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Economics, Judaism, and Marriage

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Economic and Jewish Perspectives on Marriage

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I. Introduction

Whereas the subject of marriage takes on great importance in Judaism, today's intellectuals tend to consider the study of marriage of marginal importance. This may reflect the values of society. Alternatively, it could be that many find marriage an important subject, but its explanation has been relegated to the realm of feelings, which reduces the need for scientific analysis.

The intellectual neglect of marriage stands out by comparison to other fields such as politics and finance. Those subjects have been covered by an extensive and serious literature, and the opinions of academic experts relevant to these matters are frequently reported in the media.

In light of such bleak background, research on marriage from an economic perspective, what has been called "the economics of marriage," represents a turning point. This article clarifies some of the major conclusions that follow from this novel research trend, and points out to some links between the economics of marriage and the perspective of Jewish law. I will present a new language, based on the economic approach, which I hope will help explain an age-old logic to a broad contemporary public. The article is composed of the following sections: Section II presents an overview of the economic approach to marriage; the approach is applied to the sex ratio question (Section III), the price of Torah scholars (Section IV), the need for brokers (Section V), marriage contracts (Section VI), and polygamy (Section VII). Concluding remarks are found in Section VIII.

II. The Economic Approach to Marriage

The public at large often views economics as belonging to the domain of business and government action directly related to the functioning of "the economy." In contrast, many economists interpret the term "economics" in a broader fashion, as a conceptual framework that facilitates any kind of decision-making. Economics in that sense can be helpful any time a choice is made, be it the choice of a good, a service, an action, or a resource. Whenever a decision regarding the optimal use of time, energy, or money needs to be made, cost-benefit analysis, one of the basic tools of economics, can be helpful. This applies not only to the firm determining its level of operation, but also to the individual or the family making decisions regarding number of children, consumption levels, or extent of participation in the labor force.

Economics in the sense of a conceptual framework dealing with optimal allocation of resources is in fact applied mathematics, and is hard to distinguish from other attempts to analyze issues rationally and on the basis of individual freedom of choice. Common to both⁴ the economic approach and the Jewish approach is the view that the individual needs to make decisions regarding his own life. In contrast, one can list other approaches commonly found amongst intellectuals, such as the Marxist approach which emphasizes material determinism, and the Freudian approach which emphasizes the power of instincts over man's behavior.

The two major tools used by the economist are

1. Cost-Benefit Analysis which divides the elements related to a particular decision into two groups: benefits and costs. The optimum point is reached when marginal benefit equals marginal cost. For instance, a

person will spend money on margarine up to the amount at which the benefit derived from a pack of margarine equals its price. In this case the price is the marginal cost. If a good is not sold in the market, but is produced in the home, the marginal benefit needs to equal the marginal cost, which is also determined in the home, e.g. as a function of the value of alternative uses of time and money.

2. Market Analysis. If a good or service is not destined solely to one "consumer," and is not produced solely by one producer, a market exists, whether or not it is physically observable. There are markets for goods, services, and different types of work, such as engineering, teaching, etc.

These two tools, cost-benefit analysis and market analysis, can be applied to the study of marriage. Becker (1973) was the first to do so. In the last decade a few other economists joined him, mostly former students of Becker. But the total number of economists active in this area is small, e.g. because clear disciplinary borders have been established in the academic world, and the study of marriage is considered primarily as a subject for sociologists and psychologists (Grossbard, 1978).

According to the economic approach people get married when cost-benefit analysis tells them marriage is profitable. This implies that the benefits, material and spiritual, exceed the costs. The costs are not simply financial or material. They depend on the value a person attaches to alternative uses of time, and can include, for instance, the value of the hours a person is unable to devote to Torah study because of marriage.

