

Rabbi Tovia Singer Speaks on Polygamy and Concubinage

2017 Answer:

A very, very good question. So in the Torah it is permissible for a man to have more than one wife. The Patriarch Abraham as he mentioned had more than one wife. King David had 18 wives. King Solomon had, well, too many wives, you read 1 Kings chapter 10 [11:3]. King Solomon in fact had, we are told, over a thousand wives and concubines.

I think an explanation, one modification is essential here and that is that the Jewish people today have accepted upon themselves not to engage in any form of polygamy and a man is permitted to have only one wife and that decree was made and accepted by a great Rabbi, his name is Cherem De-Rabbeinu Gershom, which means it was a prohibition that was enacted by a great Rabbi who was Rabbeinu Gershom. The date of this enactment was the year, literally 1,000, so it was exactly 1,017 years ago and all Jewish communities, virtually all Jewish communities accepted this decree and the reason why the decree was enacted was for a number of reasons.

One of those reasons was that in the year 1,000 of course there was great growth and people were traveling, men were traveling from countries and there was enormous change in the West and as a result a man could have a wife in different countries. And naturally he would/could have children in different countries and unlike today when people could travel freely, in the ancient world or in the Middle Ages, it was quite a deal to move from one place to another. Therefore, it was it was conceivable that a man could have children in two different countries and then those children might one day meet each other, not be aware that they're, that the people their meeting are siblings and God forbid this can lead to incest.

There were other reasons for it but today that is not acceptable, today polygamy is not acceptable. Now we go back to the original question, the original question is that a man could have more than one wife and he could also have a concubine. The difference between a wife and a concubine, the word for concubine is the word 'pilegish,' is that she didn't have all the rights that a wife would have. And the reason, so let's explain why polygamy worked in the ancient world. And that is that a woman today if she didn't have a family, or she did not have a family that could secure her, protect her, she can get a job, if there's a problem she can call the FBI and so on and so forth. But in the ancient world this was not possible. A woman's only protection was her family and an extension was a clan and an extension was a tribe, that was her protection and therefore if a woman did not

have a family, she can join another pre-existing family, have children as part of that family and then she was, if it was a wife, she was entitled to all the benefits of the family and the security of the family.

However, if it was pilegash, if it was a concubine, rather than a full-blown wife, of course this would have to be done with the acquiescence of any wife the man had. She was not entitled to the inheritance of the of the others but she was afforded the protection that any other member of the family had.

I want to state this one more time, in the ancient world there wasn't something like an FBI, there wasn't like you can call 911. If you had no family you were as good as dead. You had no one to protect you, that's all you had to protect you and therefore if you didn't have a family and here you were, you were a widow or whatever, you can join a family and then were afforded the protections of the family. This is not only true for a wife or a concubine, this is also true for an eved, a slave, a servant.

Slavery again in the Torah, I've done another show on this had nothing to do with the wicked system, the racist system that was the United States, in fact the very big problem that existed in the Torah was that people who owned slaves wanted them to go free and the slave said, 'I don't want to go, I'm having a good time' because they had to have complete equal rights as everyone else. They were afforded enormous protection in the Torah. So that's the answer, the answer is a concubine, a pilegash did not have the rights, the financial rights and inheritance rights of the wives' but she was afforded the opportunity to build a family and to enjoy the security of the family.¹

2015 Answer:

I think the listeners want a straight answer without any fancy dancing here. There are many relationships that are forbidden in the Bible. However, it is not forbidden from God's point of view, it is not forbidden for a man to have more than one wife. Again, that doesn't mean he is cheating, that means a man can be mekadash, he can sanctify, he can have more than one wife.

In practice, virtually no Jews practice this today with the exception of Jews of Yemen. Because roughly a thousand years ago the Jews accepted upon themselves a decree to no longer have more than one wife and this decree began in the year 1,000. Technically speaking that decree expired because it's a 1,000 year decree but I'll explain.

¹ Tenak Talk (TaNaCh), '358) 101- Let's Get Biblical Q&A with Rabbi Tovia Singer', (YouTube, 4/9/2017, 10:48)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTWmq0Shvn0>>.

See it sounds crazy, what do you mean a man has more than one wife?? Well, as it turns out in the ancient world men got killed in battle, in work, in labour, and so on. And a woman wanted to build a family. She wanted a house. She wanted protection. And she could join a family or a man who was married and he could marry a second wife and as long as every person said this is okay, is accepted, then he could have a second wife. And with her he could build a family and she could have children for him as well. And there are many laws in the Torah that govern this area. Many laws about inheritance, about what happens if you have a second wife, a third wife and so on. So it is not true to say that polygamy intrinsically is a sinful relationship.

Now to our mind, to the Western mind, it's inconceivable, why? Because our understanding of marriage is an intimate relationship between a husband and a wife, and it's deeply personal. If any person today would try to apply this law it would destroy the marriage. It would destroy any marriage. Every marriage would be destroyed. So in our culture, in our society, everything about it would explode. It wouldn't practically be possible. In another culture where a woman had no husband, had no man, all she wanted to do was build a family with a man and have protection, have the rights of a wife. And be able to bring children into this world and she couldn't find a husband, she could marry a man who is already married. And again, this had to be something was agreed upon.

