-century polygamy ban expired in 1240. Sopher also claims that the reason the Israeli chief rabbinate opposes polygamy is their receiving state salaries. Personally, I know one woman in Israel, who became a second wife to a man who was 25 years her senior. This man, her Rabbi, convinced her that by becoming his second wife, she was doing a great mitzvah and speeding up the redemption. You can only wonder about the motivation of such men who condone polygamy.