Commentary

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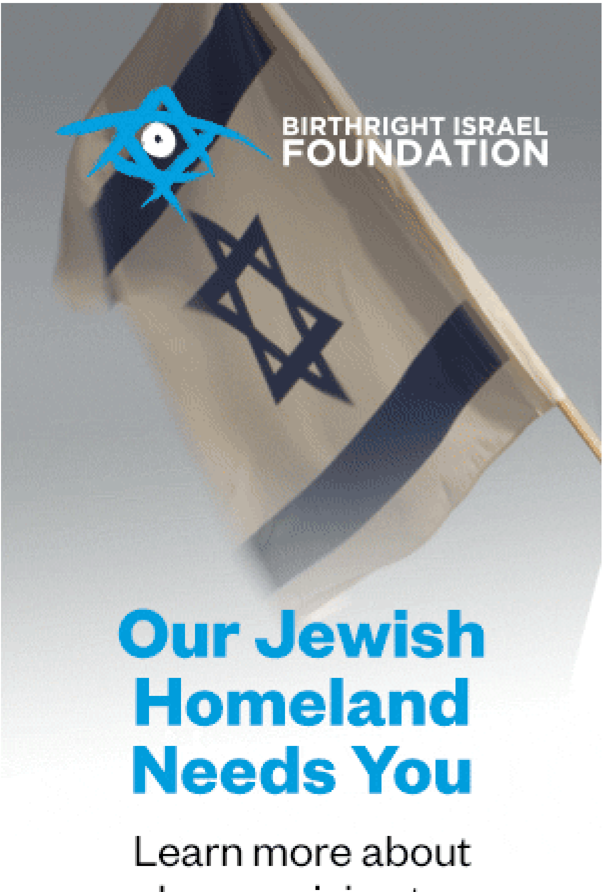
Of Priests, Rabbis, and Wives

A profound divide separates the classical Christian and Jewish views of marriage and family.

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

FOR THERE ARE SOME EUNUCHS, WHICH WERE SO BORN FROM THEIR MOTHER'S WOMB: AND THERE ARE SOME eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

—Matthew 19:12



A man who lives without a wife lives without joy, without blessing, without goodness, . . . for it is written, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

—Talmud Yevamot 62b

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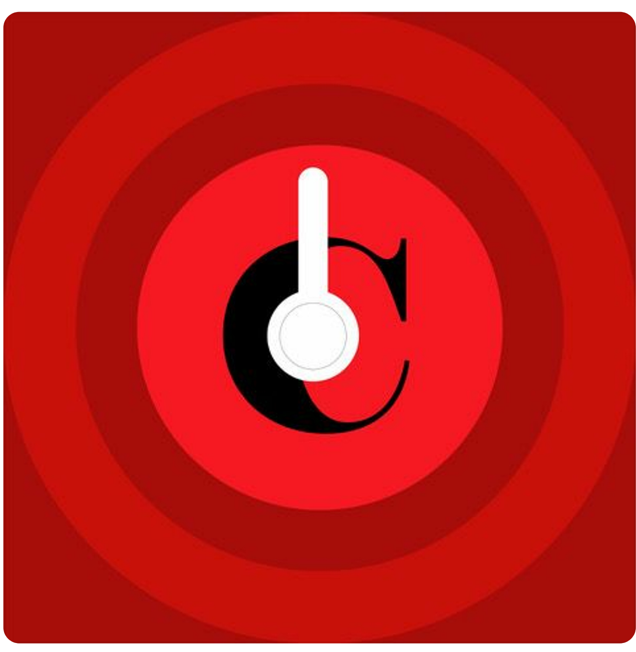

