

Torah Table Talk

Marriage, Divine and Human

Parshat Bemidbar

Numbers 1:1 – 4:20/ Hosea 2:1 - 22



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson
Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
"He was the perfect child"*

His life was a mess. Toward the middle of the eighth century B. C. E. a man named Hosea was bidden to marry a woman who would eventually break his heart. Unfaithful and promiscuous, Gomer turned her husband, Hosea, into a laughing stock within his community. The prophet struggled to save his marriage only to find that his wife cavorted with other men. The prophet began to doubt the legitimacy of his own children. As Hosea struggles with his "wife of whoredom," he comes to understand that in some way he is acting out the relationship between God and Israel. Israel has gone astray in its pursuit of false gods. In his rage, God also wishes to divorce Israel. But in his love he wishes to find to bring reconciliation and renewal to their covenant/relationship.

In today's *Haftorah* we find both the anger and tenderness which God/Hosea feels. He calls on her children to rebuke their mother for her unfaithfulness. He threatens to strip her naked and cast her out. And yet God/the prophet speaks of hedging her in and leading her back to their home. God will coax her to return to the wilderness, the place where Israel's relationship with God was originally forged, so that they can renew their relationship.

Why is this portion the *Haftorah* for *Parshat B'midbar*? There are two obvious reasons. First the Torah portion contains an elaborate census of the children of Israel; the *Haftorah* begins, "The number of the people of Israel shall be as the sands of the sea which cannot be measured or counted..." Second, Hosea speaks of the wilderness as a place of reconciliation and renewal. *B'midbar* means "In the wilderness;" it describes the forging of a relationship between God and Israel during the sojourn in the wilderness.

Hosea 2:18, 21-22

And on that day, declares the Lord, You will call [Me] Ishi (my man) and no more will you call Me Baali (literally, 'my master;' also a common Canaanite male deity) for I will remove the names of the Baalim from her mouth and they shall nevermore be mentioned by name.

And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy. And I will betroth you to me with faithfulness; then you shall know the Lord.

Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 87b

When the Holy One said to Hosea, "Your children sinned," Hosea should have replied, "They are Your children, children of those You greatly loved, children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Let the measure of Your mercy roll gently over them." Not only did Hosea not speak in this way, but he actually dared say to God, "Master of the universe, the entire world is Yours [to do with as You like]. Put another people in their place." The Holy One said: What shall I do with this so-called sage? I will tell him, "Take yourself a whoring wife, who will bear you children of whoredom." Later I will tell him, "Send her away from you." If he is able to do so, I, too, will send Israel away. So Hosea went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim. After two sons and a daughter were born to him, the Holy One said to Hosea, "Should you not follow the example of your teacher Moses, who separated from his wife as soon as I began speaking to him? You too should live apart from yours." Hosea replied, "Master of the universe, I have children by her--I cannot send her away or divorce her." The Holy One: "You--whose wife is a whore and whose children are children of whoredom, so that you do not know whether your children were fathered by you or by others--still reply in this way. Yet you dare say of Israel who are My children, children of those tested by Me, children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Israel who are one of the four masterpieces--Torah, heaven and earth, the Temple, and Israel--I wrought in My world, yet you dare say of them, 'Put another people in their place!' "Thus

made aware that he had sinned, Hosea started to beseech mercy for himself. But the Holy One rebuked him: "Before beseeching mercy for yourself, beseech mercy for Israel."

The JPS Commentary: Haftorot Michael Fishbane

Hosea is the first prophet to portray the covenant between God and Israel as a marriage. After him Jeremiah (2-3), Ezekiel (16 & 23) make strong uses of the motif – positively – in terms of Israel's loyalty and devotion; and negatively in terms of the people whoring after false gods and political alliances. Later prophetic traditions developed this theme further, portraying the reconciliation of God and Israel after the exile as the renewal of marriage between a "husband" and his "divorced" wife. It was presumably this perception of the covenant as grounded in the sanctity of love and marriage that led the ancient sages to interpret the Song of Songs as a dialogue of covenant and longing between Israel and her God.

Entering Jewish Prayer Reuven Hammer

Tefillin are not merely a sign of subservience. There is more than that in our relationship with God. The Shema, which is the acceptance of God's kingdom over us, begins with the word "love": "You must love the Lord your God." The Tefillin, too, represent the close intimacy of love and affection. This is best indicated by the way in which the straps are wound around the finger and by the verses that are recited at that point. The straps wound around the finger remind us of a wedding band, and the seven windings around the arm have been taken as symbolic of the seven wedding blessings. During the seventeenth century it became customary to recite the magnificent wedding formula of God and Israel found in the book of Hosea (Hosea 2:21-22)

Hosea's daring symbolism depicts Israel as the wife of God who went astray. In the end, however, there will be another marriage ceremony more binding and effective than the first in which God will dower Israel with all the desirable qualities she had lacked: righteousness, justice, goodness, mercy and faithfulness. From then on Israel will know the Lord, that is, be in a relationship of intimacy with God which represents the full expression of closeness and love between them...

Questions for Discussion

1. In the opening chapter of Hosea, the prophet is told to marry a faithless woman. Why did the sages understand this as an apt punishment for the prophet? Do you think that this was an attempt to punish or instruct Hosea? How else can we understand Hosea's unhappy marital experience? Sometimes we look back at painful events in our lives and we find deeper meaning in our experiences. Has this ever happened to you?
2. Hosea understands Israel's lack of faith in God as a kind of spiritual adultery in which the people pursue other gods rather than remaining faithful to the One God. Can we take of the Jewish people in these terms today? Are we guilty of committing spiritual adultery? Why or why not? In a world that celebrates pluralism and diversity how do we reconcile the notion of faithfulness in the Haftorah?
3. In classical literature it is the woman who is always unfaithful and never the man. What social and cultural realities might help us understand why this is so?
4. Hosea speaks of Israel now calling God, "my man" rather than "my master." The word *baali*, my master, has certain implications in terms of idolatry since the word *baal* was a commonly used for the chief male god of the Canaanites. This explanation aside, what else does this change of names imply about the relationship between God and Israel? How does the relationship with God become more equal through this change of names?
5. How has our notion of marriage changed over the centuries? What is the traditional notion of marriage in terms of the relationship between husband and wife? How is this different from the way couples relate to one another in marriage today? What insights can our modern notion of marriage give us into the relationship of the Jewish people and God?

6. What connections are there between spirituality and marriage?
7. Many scholars have pointed out that putting on Tefillin is a way of acting out the divine human covenant/marriage. What role to righteousness, justice, goodness and mercy and faithfulness play in marriage.

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*