

I Betroth You to Me Forever

The Unusual Marriage of Hoshea and What it Teaches Us About Our Relationship with G-d

“Sure you have your marital issues, but on the whole you feel so self-satisfied about how things have worked out that you would never, in your wildest nightmares, think you would hear these words from your husband one fine summer day: ‘I don’t love you anymore. I’m not sure I ever did. I’m moving out. The kids will understand. They’ll want me to be happy.’”

“Those Aren’t Fighting Words, Dear,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2009

All throughout Tanach, the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people is often referred to as a marriage. The revelation at Har Sinai — the desert blooming with flowers, the mountain over our heads, the seven rings of Jewish people around the mountain, the greatest document in the history of mankind revealed — all this is the marriage of G-d and the Jewish people; so much so, that every marriage re-enacts the event with flowers, chupah, customs of the bride walking around the groom seven times and the giving and accepting of the ketubah — the marriage contract. Shir HaShirim is the great love story between G-d and the Jewish people and on the negative side, we read of the antithesis of that love during the three weeks and the nine days that precede Tisha B’Av. *“Eicha haytah l’zona kirya ne’emanah?*, How did a



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formerly faithful city, [like a faithful wife], become a harlot, a prostitute?” (Yishayahu 1:21).

This metaphor reaches its most concrete manifestation in the prophecy and in the life of Hoshea. Hoshea, one of the twelve “minor” prophets, is, ironically, considered by the Talmud (*Pesachim* 87a) as the greatest prophet of his generation. No small claim, since some of Hoshea’s contemporaries were Amos, Michah and Yishayahu.

The Gemara in *Pesachim* 87a, states the following:

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא להושע בניך חטאו והיה לו לומר בניך הם בני חנוניך הם בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב גלגל רחמך עליהן לא דיו שלא אמר כך אלא אמר לפניו רבש”ע כל העולם שלך הוא העבירים באומה אחרת אמר הקב”ה מה אעשה לזקן זה אומר לו לך וקח אשה זונה והוליד לך בנים זנונים ואחר כך אומר לו שלחה מעל פניך אם הוא יכול לשלוח אף אני אשלח את ישראל.

The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Hosea: “Your children have sinned!” [Hosea] should have responded “They are your children! They are the children of Your favored ones — the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Arouse Your

mercy for them.” It was not enough that [Hoshea] did not say this, rather he said before G-d: “Master of the Universe – the entire world is Yours. Exchange them for a different nation.” Said the Holy One, Blessed Be He: “What shall I do with this old man? I will tell him: ‘Go and take a woman of harlotry, and father children of harlotry.’ Afterward, I will tell him: ‘Send her away from your presence. If he is able to send [her away], I too will send Israel away.’”

Let’s study the first chapter of Hoshea and a good part of the second chapter. It is interesting to keep in mind that the second perek becomes the haftarah for the weekly portion of Bamidbar.

What we are going to see is the marriage of Hoshea to the harlot, Gomer, as well as the birth of their children, as part of the great metaphor of the relationship of G-d and the Jewish people.

Hoshea Builds a Family

The prophecy begins with Hashem telling Hoshea to take for himself a prostitute: *“Lech kach lecha eishet znunim.”* What really happened here?



Did Hoshea actually marry this woman — a prostitute? Rambam, Ibn Ezra and Targum Yonatan hold that these words to Hoshea were either symbolic or lived out in a Divine dream — because to say that it really happened would be an embarrassment and a humiliation to the prophet.

Abarbanel, siding with the Gemara, says that in fact Hoshea did marry a prostitute and did have children with her!

Using very powerful language, the Abarbanel states:

כי הוא באמת זמה ועון פלילי להכחיש פשוטי הכתובים.

It is really a terrible sin to contradict the plain meaning of the psukim.

According to the Abarbanel, why must the prophet do this?

כי הדברים הנראים יותר פעלים בלבבות מהדברים הנשמעים.

Things seen have a greater impact on our hearts than things that are heard.

