

The True Meaning of *Ezer Kenegdo*

Shalom Rav

ויאמר ה' אֱלֹהִים לֹא טוֹב הִיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה לוֹ עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ.
(בראשית ב:יח)

And the Lord God said: "It is not good for man to be alone, I will make a helpmate for him." (*Bereshit* 2:18)

This *pasuk* is an amazing contrast with the first chapter of *Bereshit*, which repeatedly states, "and God saw that it was good." Everything is good: All of creation is good, the animal kingdom is good, and the whole universe is good. This culminates in Hashem surveying all He created and saying that it is not only good, but *very* good. Now, all of a sudden, we have something that's not good: It is not good for man to be alone.

Hashem declares, "I will make a help mate for him" – an *ezer kenegdo*. However, over the next ten *pesukim*, Hashem then brings Adam all the animals, which he names. Only then does Hashem remove a rib from Adam, from which he forms Eve. What are these *pesukim* about the animals doing here? The simple explanation is that Hashem is informing Adam, "You can't mate or pair with any of these or any other creatures, so I have to create somebody new."

What is the meaning of *ezer kenegdo*? It seems like a self-contradictory juxtaposition: An *ezer* is a help. *Keneged* means "opposite." Rashi, quoting *Hazal*, highlights this contradiction: "If one is worthy, she is a help; if one is not worthy, she opposes him." In a marriage, each spouse must live up to the other, must be worthy of the other. Otherwise, there will be tension.

The Netziv offers a different idea based on the simple understanding of the words. Individuals comprise many elements. People relate differently to situations and have diverse strengths and attributes. There are so many diverse elements to each person and gender. Husbands and wives have to be connected and help each other on so many different levels – *kenegdo*, complementing all the different elements in their specific personalities.

The Netziv then offers a second explanation. The opposition and tensions with one's spouse is designed to help them – that's the key. Sometimes, being opposites could be the greatest help. The greatest critic in the world should be our spouse, and we should be able to hear it from them, because we're one. It is often hard to accept criticism, but if we are being criticized by a spouse, we should appreciate it. Knowing there is unconditional love and commitment, such criticism is only being shared so we can improve ourselves. That partnership is true *ezer kenegdo*.

Two people, man and woman, husband and wife, are not the same person. They're different beings that come together. If a husband and wife both possess a penchant for anger, the result could be disastrous. Rather, each weakness should be offset by a corresponding strength. That's why spouses so often each have different strengths, specifically opposites, to balance out the relationship of the family. Even children know this sometimes – if they want A, they'll go to parent A. If they want B, they'll go to parent B. Even the children know the differences, because parents aren't exactly alike, and they aren't meant to be alike.

Many *Aharonim* (Rav Soloveitchik and Rabbi Aviner, among others) suggest that this could help explain the Gemara (Berakhot 61a) that describes two stages in the creation of man.¹ Hashem thought to

1. This is reflected in the *sheva berakhot* recited at a wedding and during the week following a wedding, which have two blessings that end with a reference to the creation of man (*yotzer ha'adam*).

create mankind as two, but then decided to create man as one.² Then He separated "them" and eventually brought them back together. How are we to understand those different "stages"? What is the message of man and women being created together or in two stages? Perhaps the idea is that each man and woman, husband and wife, are so different, with distinct backgrounds and interests, that they could never be expected to join together as one. Therefore, Hashem created them initially as one unit, one *neshama*, and then split them into two beings so that the event of marriage will represent a reunion. Each partner thereby brings their respective strengths and abilities to the relationship, creating a perfect, complementary, wholesome family.

2. Obviously, Hashem did not change His mind. This idea expressed is to provide insight into differing values.