The Wisdom of the Affable Conservative Nut

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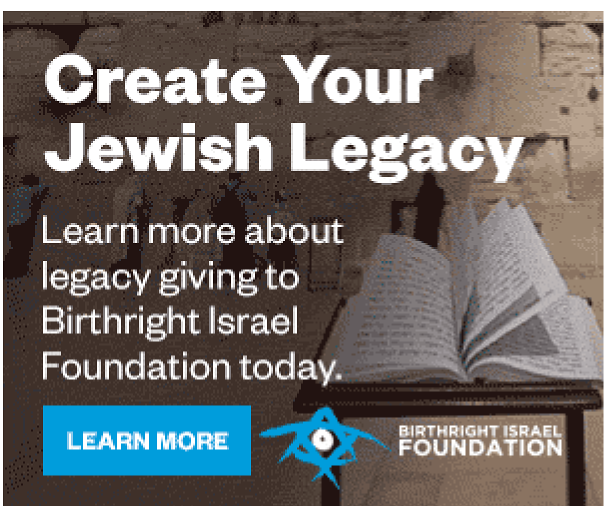
When Benedict XVI issued his first papal encyclical on Christmas day last year, it was greeted by a fair amount of surprise. The new pope, an outspoken theologian of a pronounced conservative bent, had not chosen to write on an obviously headline-grabbing issue like the priestly ordination of women or homosexuals. Instead, he focused on an age-old question—the nature of love—which he treated in a measured, philosophical manner. But if that was one surprise, for some readers another surprise lay in what he had to say.

Like other Christian thinkers before him, Benedict took care to distinguish between love for one's own, such as the love of a man for his wife, and the unmotivated and unearned love for that which is not one's own, for the outsider. According to the Swedish Protestant theologian Anders Nygren, whose influential book on the subject was titled *Eros and Agapé* (Swedish edition 1930-36), these two forms of love are diametrically opposed: one preferential and selfish, the other generous and open. Indeed, the two types also encapsulate a stark difference between Judaism and Christianity. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Nygren wrote, "love is exclusive and particularistic"; Christian love, by contrast, "overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embracing."



But here Benedict diverges, and does so specifically by citing Jewish scripture in defense of a properly directed *eros*. In Benedict's reading, the two loves do not so much contradict as complement each other. The Hebrew Bible, in firmly opposing pagan sexuality as "a warped and destructive form" of love, shows an understanding that "*eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure" but a form of "true grandeur." It is this purified kind of love, Benedict adds, to which the Hebrew word *ahavah* refers.

These passages, however, are what some commentators found surprising in the Pope's encyclical. To be precise, they found surprising what they omitted. "I do not know what to make of the fact," wrote Father Richard John Neuhaus, that Benedict's "discussion of the fulfillment of the human person through being joined with a person of the opposite sex in marriage is not followed by a discussion of celibacy."

On this point, too, there is a stark difference between Christianity and the Judaism out of which it grew. As Benedict's predecessor John Paul II noted, "the ideal of celibacy or of virginity"—of being a "eunuch for the kingdom of heaven"—was something radically new in Jesus' age, something quite unthinkable to the Jews of that time. Jesus, wrote John Paul, "spoke to men to whom the tradition of the Old Covenant had not handed down the ideal of celibacy or of virginity. Marriage was so common that only physical impotence could constitute an exception."

The contemporary Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas agrees. For him, indeed, the issue of voluntary celibacy continues to mark one of the major moral divides between Judaism and Christianity:

> Nothing distinguishes Christians and Jews more dramatically than our understanding of the family. Put simply, Christians are not bound by the law to have children. We must acknowledge that we are children by appropriately honoring our parents, but to honor our parents does not mean that we must make them grandparents. The stark fact of the matter is that Jesus was neither married nor had children. . . . What Jesus started did not continue because he had children but because his witness attracted strangers . . . . [T]he church grows through the conversion of strangers, who often turn out to be our biological children.

About this moral divide Hauerwas is correct, at least in part. Jews *have* traditionally considered themselves obligated by their religion to honor their parents by making them grandparents. Similarly, John Paul II was correct to note that, for the Hebrew Bible, "marriage, as a source of fruitfulness and of procreation in regard to descendants, was a religiously privileged state: and privileged by revelation itself."

Yet the Jewish insistence on marriage is connected to much more than generational continuity. To understand what that "more" is, it may help to look a bit more closely at Christian arguments in favor of a celibate clergy, and to ponder why Judaism has always rejected them.