Almost four hundred years later, Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote in his epoch poem, “Enoch Arden,” of the heartbreak of a husband, who was thought to be dead, as he watches his wife engaged in a relationship with her new “husband.” Although he had

known of his wife’s marriage, seeing her from a distance with the other man impacted on him in a way that hearing the news did not: “Because things seen are mightier than things heard.”

The third verse teaches that Hoshea married Gomer bat Divlaim and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

Our commentaries discuss the name of Hoshea’s new wife as fraught with meaning. “Gomer”: all can complete (“*ligmor*”) their desire through her (Rashi). “Bat Divlaim”: “*Divlaim*” is reminiscent of the word “*dibah*” like the words “*dibah ra’ah*” — bad talk about her; bad reputation. Also *divlaim* are figs — sweet in everyone’s mouth like a fig; everyone picks at her, like a fig.

In the fourth verse, Hashem tells Hoshea to call his son Yizrael because Hashem is going to avenge the blood of Yizrael on the house of Yehu. Yizrael has two contradictory meanings, both of which play out in the chapter. It is also a reference to a historical situation. Emek Yizrael refers to the hilly fields where the king Yehu attacked Achav, who was notorious for his evil and his idol worship. But Yehu was also evil.

He, too, was an idol worshipper and therefore he was condemned for the insincerity and hypocrisy of his actions. Yizrael was also the seat of royalty for the kingdom of the northern government — the ten tribes — who separated from the Kingdom of Judah and Malchut Beit David.

The verse concludes “*v’hishbati mimalchut Beit Yisrael*,” that the punishment for the ten tribes will come from the place of the sin itself — the seat of their kingdom. To quote verse 5: “It will happen on that day that I will break the bow of Yisrael in the Valley of Yizrael.”

In verse six, we are told that Gomer gave birth to a daughter: “*vatahar od v’teled bat*.” Note that verse three states “*va’teled lo ben*,” while here it only states “*va’teled bat*” without the word “*lo*.” Commentaries suggest that maybe it was not Hoshea’s daughter. And her name? “*Lo Ruchama*” — no mercy for her, or even worse, not even deserving of mercy. This then becomes the paradigm of the relationship between G-d with the Jewish people “*Ki lo osif od arachem et Beit Yisrael ki naso esa lahem*, I will no longer have mercy on the Jewish people that I should continue to forgive them.”

We are reminded of the verse from Bamidbar 14:19 that carries a request from Moshe to do the opposite — to forgive the Jewish people (*Parshat Shlach* — following the incident of the Meraglim): “*s'lach na la'avon ha'am ha'zeh k'godel chasdecha v'ka'asher nasata la'am hazeh miMitzraim v'ad hena*, Forgive the sin of this people in accordance with the greatness of your mercy as you forgave them from the time of Egypt until now.”

We might also look at “*ki naso esa lahem*” — which we originally translated to mean that I will not forgive them — to actually mean “*ki esa lahem*” that I will indeed forgive them — the comfort being that even in the moments of greatest anger, Hashem says “I will forgive them.” This meaning seems to be borne out by the next verse — “*v'et Beit Yehuda arachem v'hoshatim b'Hashem Elokeichem*, But I will have mercy on the House of Judah and I will save them through Hashem their G-d.”

Once again the name of the child indicates G-d's disfavor with the House of Israel.

EheyeH: I Will be There for You

The next two verses speak of a third child. Hoshea is told to “call his name Lo Ami (Not My People) because you are not my people and I will not be (*eheyeH*) yours.”

The *Da'at Mikra* points out that the use of the word “*eheyeH*” hearkens back to the *sneh* — the burning bush, which is the first time the Jewish people were called “*ami*” by Hashem — a term of great endearment: “*Ra'oh ra'iti et oni ami ... va'yomer Elokim el Moshe 'eheyeh asher eheyeh,* I have seen the oppression of my people (*ami*)

and Elokim said to Moshe ‘I Shall Be as I Shall Be (*EheyeH*).’” (Shmot 3:7,14)

Rashi comments there (from Gemara *Brachot*) that the name “*eheyeH*” means:

אהיה עמם בצרה זו אשר אהיה עמם בשעבוד
שאר מלכויות.

