

2003: Dear Rabbi

Thank you for your discussion today, Sunday, on Hosea. I enjoyed it, but was sorry that my thoughts were not clear enough for you to fully understand. I'm sure I spoke more quickly than I could fully formulate my ideas. This has happened to me many times before. I'd like to try to explain them in writing and see if I can make myself any clearer.

Firstly, I'd like to say that my final point is that I agree entirely with your comment, "God was wounded." All I would like to add to that is that the word, "wounded" is an understatement.

The relationship of the Jewish people with God who were among the Ten Lost Tribes was deeply inadequate. As you said, God says he feels "married" to the Jewish people and calls them His "bride." So, when God expresses His dissatisfaction with their conduct, Hosea flippantly tells God to divorce Himself from the Jewish people if He feels that way about it. Ironically, in the end this is precisely what God does as evidenced by the fact that these tribes are no longer a part of Jewish history.

But God goes further. He tries to explain to Hosea the depth of His actions, what it means to have a bride and what it means to divorce her, the depth of the relationship God expects from Jews. In order to bring home His message, God tells Hosea to marry. Hosea agrees, but the woman he picks is nothing more than a whore; she'll go to bed with almost anyone. The Jews that made up the Ten Tribes were equally unfaithful to God. They had introduced idol worship into their practices in addition to their marriage to God. Hosea is wounded by his wife's infidelity, just as God is wounded by The Ten Tribe's infidelity to Him.

From this unsuccessful experience with a woman, Hosea learns that a husband must choose a bride carefully. Pleasure is not enough of a reason to marry. By the same token in history, there can be no others brought into the marriage of God with the Jewish people. The Jewish people are a bride who can have only one Husband, a jealous God Who demands fidelity. We must not give our pleasure to other gods as well.

But God tells Hosea to go even further, telling him to try marrying a second time. This time Hosea has learned from his previous mistake and so he doesn't marry a whore. Instead, he marries a prostitute, a woman who's selective in the sense that she engages herself with men for profit rather than for simple pleasure.

Of course, this relationship doesn't work either. Hosea learns that as long as he has money, he has a wife who appears faithful. But once the money runs out, she's out the door looking for a new husband. This parallels the relationship of the Jews of the Ten Tribes who were willing to believe in G-d so long as it was in their own best interest, so long as they got what they wanted. But when bad times came, their faith went out the window, and they went looking for one god after another. These Jews saw their relationship to God as nothing more than a business-like alliance. In a sense, the Ten Lost Tribes divorced themselves from God, in search of something else, and we haven't heard from them since.

From his second experience Hosea realizes that the relationship of Jew to God can't be either for pleasure or profit. It must go much deeper. Those of us who have lived in the secular world have had the "opportunity" of learning just such lessons. How many relationships did I have that were simply for pleasure! How many times did I try to buy the affections of others when I couldn't get them any other way! Life taught me the hard way that true love is not only hard to find, but takes work. It isn't so easy to be in a holy union with another human being, and once in such a relationship, divorce is no option. The only answer to the stresses of relationship is hard work, chesed, understanding and insight into the nature of holy relationships. [And, actually, since all relationships are holy, they're all opportunities to learn our true ties to God.]

When I look at Hosea and my own experiences in this way, I conclude the following:

1. We, the Jewish people, the descendants of Two Tribes of Israel, have maintained a marriage with God that has lasted over 3,000 years.
2. This marriage is deep, heartfelt and successful.
3. My own personal relationship with God has paralleled the experiences of Hosea. In other words, as poor as my relationships with others have been, so "divorced" have I also been from God.
4. God, in all His mercy, has chosen to maintain His relationship with me as faithless as I am to Him.
5. He's chosen to lead me through experiences that he gave to Hosea, the Prophet, to teach me in the same way, because I didn't have, or didn't see, the opportunity of learning those lessons from Torah.
6. Torah is the way in which Jews can avoid painful lessons of the Jewish past.

7. Torah is the way to bring meaning to past personal experiences that I've had with others, the depth of the meaning of which I couldn't see at the time. By seeing those experiences as symbolic of my relationship with God, I can see how my faith has grown.
8. Lastly, or perhaps better to say, first of all, God is my compassionate "husband" and teacher. He didn't divorce Himself from me although He has had many good reasons to do so. He has stayed by my side faithfully, teaching me how to live in holy union with Him.

There! I got it all out. I hope you understand.

May I also add a comment about your reflection on the secular world that I fear you may not understand as deeply as I do, surely only because I am an observant Jew, not a pious one. You made a comment about the music that young people listen to nowadays and how it separates them from themselves and from the rest of us. I once read that in the 19th Century the "waltz" was rejected by the older generation. They thought it would lead to the downfall of the morals of the youngsters. The older people saw it as threatening and shameful, too much "body," not enough "soul."

Perhaps it's important for youngsters to explore their bodies as a prelude or in conjunction with exploring their souls. Perhaps each generation of young people stretches its curiosity about their bodies just as all human beings have the opportunity to expand their knowledge of their soul.

May I add that, in my opinion, the relationship of body to soul is a developing one, both historically as well as individually. The container God has poured our souls into, is, in my opinion, as holy as the soul itself. So, our relationship to God is somewhat divorced from Him if we don't fully appreciate the body He's given us. Our relationship to God is ever changing and growing, as is our relationship to our body. As we ripen on the inside, we also ripen without. As we learn to appreciate our body and soul, we learn to appreciate God more and more.

I bring this up because I don't see it as separated from the story you discussed today about Hosea. The story began with God saying that He chose Israel as His bride. Inherent in that relationship is both moral and physical conduct, conduct of the mind and conduct of the body. Jewish mind and body are not only married to each other as it is with every human being, inseparable, but we're also married to God, a unique relationship that notzrim don't share with us. To understand the depth of this relationship takes both Torah and life experience, both written and oral tradition, both body and soul. One without the other is like a willing groom without a willing bride – a deeply wounding experience.