We may begin with "On the Catholic Priesthood," issued by Pope Pius XI in 1935. Contemplating the appointment of Moses' brother Aaron and his descendants to minister in the Tabernacle and Temple, Pius writes that, by means of this action, God "wished to impress upon the still primitive mind of the Jewish people" the idea of "sacrifice and priesthood." But, although these antique rituals were wonderful in their own right, the Temple's "greatest majesty and glory" derived from its symbolic function: that is, it prefigured, imperfectly, the

future “priesthood of the new and eternal Covenant [that would be] sealed with the blood of the redeemer of the world.” As an example of that imperfect prefiguration, Pius cites a passage in Exodus stipulating that only during the first seven days of their service as priests were Aaron and his sons instructed “to remain with the Tabernacle, and so to keep continent”; by contrast, he concludes, “the Christian priesthood, being much superior to that of the Old Law, demanded a still greater purity.”

In what way does such permanent continence reflect a “superior” degree of sanctity? For Pius, the more any man practices the moral virtue of eschewing physical pleasure, the more godlike he becomes. How much more so, then, in the case of a celibate priest, one who “dedicates and consecrates himself to God’s service” and should therefore in some way “divest himself of the body.”

Which brings us back to Benedict. As against Pius, the present Pope insists that we are wrong to spurn our physicality. Our bodies, Benedict argues, are an essential part of who *we* are—namely, beings made up of both body and spirit, or body and soul:

> [I]t is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united does man attain his full stature.

As if with Pius in mind, Benedict goes on to observe that “Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed.” They have existed, indeed, not only in religion but in the Western philosophical tradition, where they have been embraced by thinkers from Plato to Descartes. But neither is Benedict alone among Christians when he questions these

tendencies, or when he echoes both Aristotle and the Hebrew Bible in insisting on "the whole man." Here again is Father Neuhaus, describing, in a particularly moving passage, how his own temporary sojourn at death's door brought home the importance of his body to his sense of self:

> The notion of some of the ancients and the Enlightenment rationalists that the essential "I" is not involved in the death of this body struck me as preposterous. . . . [I]t is this body, now in pitiful ruins, that participated in the yearnings of my loves, the bracing joy of early morning walks . . . and all those nights of languorously falling into sleep. . . . This body and I, this body that is inseparable from me, together we have been this life.

But if our physicality is an essential aspect of our identity, how, then, to defend the ideal of celibacy? Though many arguments have been offered, one happens to recur time and again that is less theological than practical and ethical: the priest, as pastor, must be able to focus on his flock, and this requires that he be without the demands and the distractions of familial life and love.

The reasoning here harks back to the teachings of the apostle Paul. "He that is without a wife," wrote Paul to the Corinthians,

> is solicitous for the things that belong to the Eternal, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: And he is divided.

The same idea runs through 20th-century encyclicals as well. “A priest,” wrote Pius XI, “is to be solicitous for the eternal salvation of souls, continuing in their regard the work of the redeemer. Is it not, then, fitting that he keep himself free from the cares of a family, which would absorb a great part of his energies?” Similarly, for his successor Pius XII, “persons who desire to consecrate themselves to God’s service embrace the state of virginity as a liberation, in order to be more entirely at God’s disposition and devoted to the good of their neighbor.” The Second Vatican Council, which began after Pius XII’s reign, reiterated the point in *Perfectae Caritatis*: celibacy “frees the heart of man in a unique fashion so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all men.”

Interestingly, a non-Catholic theologian, Johann Joseph Ignaz von Dollinger, is cited by the *Catholic Encyclopedia* as having formulated with particular vividness the point that celibacy frees the human being to devote himself body and soul to the covenanted community. By way of comparison, von Dollinger invoked specifically the plight of the Protestant pastor, burdened with wife and children:

> [A] priest is a man who sacrifices himself for the sake of his parishioners. He has no children of his own, in order that all the children in the parish may be his children. His people know that his small wants are supplied, and that he can devote all his time and thought to them. They [also] know that it is quite otherwise with the married pastors of the Protestants. The pastor’s income may be enough for himself, but it is not enough for his wife and children also. In order to maintain them he must take other work, literary or scholastic, [and] only a portion of his time can be given to his people.