I will be with them during this period of suffering as I will be with them during other periods of oppressions.

Essentially, in Shmot, G-d is saying, “I will be with you on your worst day. I will not abandon you.” But here it says the very opposite: “*Ki atem lo ami*,” if you will not be *Ami* — My nation, I will not “*eheyeH*” be there for you.

And with this, we begin Perek Bet which is the haftarah for *Parshat BaMidbar*. The opening pasuk about “*mispar Bnei Yisrael*,” the great number of the Jewish people, is the link to the counting of the Jewish people at the beginning of Sefer BaMidbar.

The Comfort

Let's analyze the *nechama*, the comfort that is presented in this perek:

וְהָיָה בְּמִקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר לָהֶם לֹא עַמִּי אַתֶּם
יֹאמַר לָהֶם בְּנֵי אֵל חַי... אָמְרוּ לְאַחֵיכֶם עַמִּי
וְלְאַחֹתֵיכֶם רַחֲמָה:
הוֹשַׁע ב:ג,א

And it will happen that instead of calling them “not my people,” it will be said of them “children of the living G-d.” ... Say to your brother “Ami” (My People) and to your sister “Ruchama” (Pitied).

The negative names of Hoshea's children are turned into the most beautiful, positive names.

And then something very strange happens: After mention of the future of comfort, the chapter takes a negative turn — the way one might

suddenly remember the terrible present by speaking of what might be a beautiful future.

Continuing with the metaphor of marriage, it sounds like G-d is putting these good children in between himself and his sinning spouse. In verse four it states “*rivu b'imchem, rivu ...*, go argue with your mother because she is not my wife and I am not her husband.”

Compare this to the verse in Yeshayahu 50:1 “*Aizeh sefer kritut imchem asher shlachtiha?*, Where is your mother's bill of divorce that indicates that I sent her away?” In other words, in the chapters of comfort in Yeshayahu, G-d says to the Jewish people “You are mine! I never divorced you!”

Some say that in our chapter in Hoshea, the language of “*Ki hi lo ishti v'anochi lo isha*, for she is not my wife and I am not her husband” might be an ancient text of a *get*. In both of these verses, the metaphor of G-d's “marriage” to the Jewish people is emphasized.

The Disloyal Wife who Returns

It doesn't take a lot to understand the metaphor of the “wife” of HaShem turning to other lovers — to other gods. Let's look at the word “*m'ahavai*” in verses 7 and 9:

אֲלֶכָה אַחֲרֵי מְאֵהָבֵי נַתְּנִי לְחַמִּי ... וְרָדְפָה אֶת
מְאֵהָבֵיהָ וְלֹא תִשָּׁג אֹתָם וּבְקִשְׁתָּם וְלֹא תִמְצָא.
I will follow my lovers, those who provide me bread ... She chases her lovers but cannot reach them, she seeks them, but cannot find them.

The harlot is calling for her so-called lovers, but of course she cannot find them because they are not loyal to her;

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they are not there for her. Compare this to Megillat Eichah 1:19, where the city of Yerushalayim calls out for “*m’ahavai*” my lovers — the kohanim and the *zkeinim* — but “*hayma rimuni*” they are not there for me, they have deceived me. In Eicha, we ourselves, the elite of the Jewish people, have become the unfaithful lovers!

On a very positive note, perhaps the opposite of our verse “*U’bikshatam v’lo timtza*, she seeks them, but cannot find them,” can be found in the parsha that we read on *Shabbat Nachamu* — (Devarim 4:29) “*U’bikashtem misham et Hashem Elokecha umatzata*”! The parsha there depicts our disloyalty — our worship of other gods — our harlotry. G-d will then abandon us and scatter us among the nations — and from there we will search for G-d and we will indeed find Him and we will repent with great sincerity and G-d will forgive us and we will be reunited.

In verse 16, the entire tone changes. This last paragraph of the haftarah of BaMidbar is HaShem’s fantasy, *k’vayachol* — His dream of the future.