The other tool borrowed from economics is market analysis. Becker and before him sociologists and demographers have used the term "marriage market." According to the present version of the economics of marriage,

marriage markets consist of markets for wife-services and husband-services (a fuller presentation can be found in Grossbard-Shechtman, 1986). All the individuals participating in these markets act according to cost-benefit analysis and try to maximize their own utility, which can also include spiritual aspirations. Individuals decide about their willingness to (1) supply services that can be of use to a spouse, (2) supply labor services in the regular meaning of the term, and (3) acquire goods and services, including services from spouses.

The willingness to offer particular services to a spouse and to demand services from a spouse lies at the root of the institution of marriage according to this approach. These services include, for example, household work and children's education. The same terms can also serve to express obligations that Jews observant of Halacha take upon themselves. For instance, the mitzva of "ona" (the commandment on the husband to satisfy his wife's sexual desires) is viewed as a service demanded by the wife and supplied by the husband.

Individuals, and perhaps their parents or other guardians, supply and demand services to and from a spouse, taking account of time and budget constraints. The decisions depend on the existence of equilibrium conditions in all the relevant markets, including the markets for wife- and husband-services.

Equilibrium in the market for wife-services, for instance, originates at the intersection of the aggregate demand on the part of all men interested in marriage and competing amongst each other and of the aggregate supply on the part of all women wanting to get married and competing amongst each other. At that intersection the equilibrium employment conditions will be

established. In every human society laws influence these equilibrium conditions, and this is certainly also true with the Jewish people. Among the important laws in Halacha one can mention Rabbi Gershon's edict prohibiting polygamy, and the cost involved in marrying somebody outside the faith. A large number of "halachot" (rules) concerning the obligations of husband and wife (and considered, for instance, as potential justifications for divorce) can be viewed as an expression of the work conditions of wives and of the essence of such services.

According to this economic approach a marriage occurs when at the established market conditions the demand for wife-services by a particular man corresponds to the supply of wife-services by a particular woman, while at the same time her demand for husband's services equals his supply. After time elapses a gap can occur between quantity demanded and supplied at the market conditions which can also change. If this gap becomes sufficiently large, cost-benefit analysis could lead the spouses to decide that it is preferable for them to get divorced. The more spiritual the considerations influencing utility computations, the less divorce is likely to occur. The willingness to follow halachic rules on that matter will also influence the end result of such cost-benefit analysis.

I now intend to demonstrate the usefulness of this approach to the study of marriage by presenting a number of examples.

III. The Effect of the Number of Men and Women in Society

It follows from market analysis that the number of men and women in society influences not only an individual woman's chances of getting married, but also the conditions by which husband and wife will live after marriage.

(A more detailed analysis of this subject can be found in Grossbard-Shechtman, 1984, 1985, and 1986.) The effect of the ratio of men to women (the sex ratio, following the definition accepted by demographers) on a woman's chances to get married is obvious. The higher this ratio, the easier it is for a woman to get married. In order to explain how the sex ratio influences the wife's working conditions in marriage, a graph can be helpful.

Figure 1 presents supply of and demand for wife's services. For reasons similar to those explained in other types of market analysis--including labor market analysis--the demand slopes down and the supply is upward-sloping. On the vertical axis the symbol w^* expresses wife's working conditions. When men's demand is D_1 , working conditions are w_1^* . When the sex ratio is higher and the demand is D_2 , working conditions for wives will improve from w_1^* to w_2^* .

This can be expressed in a number of ways. Wives often bring a dowry at their wedding. It can be argued that the level of dowry is inversely related to the sex ratio. Therefore, it is expected that the higher the number of men relative to the number of women in a society, the lower the average dowry. I do not have an empirical proof, but this can be tested, as the sex ratio varies over time and from one place to another.

Groups may differ in sex ratios because of different customs. Some sociologists claim, for instance, that the Halachic laws of family purity cause a higher sex ratio among Jews following Halacha than amongst other Jews (Guttentag and Secord, 1983). If this is true, the high sex ratio will facilitate the task of finding a suitable husband for an observant Jewish woman, and will lead to a better treatment of the married religious Jewish woman. This would not necessarily be the case because of legal

considerations, but because of the relative scarcity of brides. Although a test for this would not be easy to perform, it is feasible in principle.