But this raises the question of why Protestantism rejected priestly celibacy in the first place, and on what terms. In defending the principle that pastors should be allowed to have families, the Augsburg Confession (1530), one of the earliest articulations of Protestant doctrine, drew largely on Paul’s grudging concession that “it is better to

marry than to burn" (and also on the argument that permitting marriage would increase the possibilities of pastoral recruitment). John Calvin, for his part, distinguished between celibacy and *chastity*; rather than insisting on the former, he thought that Christians should seek to "restore" the latter, "to bring back that obsolete discipline by which all licentiousness is restrained, and free the Church from the flagitous turpitude by which it has long been deformed."

An analogous impulse seems to have been at work in post-Reformation England, where (as the historian John Yost has written) a celibate priesthood was often discouraged on the grounds that "marriage was a necessary remedy for fornication"—the latter, of course, being regarded by Protestant reformers as a vice to which Catholic priests were especially susceptible. But Protestants could hardly deny that both Jesus and Paul had praised celibacy as an ideal for those worthy of it. John Wesley, considered the founder of Methodism and one of the fathers of modern English and American Protestantism, resolved the issue this way:

> Upon the whole, without disputing whether the married or single life be the more perfect state (an idle dispute since perfection does not consist in any outward state whatever, but in an absolute devotion of all our heart and all our life to God), we may safely say, Blessed are they who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake: who abstain from things lawful in themselves, in order to be more devoted to God.

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In short, for both Protestants and Catholics, and whether or not absolute continence is demanded of the clergy, celibacy remains a blessed spiritual state. In dismissing *eros* as un-Christian, and in promoting *agapé* as the goal to be striven for, Anders Nygren was thus drawing on a long tradition. In fact, as between Protestantism and

Catholicism, the latter, as we have seen from the example of Benedict XVI, may be the more latitudinarian, at least where lay people are concerned. And in this Benedict himself harks back not so much to Paul as to Thomas Aquinas, whom the Catholic theologian Thomas Vacek has dubbed "the apostle of *eros*." In Vacek's summary, Aquinas stressed that one's ethical relationships begin with those closest to one's self, then "lead *through* them to the dignity of all human beings, and set as a *goal* the richest possible variety of special relationships." Only when it comes to the special case of the clergy does Catholicism appear to reject this view.

And with that we may return to Judaism, which knows nothing of a celibate clergy. To the contrary, an unmarried clergy, far from being a token of ethical superiority, represents, for rabbinic Judaism, an ethical regression: those without familial responsibilities are regarded as positively *unsuited* for religious leadership.

Stanley Hauerwas is correct that Judaism insists on the bearing of children because it is essential to Jewish continuity. But to end the matter there is to miss an essential point: if we are to learn to love others, Judaism says, we must begin by loving those who are closest to us. Sexual abstinence, Pius XII argues, "gives greater freedom to the soul which wishes to give itself over to spiritual thoughts and prayer to God." Judaism stipulates by contrast that, far from being a distraction from pastoral duties, marriage and family form the very foundation of pastoral excellence.

According to the Mishnah, the high priest (*kohen gadol*), when representing the people of Israel on Yom Kippur and asking for atonement on their behalf, *must* be married; otherwise he is forbidden to serve in the Temple. The same has traditionally applied to Jewish communal leaders, whose authority was once embodied in the Sanhedrin or rabbinical high court; in order to serve on this body, one first had to have children. Why? So that, in the words of Maimonides (1135-1204), one would be merciful toward others.

"Do not judge another," state the rabbinic writings, "until you reach his place." Applied to our issue, this translates into the generalization that one who does not lie awake worrying about his own children can understand, but not fully empathize with, one who does; one who has not experienced the exclusive love that is marriage can understand, but not fully feel *with*, the pain experienced by someone who has lost a spouse. Rather than detracting from the love of others, preferential love is essential to the enterprise.

"How," queries Pius XII, "could a missionary such as the wonderful St. Francis Xavier, a father of the poor such as the merciful St. Vincent de Paul, a zealous educator of youth like St. John Bosco, a tireless 'mother of emigrants' like St. Francis Xavier Cabrini, have accomplished such gigantic and painful labors, if each had to look after the corporal and spiritual needs of a wife or husband and children?" Judaism has long celebrated heroes who accomplished precisely such gigantic and painful labors. Never, however, has it suggested that they remain celibate in order to increase their effectiveness. To the contrary, the choice between exclusive and pastoral love, between special relations and love of the stranger, between spousal love and priestly *agapé*, is seen by Judaism as a false choice.