“*V’Holachtiha hamidbar*, I will lead her to the desert.” Here, the desert is not the place of desolation as it was described earlier, but rather, a hearkening back to the experience of the Revelation of G-d to the Jewish

people in the Desert of Sinai. We are not speaking of a desolate place, but rather of a secluded place, a place of no distractions where the beloved will hear only My voice. A place of romance where I can speak with her alone.

Comparing the harsh verse 4 “*Hi lo ishti v’ani lo isha*, she is not My wife and I am not her husband,” we now have in verse 18 “*tikri’i ishi — v’lo tikri’i ba’ali*, you will call Me, my husband and you will not call Me, my master.” A *ba’al* is a master but I will be her husband. There will be a relationship — not dominance. There is surely a reference here to the idolatry of Ba’al — of *avoda zara*.

The Betrothal

We turn our attention now to the last verses of the haftarah of BaMidbar — famous and romantic verses which sometimes appear on our wedding invitations — but more famous because they are the verses that are recited when tefillin is put on each weekday morning:

וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצַדִּיק
וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְרַחֲמִים: וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי
בְאֵמוּנָה וְיָדַעְתָּ אֶת ה’:

I will betroth you unto me forever, I will betroth you to me with righteousness and with justice and with kindness and with mercy. I will betroth you to me with faith and you will know G-d.

“I will betroth you unto me forever.” Here we have the closure, the betrothal instead of the divorce (“*Hi lo ishti v’anochi lo isha*”). Let us briefly analyze these two powerful verses:

The Malbim (Hoshea 2:21) discusses the fact that *mishpat*, justice, is doing what is fair — “*shurat hadin*,” and that *tzedek*, righteousness is doing more than what is required — “*lifnim mishurat hadin*.” She, the bride, will

bring *tzedek* and *mishpat* (reminiscent of the first chapter of Yeshayahu that we read on *Shabbat Chazon* — “*Tzion b’kishpat tipadeh v’shaveha b’tzedaka*, Zion is redeemed with justice and charity). “I, the groom, says Hashem (according to the Malbim), will bring *chesed* (kindness) and *rachamim* (mercy).” In our verse, *chesed* parallels *tzedek* — the *lifnim mishurat hadin*; *rachamim* parallels *mishpat* — that which is simply fair. The Malbim suggests that the *ba’al harachamim* (one who is merciful by nature) will see the downtrodden state of he who evokes our mercy and he does for him what he deserves. *Chesed*, however is going beyond what is required. The one who performs *chesed* doesn’t look to see if the person on the receiving end needs anything — he just gives it. He doesn’t wait until his pity or his mercy is evoked.

She (Knesset Yisrael) will bring into this relationship her *emunah*, her faith. In turn, says G-d, I will bring to you the gift of “*V’yada’at et Hashem*, and you will know G-d.” You will not need *emunah*, faith — because you will know G-d — a greater knowledge than faith.

Why are these words the seal after “*v’eirastich li*,” that you will know G-d? Because, *eirusin* (*v’eirastich li*, betrothal) is *kiddushin* — “*harei at mekudeshet li*,” but *v’Yada’at et Hashem* is consummation. “*Ve’ha’adam yada et Chava ishto*, the man ‘knew’ his wife” (Bereishit 4:1). *Yediah* is closeness, love, the ultimate deep knowledge that symbolizes relationship, knowledge of the very significance of the other.

Hashem says of Avraham:

כִּי יִדְעֹתִיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ
אֲחֵרָיו וְשִׁמְרוּ דְרָגָה ה’ לְעִשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט
לְמַעַן הָבִיא ה’ עַל אֲבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עָלָיו.
בְּרֵאשִׁית יח:יט

I have known him because he commands his children and members of his household to follow him. They follow the path of God to perform righteousness and justice in order that God can bring to Avraham, that which he has spoken about to him.

Bereishit 18:19

Note how righteousness and justice are an integral part of this knowledge.

We say of Moshe, “*Asher yida’o et Hashem panim el panim*, He knew G-d face to face.” (Devarim 34:10).