Now there was in going back a thousand years ago a great Rabbi who was at the end of what is called the Geonic Period. But anyways his name was Rabbeinu Gershom...Having more than one wife (polygamy) was very rarely practiced among the Jewish people, it was rarely practiced. Because it was a problematic relationship. Very often the wives would ultimately become jealous and embittered with each other.

But there was actually a much greater problem, well I don't want to say greater but another problem that arose from what would be an arrangement that could be very beneficial. Meaning you could have a woman who instead of living alone or having nothing or being destitute and childless, could have built a home. Is that in the early Middle Ages people were travelling. The world opened up. And as such a man (travelling is not like today where you can fly to Hawaii in 10 hours). In the ancient world, travelling across Asia, travelling from Israel to Europe was a journey that took months, maybe years. And as such a man could have a family in two different parts of the world. Two different parts of the ancient world. What might happen is you have children in two different families with two different wives and they don't even know each other. They don't even know the other exists.

The danger could be, this is just one problem, there were many problems. But one very big danger is if someone has a brother or sister and they don't know that they even exist because they are

somewhere else, they can God forbid marry each other one day. Because if everyone is travelling, the children could travel and this could lead to incest and many other problems. And therefore there was what's called a Cherem De-Rabbeinu Gershom, which means there was a decree that any person, that any man that practiced polygamy, that practiced what is permitted, technically permitted in the Bible, would be excommunicated. And this was accepted by the Ashkenazic world, it was accepted by a great deal of Sephardic world, North African world, it was not accepted in some areas like in Yemen and where I think to this day, I know to this day there are Yemenite Jewish men who have more than one wife. But that is normative in that kind of culture. In that kind of society.

But it is not Biblically forbidden for a man to have more than one wife. It is forbidden for a woman to have more than one husband. But polygamy, it is wrong to say, I mean because we have to be clear, it is wrong to say that polygamy intrinsically is a sinful relationship. It's just not true. One other point I should state and that is it was so unusual for people to have more than one wife as you can understand that I don't know of a single author in the Mishna, the Talmud, any what's called Tanna or Amora, any Rabbi in all the Talmud, Talmudic literature who in fact had more than one wife. I don't know one instance. So this is something very unusual. Something, I can't say unheard of just very, very rare. In many communities frowned upon for reasons that are beyond the scope of this broadcast.

The answer is polygamy is not the same as bestiality. Bestiality is a sinful, intrinsically, inherently sinful 'relationship' because the Bible tells us so. And in fact a man having more than one wife who are each raising families and raising families together is not intrinsically sinful but the Jewish people in unity have declared that in fact polygamy is not permitted among the children of Israel today because of a Rabbinic Injunction.

I just want to say this one point here: I promise you that everybody listening to this show is going, 'Did that Rabbi just say that polygamy is okay??'²

2016 Answer:

That's a good question. The question is that is polygamy permitted in Judaism. Scripturally, the answer is of course it is. And the Torah can't change. That means the Torah does not adjust itself to social norms and so on. The Torah is the headlights, not the tail-lights.

² Tenak Talk (TaNaCh), '24) 12 – Let's Get Biblical Q & A with Rabbi Tovia Singer and host wil'Liam Hall', (YouTube, 9/3/2015, 1:43:04) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSHn9XsawX8>>.

A man, with his wife's consent, can marry another wife, he can marry a second wife. It did create a problem. It created a number of problems. The big problem it created for the Jewish people, anyone who tells you that polygamy is prohibited in Judaism is just, it is kind of true and I will explain this point.

So Scripturally it is certainly permitted. However, there was a huge problem in the early Middle Ages, what happened? People began to travel. Men travelled from the Land of Israel to Europe, travelled all the way where I live, Indonesia, or China. It was a spice trade that spanned. And it wasn't like today you get on Turkish airlines and in 12 hours and you've gone from Istanbul to Jakarta. It was a trip that was arduous and took years. Took a very, very long time. So men would be in other countries would marry other women and have families in different countries.

The problem that resulted was that you now can have, this was not the only problem, but this was a major problem. This is a show [so] I'll give you one that is very easy to understand. The problem is now if you have a man who has a wife in multiple countries and he has children in different countries. And it is not like today we have email and internet and the children get to know each other. That means that Jews have siblings that they don't even know exist. Or they don't know who they are.

What happens if God forbid, one day a man travels to another country and has children, he dies, people in the ancient world, life was on a knives edge. In 1900 in the United States the expected lifespan was 42. In the ancient world it was much less. People got an infection and died. So man has children and dies, eventually these children travel. They travel from South East Asia to Europe and they can meet siblings that they don't know that that's their sibling, they share the same father. And then God forbid they can marry each other and then you have incest. So why? A range of reasons, this one is extremely prominent.