I have already mentioned the Yom Kippur ritual in the ancient Temple. As delineated in the biblical book of Leviticus, Israel's atonement was achieved, year after year, through the sacrifices brought on that day by the high priest. The several stages of the ritual, still recited as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy, illuminate the point I have been making.

The ritual centered on the sacrifice of two animals: a bull brought by the high priest on his own behalf, and the "*se'ir la-Azazel*," commonly called the "scapegoat," designated to bear the sins of Israel. Whenever an individual brought a sin-offering to the Temple, the Bible prescribed that he first had to confess his sins. The same applied to the high priest, who himself, as recounted in the Mishnah, went through a complex series of confessions on that day. He began by beseeching forgiveness for himself, and for his family.

> And so he would say: I beg of You, O Lord, I have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You, *I and my household*. I beg of You—by Your Name—atone now for the errors, iniquities, and willful sins by which I have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You, *I and my household*. As it is written in the Torah of Moses, Your servant: for on this day he shall atone for you, to purify you, from all of your sins before the Lord. [emphasis added]

After praying for his wife and children, the *kohen gadol* then offered a similarly lengthy confession and prayer on behalf of his fellow priests. Only after completing these would he turn to the sins of the entire nation:

> And so he would say: I beg of You, O Lord, they have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You, Your people, *the family of Israel*. I beg of You—by Your Name—atone now for the errors, iniquities, and willful sins by which the *family of Israel* have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You. As it is written in the Torah of Moses, Your servant: for on this day he shall atone for you, to purify you, from all of your sins before the Lord. [emphasis added]

The order is significant, embodying a millennia-old testimony to the fundamental idea that loving particular people in a preferential way is a necessary step in understanding the needs of others. In the words of Ze'ev Maghen of Bar-Ilan University:

> Preferential love is the most powerful love there is, the only truly *motivating* love there is. It is by means of that love—the special love we harbor for those close to us—that we learn how to begin to love others, who are farther away. . . . It is via emotional analogy to these types of strong-bond affections that one becomes capable of executing a sort of "love leap," a transference of the strength and immediacy of the feelings one retains for his favorite people, smack onto those who have no direct claim on such sentiments.

This "love-leap" is precisely what the *kohen gadol* performed and enacted as he moved from himself and his immediate family to his extended family, and from there to all Israel. The laws regarding the priests, moreover, continued to affect the Jewish people long after the Temple's destruction and the abolition of sacrifices. The *Shulhan Arukh*, the authoritative 16th-century code of Jewish law, recommends that anyone leading public prayer on the High Holy Days be married—for who better can understand the condition of those in need of prayer and forgiveness? The "fruit of virginity," contended Pius XII, "is not only in . . . external works, . . . but also in the earnest prayer offered for others." Judaism approaches this issue, too, very differently.

As David Gelernter has written, many "casual observers" believe that "the underlying ethics of Judaism and Christianity are basically the same, that the differences between the two religions center on religious law and on Jesus." This impression, Gelernter adds, is "wrong."

Stanley Hauerwas would agree. While there are certainly traditional moral values that both Jews and Christians struggle to preserve in common, one's theology, Hauerwas points out, often shapes one's morality. Religious disagreements, such as those centering on Jesus and on the role of law, help to define each religion's distinct perspective on the moral life. Responding to the claim that Jews and Christians share the same "family values," Hauerwas quite correctly observes that, theologically speaking, "family is not central to our identity as Christians" as it is to Jews. For Christians, the biblical role model is Jesus; for Jews, it is Abraham—Abraham, who so desperately yearned for a child, who selflessly served humanity but nevertheless longed for personal progeny, and who was beloved of God for his desire to "command his children and household after him to perform justice and righteousness."

Abraham could not be "the father of many nations" before becoming the father of one nation. Jews bear children not only because the carnal election of Abraham must continue. For Jews, raising children is essential to living a rounded ethical life. If we are truly to love *others* at all, Jews believe, we must love *some* more. Jewish universalism, to whose fruits all of human history bears witness, rests squarely on Jewish particularism, and is unthinkable without it.

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