The sex ratio can also change over time for a given group or society. In the United States the low sex ratio accompanying women born after World War II--the result of the difference in bride and groom's age at marriage--is one of the explanations for women's massive entry into the labor force and for the rise in divorce, in out-of-wedlock births, in age a marriage and in cohabitation (explanations can be found in Grossbard-Shechtman, 1986).

In Israel women born between 1945 and 1955 also suffer from a low sex ratio. Therefore it should not be surprising that this cohort experienced a substantial increase in the labor force participation of mothers of young children, a fact mentioned but not satisfactorily explained by Ben-Porath and Gronau (1985). Even though the percent of children born out of wedlock remains substantially lower in Israel than in the United States, it has risen, particularly among women born in the years 1945-1955.

Marriage markets are not homogeneous, and for certain purposes it is desirable to distinguish between groups with particular characteristics. The next example of an application of the economics of marriage relates to Torah scholars interested in getting married.

IV. How Much is a Torah Scholar Worth?

Even if it is true that the supply of grooms is large relatively to the demand, while the demand for wife-services is large in relation to the supply, it is possible that a woman marrying a Torah scholar will not experience favorable market conditions (w^*). The reason for that is that every religious Jewish community only has a small number of outstanding Torah

scholars, whereas the number of women and their families wanting to marry such grooms is large. As a result one expects a low w^* for the brides and a high w^* for the grooms. The w^* received by the bride can even be negative to the extent that the supply of wife-services originates under the horizontal axis. This would follow from the fact that a woman starts by providing the wife-services she enjoys more, and gets to the activities she likes less later. She may even be willing to pay in order to engage in the activities she enjoys more. For example, if following Jewish law her ultimate goal is to send her husband and children to study Torah, then she may not ask for any compensation for the hours she engages in activities promoting this goal. On the contrary, she may be willing to pay for this privilege.

This payment can not be expressed entirely in the giving up of the wife's rights determined in Jewish law. Even if wives are willing to give up some of their rights, this can be done only up to a certain limit, which is also set by Jewish law. In view of these constraints, the lower negative w^* of outstanding Torah scholars' wives and the high w^* of these husbands, often appear in the form of a dowry paid by the bride's parents. In today's wealthy religious Jewish communities such dowries can reach more than half a million dollars.

Another possible reflection of the low w^* received by the wife of a Torah scholar is the presence of earnings obtained by the wife. This is more common in communities with a lower standard of living where it is hard to accumulate large dowries. It is often the case in Israel, where the high price of housing increases the need for earnings, even where a dowry was paid. Torah scholars are often supported by their wife's earnings from outside labor. In Eastern Europe it also used to be very common that a husband's learning at the

Yeshiva were financed through a dowry or the wife's earnings. If the supply of Torah scholars rises in relation to the demand for their services as husbands, for instance due to selective migration of outstanding scholars without a similar increase in the number of wife-candidates, there will be an improvement in the marriage conditions of local (for instance, Israeli) brides. Again, this may not be reflected in the quality of the marital relationship, but in a lower need for the bride to bring a dowry or to support the family. If there exists such selective migration to Israel, this would explain why it is expected that the family of an immigrant Torah scholar is expected to contribute a substantial amount of money towards the marriage (I got this information in the religious community of Antwerp).

Another characteristic of marriage in contemporary religious Jewish communities is the reliance on marriage brokers.

V. A Market with Brokers

It follows from the economic perspective on marriage that reliance on brokers should not be avoided. Brokers can facilitate transactions in many areas, including family formation. The lack of popularity marriage brokers encounter in the West, including that part of Jewish Israeli society which is influenced by Western values more than by Jewish tradition, reflects the common emphasis on marriage out of love. Contemporary Western society understates the importance of rational and business-like considerations when dealing with marriage. The traditional Jewish approach and the economic approach both object to the excessive importance of feelings as criteria for decision-making.

