

Tazria: Covenant and Conversation - "The Sign of the Covenant"

- Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks.

Why circumcision? What does it tell us about Jewish identity? Hosea's personal lesson, to see how it feels to be loved and betrayed. Such is the history of the Jewish people. It is a love story between the faithful God and his sometime faithless people. The marriage covenant and what it symbolizes. For faith to be more than the worship of power, it must affect the most intimate relationship between men and women. This is expressed by circumcision.

TAZRIA: by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
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Tazria
The Sign of the Covenant

The sedra of Tazria begins with the laws of childbirth and the command of circumcision: "On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Lev. 12:3) Since the days of Abraham, this has been the sign, for males, of the covenant between G-d and the people He has summoned to be His witnesses:

G-d further said to Abraham, "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. (Genesis 17: 10- 11)

Why this sign above all others? Why this physical mark on the flesh? What does it tell us about the nature of Jewish identity? To understand the full depth of this command, we have to move forward several centuries to one of the great prophets of the Bible, Hosea.

Hosea lived in the eighth century bce. The kingdom had been divided since the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom in particular, where Hosea lived, had lapsed after a period of peace and prosperity into lawlessness, idolatry and chaos. Between 747 and 732 bce there were no less than five kings, the result of a series of intrigues and bloody struggles for power. The people, too, had become lax: "There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of G-d in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder" (Hos. 4: 1-2).

Like other prophets, Hosea knew that Israel's destiny depended on its sense of mission. Faithful to G-d, it was able to do extraordinary things: survive in the face of empires, and generate a society unique in the ancient world, of the equal dignity of rich and poor as fellow citizens under the sovereignty of the Creator of heaven and earth. Faithless, however, it was just one more minor power in the ancient Near East, whose chances of survival against larger political predators were minimal.

What makes the book of Hosea remarkable is the episode with which it begins. G-d tells the prophet to marry a prostitute, and see what it feels like to have a love betrayed. Only then will Hosea have a glimpse into G-d's sense of betrayal by the people of Israel. Having liberated them from slavery and brought them into their land, G-d sees them forget the past, forsake the covenant, and worship strange gods. It is a powerful passage with an astonishing assertion at its heart. More than the Jewish people love G-d, G-d loves the Jewish people. The history of Israel is a love story between the faithful G-d and his sometimes faithless people. Though G-d is often angry, He cannot but forgive. He will take them on a kind of second honeymoon, and they will renew their marriage vows:

“Therefore I am now going to allure her;

I will lead her into the desert

and speak tenderly to her . . .

I will betroth you to me forever;

I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,

in love and compassion.

I will betroth you in faithfulness,

and you will know the Lord.” (Hosea 2: 16-22)

It is this last sentence – with its explicit comparison between the covenant and a marriage – that Jewish men say when they put on the hand-tefillin, winding its strap around the finger like a wedding-ring.

One verse in the midst of this prophecy is enthralling. It is a complex metaphor, that must be unraveled strand by strand:

"In that day," declares the Lord,

"you will call Me 'my husband' [ishi];

you will no longer call Me 'my master' [baali].

The last phrase is a pun. Baal, in biblical Hebrew, meant ‘a husband’, but in a highly specific sense – namely, ‘master, owner, possessor, controller’. It was also, of course, the name of the Canaanite god – whose prophets Elijah had challenged in the famous confrontation at Mount Carmel. Baal (otherwise known as Hadad, and usually portrayed as a bull) was the god of the storm, who defeated Mot, the god of sterility and death. Baal was the rain that impregnated the earth and made it fertile. In terms of myth, Baalism is the worship of god-as-power.

Hosea contrasts this kind of relationship with the other Hebrew word for husband, ish. Here he is recalling the words of the first man to the first woman:

“This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman [ishah],
Because she was taken from Man [ish].”

Here the male-female relationship is predicated on something quite other than power and dominance, ownership and control. Man and woman confront one another in sameness and difference. Each is an image of the other, yet each is separate and distinct. The only relationship able to bind them together without the use of force is marriage-as-covenant – a bond of mutual loyalty and trust in which each makes a pledge to the other to honour one another and the reciprocal duties that bind them together in a moral bond.

Not only is this a radical way of reconceptualizing the relationship between man and woman: it is also the way we should think of the relationship between human beings and G-d. G-d reaches out to humanity not as power (the storm, the thunder, the rain) but as love – and not an abstract, philosophical love but a deep and abiding passion that survives all the disappointments and betrayals. Israel may not always behave lovingly toward G-d, says Hosea, but G-d loves Israel and will never cease to do so.

How we relate to G-d affects how we relate to other people. That is Hosea’s message – and vice versa: how we relate to other people affects the way we think of G-d. Israel’s political chaos in the eighth century bce was intimately connected to its religious waywardness. A society built on corruption and exploitation is one where might prevails over right. That is not Judaism but idolatry, Baal-worship.

Now we understand why the sign of the covenant is circumcision. For faith to be more than the worship of power, it must affect the most intimate relationship between men and women. In a society founded on covenant, male-female relationships must be built on something other and gentler than male dominance, masculine power, sexual desire and the drive to own, control, possess. Baal must become ish. The alpha male must become caring husband. Sex must be sanctified and tempered by mutual respect. The sexual drive must be circumcised and circumscribed so that it no longer seeks to possess and is instead content to love.

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