There was what's called Cherem De-Rabbeinu Gershom. Rabbi Gershom lived at the very end of the Geonic Period, right before Rashi, and a decree was made that didn't affect the Jews of Mizrahi, meaning Jews in the Arabian Peninsula. But Jews who were involved in these kinds of trades, what today are Ashkenazi Jews, and it was accepted by the Sephardi Jews as well. Is that Jews do not take more than one wife. And the year this decree was accepted among many, many communities of the Jewish people was exactly the year 1,000, precisely. It was originally, what it said essentially that it is forbidden for a man to take more than one wife unless you had a hundred rabbis of many different countries signing that there is an exception. An extenuating circumstance. What extenuating circumstance could there be? You have a wife who loses her mind, who becomes senile. She can't accept a divorce. A woman who goes missing, just don't know where she is. So there is what's called a Heter Meah Rabbanim, there's an exception. A woman

goes into a coma, she can't accept. A person who is not [mentally fit]. Now by the way in Jewish law if that woman ever comes out of the coma he can't go back and live with her. This is called a cherem, cherem means haram, illicit, but it means also that if someone violates this, they are expelled from the Jewish community.

It should be said that this was a highly unpopular family arrangement. For example, I am not able to find one Amora, one of the contributing authors to the Talmud who had more than one wife. This was not pervasive, except in lands where it was very much part of the norm. In for instance, Yemen, which is in Arabian Peninsula. There it was the norm and there are no Jews left in Yemen today. But there are Jews who have polygamous marriages who are from Yemen. Who had to leave but left with their whole family, with multiple wives.

So let me just say that there were many, many, many concerns about polygamy. The relationship between two wives and a single husband was very often very difficult. I'll say something interesting. Living in Indonesia as a rabbi people come to me and many of them are Bnei Noach, they are not Jewish. And some of them come to me with family problems and sometimes they come to me with the problem, not a lot, but people do turn to a rabbi and those who are Bnei Noach, turn to a rabbi, let's say former Christians and they have more than one wife. Now Christianity says no but Indonesia has a different kind of culture.

I sat with a guy with two wives, it's not a good thing. I say and I know people are watching this and your jaw is hanging open, believe me mine was too. And I had nothing in counselling a man and his two wives, it was nothing I could, I had nothing in my background that I could address this. It was very striking. But the actual relationship between two woman who are married to a same man is called tzarah which means it's a problem. It doesn't mean these relationships can't work as long as they are absolutely necessary.

For instance, take Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula where you had, if you don't have a clan, what you had is very limited resources in Yemen. It's a desert. There's nothing there. You had an oasis, a place where water came from, that was your life. If you didn't have that oasis and who protected that oasis? A family did. And a family extended cousins and cousins. And they were loyal to each other. And they created clans. And those clans grew and became tribes. So what it is is a family that trusted each other.

Now if you didn't have that you were dead. You were dead! It's not like in Indonesia where it's a country of enormous resources where food is just flying out of trees every minute. In the Arabian Peninsula particularly there was very limited resources. And if you were a single girl and had no family you were dead. You were finished. So your way to have a good life was to marry into an existing family and to have children. But it was all on the level. That culture it can work...In that

culture everyone understood that you marry into a pre-existing family, you would then as a wife had the benefits of the first wife and now you can bear children and you could live and have a good life. You contributed to the family. You have the responsibilities of the family. And you have the benefits of the family.

So in Jewish law because of a Rabbinic injunction, which means, we are not allowed to say it's of the Torah. Listen very carefully. Torah says in Deuteronomy 4:2 you may not add to the Torah or take away. Which means we are not allowed say this is a new commandment, that's complete heresy. But we can say this is dangerous business! I could say that going to the south of France to the beach where people are walking around virtually completely undressed, even though technically there may not be a commandment, I will almost certainly wind up in sin and I don't want to go! I'm not going to say it's in the Torah. But I'll say a person who fears God shouldn't be in a place like that. Okay so we're careful. We don't say, so be careful here, I don't want to hear from people who say, 'You can't add.' I am allowed to have an electrical system and wire it and put wire-tape around it and then put a fence around it so no child touches it. So that we do. We have a fence. And this was a fence to prevent incest and enormous complications.

So from Scripture there is no prohibition whatsoever, but there was a Cherem De-Rabbeinu Gershom. That means there was a haram, same word in Arabic, means if you violated this you were excommunicated from the Jewish community and many were. And haram means illicit and that exists to this day, that Jews are not to have more than one wife. Except, again there is an exception, sometimes God forbid a woman is in a coma or she's lost at sea, and a man wants to marry again, then there is a way. So that's the answer, the answer is that polygamy is prohibited by Rabbinic Injunction. It is not Scriptural.³

³ Tenak Talk (TaNaCh), '226) 75 - Let's Get Biblical Q&A', (YouTube, 31/10/2016, 1:29:54) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6BMtALMOB0>>.