“*V’Yada’at et Hashem*” is the ultimate consummation of the marriage between G-d and his sometimes wayward people.

Are we Committed to Making the Relationship Work?

At the midpoint of Tisha B’Av day — *chatzot* — something happens. The character of the day changes. We stand up. The Jewish people don their tefillin and as they wrap the tefillin around their finger, like a groom placing the ring on the finger of his bride, we recite — even on this day of destruction: “*V’eirastich li l’olam*, I betroth you to me forever.” These are G-d’s words to a nation of infidels — a nation that said, “I don’t love you. I never loved you.” And we said those words with actions — worshipping the Golden Calf forty days after our betrothal at Har Sinai!

“*V’eirastich li l’olam*, I betroth you to me forever.” Here is the problem: The statement is one-sided. I am yours — but maybe you are not mine! On the day that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed the Kodesh Kadashim was exposed and there were the *Kruvim* in the form of a man and a woman bound in intimacy. When the *Kruvim* were in this position it was an

indication of G-d’s love for us (*Yoma* 54a). On Tisha b’Av? At the worst moment of Jewish history? Yes! There are a number of responses to this amazing and profound contradiction. Perhaps one can respond that the image that was exposed was Hashem loving us as the Beit Hamikdash was being destroyed — but we were there just lying limply in his arms and not responding.

“I am yours,” says Hashem — but you are not mine ... and where are we? “*V’Radfa et m’ahaveha v’lo tasig otam, u’bikshatam v’lo timtza*” — We are seeking other gods, other lovers, with perhaps every now and then a half-hearted attempt to return because, who knows? — maybe we’ll give the one at home a chance as well.

In *The New York Times* article quoted above, the wife decides to wait out her husband. He wants to move out. She responds: “I don’t buy it.” In the end, he did not move out. “Instead, he spent the summer being unreliable. He stopped coming home at his usual six o’clock. He would stay out late and not call. He blew off our entire Fourth of July — the parade, the barbecue, the fireworks — to go to someone else’s party. When he was at home he was distant. He wouldn’t look me in the eye. He didn’t even wish me ‘Happy Birthday.’”

Sometimes our marriage to G-d is like that. It’s only half a marriage. Only one party is truly invested, the other is committed only to him or herself. A while ago someone termed the problem of texting on Shabbos as “half Shabbos.” How aptly named! It’s not just about texting and it’s not just about Modern Orthodox Jews.

We’re like the husband of the article. We show up but whenever we want to with few rules and fewer

responsibilities and no passion. Half davening, half tzniut, half kashrut. In the marriage, but not really. In many yeshivot and in many shuls, everyone is just sitting there, limply, waiting for the inspiration to just happen, waiting for the turn-on, for the *kavanah*, but investing almost nothing.

It is Hoshea, the prophet who is married to the unfaithful wife and then won’t leave her, who tells us of Hashem’s loyalty to us, the Jewish people. And it is Hoshea who calls to us on the Shabbos before Yom Kippur — Shabbos Shuva: “*Shuva Yisrael ad Hashem*, Return Israel to Hashem!” Yom Kippur is the day when the second *luchot* were given. It is the second betrothal — our second chance. “Go back!” says Hoshea. It is not enough for Hashem to betroth us — we also have to want him! “*U’bikashtem misham et Hashem Elokecha u’matzata, ki tidrishenu b’chol livavcha ub’chal nafshecha*” — You will seek out G-d from there and you will find him. Why? Because you will search for him with all your heart and all your soul.

“*v’Eirastich li b’emunah — v’yada’at et Hashem.*” We need to respond to that with the last words that we read from Eicha: “*Hashiveinu Hashem eilecha, v’nashuva* G-d — return us to you and we will return.” We will finally return the embrace.

The New York Times piece ends as follows: “My husband tried to strike a deal. Blame me for his pain. Unload his feelings of personal disgrace onto me. But I ducked. And I waited. And it worked.”

The Ribono shel olam is waiting — but only we can make it work.