It is interesting to notice that Jews observant of Torah laws are not the only modern people who rely on marriage brokers. In the Far East modern nations also look down at Western romanticism as a criterion for decision-making. In this respect Japan, which learned so much from the West, is an interesting example. After World War II the Americans tried to weaken the strongholds of traditional power in Japan by passing a new constitution reducing the influence of extended family units. Accordingly, it was stated that a couple which is getting married should do so not because of family considerations, but out of "love." The Japanese do not take this part of the constitution seriously, until this very day. Parents still often help in the search for an appropriate bride or groom (Hendry, 1986). Marriage brokers are widely used. Employers also often help in the search process. Many large companies have their own computerized matchmaking service intended to help single employees (Browning, 1985). ✓

Another field where Jewish law and the economics of marriage overlap is the field of contracts.

VI. Marriage Contracts

In view of the fact that women perform most services in a marriage and of the competitive conditions found in marriage markets, women need to obtain legal guarantees from their husbands. A theoretical analysis on this subject can be found in Becker (1981) and Grossbard-Shechtman (1982).

The hypothesis that women need a formal obligation from their husbands more than vice-versa was tested using a comparison of the characteristics of men and women living together with or without marriage. As expected, it was found that women with larger resources were more likely to be married than

women lacking such resources. In contrast, the amount of resources controlled by husbands did not seem to have a clear effect on the probability that they are married (Grossbard-Shechtman, 1982). According to Jewish law, the "Ketuba" (marriage contract) also serves as a sort of insurance policy benefiting the wife (Liebermann, 1983). If young Jews educated far from traditional Jewish values would study some economics of marriage, they would relate differently to their "ketuba," and would perhaps take advantage of their option to add sections to that marriage contract. If we consider the use of marriage contracts as an indicator of a rational rather than emotional approach, it seems that the rational approach has recently been gaining momentum in the United States. In part as the result of the high divorce rate, more and more couples who are getting married are writing marriage contracts (Weitzman, 1983).

Finally, a few words on the economic approach to marriage and polygamy.

VII. Polygamy

As apparent from Becker (1974, 1981) and Grossbard (1980) it follows from marriage market analysis that a prohibition on polygamy reduces social welfare. In terms of a market for wife-services, the prohibition truncates the aggregate demand for wife-services and therefore causes a reduction in the consumer and producer surpluses measuring social welfare. If other laws are not changed, the prohibition on polygamy will reduce women's well-being in comparison to men's.

As I argued in Grossbard (1980) a prohibition on polygamy is particularly costly in a society where the sex ratio is low, i.e. there is a large number of marriageable women in comparison to the number of men. The

prohibition is particularly harmful to women born during the baby-boom following World War II (in view of the existing difference in age at marriage). A relatively large number of women born during that period in Israel or the United States have been unable to find an appropriate husband. The immediate cancellation of Rabeinu Gershom's prohibition on polygamy amongst Jews would not change this situation dramatically, in view of the many constraints Jewish law imposes on polygamy. But for the relatively small number of men and women would chose to live like this, with the full approval of the first wife, an improvement would occur.

VIII. Conclusions

This brief overview shows that the economic approach to marriage and Jewish law (halacha) on that topic overlap on a number of issues. It is clearly the case that the gap between these two approaches is smaller than that between the values presently popular in the West--influencing religious Jews as well--and the Torah. It is therefore possible that the economic approach, popular in many other areas, will help to strengthen the role halacha plays in the lives of Jews who are not presently attracted to halacha.

This writer does not know much about the ways rabbinical and secular courts dealing with marriage and divorce operate in Israel, but believes that judges, both religious and secular, can learn something from the economic approach to marriage. For example, economics can possibly help bridge the gap presently separating rabbinical and lay courts handling marriage and divorce cases.

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Figure 1
Market for Wife Services

