

Of a Prophet, a Prostitute, and Pesah

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The opening narrative of the book of *Hosea* stands as one of the most surprising and inscrutable in Tanakh. God instructs Hosea to marry a prostitute and have children with her, though knowing that said children may not be his.¹ Each child is to be named in a way that indicates the low spiritual state of the Jewish People and G-d's rejection of a relationship with them.

When the LORD first spoke to Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom; for the land will stray from following the LORD." So he went and married Gomer daughter of Diblaim. She conceived and bore him a son, and the LORD instructed him, "Name him Jezreel; for, I will soon punish the House of Jehu for the bloody deeds at Jezreel and put an end to the monarchy of the House of Israel. In that day, I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel." She conceived again and bore a daughter; and He said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah; for I will no longer accept the House of Israel or pardon them. (But I will accept the House of Judah. And I will give them victory through the LORD their God; I will not give them victory with bow and sword and battle, by horses and riders.)" After weaning Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then He said, "Name him Lo-ammi; for you are not My people, and I will not be your [God]." (*Hosea* 1:2-9, JPS)

Abruptly then, in chapter 2, *Hosea* launches into a prophecy which mixes rebuke and consolation. While detailing some of the sins and punishment of the Jewish People, clearly compared to the harlot wife of Hosea, G-d writes that He will rebuild a relationship with the Jews. As part of this, each of Hosea's children is given a new name that captures the healed relationship. Other elements of the chapter further this idea. For example, Israel as G-d's wife will now refer to G-d with the more

¹ See, for example, Rashi and Radak to *Hosea* 1:2.

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intimate term for husband, *isbi* (roughly, my husband/man), rather than the harsher one, *baali* (my master).²

The number of the people of Israel shall be like that of the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted; and instead of being told, “You are Not-My-People,” they shall be called Children-of-the-Living-God. The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall assemble together and appoint one head over them; and they shall rise from the ground—for marvelous shall be the day of Jezreel! Oh, call your brothers “My People,” And your sisters “Lovingly Accepted!” Rebuke your mother, rebuke her—For she is not My wife And I am not her husband—And let her put away her harlotry from her face And her adultery from between her breasts... Assuredly, I will speak coaxingly to her And lead her through the wilderness And speak to her tenderly. I will give her her vineyards from there, And the Valley of Achor as a plowland of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, When she came up from the land of Egypt. And in that day—declares the LORD—You will call [Me] Ishi, And no more will you call Me Baali. For I will remove the names of the Baalim from her mouth, And they shall nevermore be mentioned by name. In that day, I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will also banish bow, sword, and war from the land. Thus I will let them lie down in safety. And I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, And with goodness and mercy, And I will espouse you with faithfulness; Then you shall be devoted to the LORD. In that day, I will respond—declares the LORD—I will respond to the sky, And it shall respond to the earth; And the earth shall respond With new grain and wine and oil, And they shall respond to Jezreel. I will sow her in the land as My own; And take Lo-ruhamah back in favor; And I will say to Lo-ammi, “You are My people,” And he will respond, “[You are] my God.” (*Hosea 2*, JPS)

The strangeness of the story led many commentators to assume that the entire incident was merely a prophetic vision.³ The simple understanding of the Talmud, however, is that this Hosea was indeed commanded to marry a prostitute and beget children. As Abarbanel⁴ notes, only in this way would the story have the possibility of impressing mean-

² There does seem to be an allusion to God replacing the major pagan God in the area, Baal, the rain God.

³ See, for example, Ibn Ezra to *Hosea* 1:1 and *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:46.

⁴ *Hosea* 1:1.

ing on the Jewish People. (We will see, however, that the Talmud indicates that the intended audience was Hosea himself, rather than the people.)

The Talmud devotes a particularly extended section of *aggadah* to outlining the story. In the Talmud, the backstory for the book is a conversation between God and Hosea. God informs Hosea that the Jewish People have sinned. Rather than defend them, or call for God's mercy on His children, Hosea suggests that God find a new nation. God then commands Hosea to marry the prostitute and have children with her. Next, He instructs Hosea to divorce his wife and send away his children. God says that if Hosea can emotionally bring himself to send away his unfaithful wife and children (who may not be his), then God will send away the Jewish People. However, if Hosea cannot, this will show that God has reason to maintain his relationship with the Jewish People. Hosea protests when told to divorce his wife and learns the above lesson. This leads to chapter two of Hosea where Hosea defends the Jewish People and helps reforge their relationship with God. According to this reading, the Talmud seems to assume that Hosea was actually commanded to engage in this exercise, and that unlike Abarbanel's interpretation, the intended audience was Hosea himself, not the Jewish People.

While a full analysis of this passage will surely yield many critical insights into the book of *Hosea*, as well as other lessons, I would like to focus on an often-overlooked part of this text, namely, the placement. Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (*Peri Tzadik*, *Kedushat Shabbat* 3) contends that aggadic texts are placed within halakhic sections to convey a lesson. Thus, the central stories concerning the destruction of the Temple are placed in the tractate of *Gittin* because the relationship between God and the Jewish People is compared to marriage and thus the destruction of the Temple and the Exile are compared to divorce. However, to emphasize that it is not really about divorce, these passages appear in the chapter of *Gittin* that focuses on damages, rather than the primary chapters that focus on divorce. Rabbi Yitzchak Blau has documented other cases of this methodology in both traditional and academic sources, aptly titling his article on the topic "Hassidim and Academics Unite: The Significance of Aggadic Placement."⁵ I contend that the placement of the Talmud's analysis of *Hosea* is similarly meaningful.

Here we turn to the full passage. The ninth chapter of *Pesahim* begins with the following question. One may only eat of the Pesah if one

⁵ <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/hassidim-and-academics-unite-significance-aggadic-placement>

was included in the group from when the animal was slaughtered. The Mishnah raises a very specific case—when a woman’s father and husband each included her in their group for the Pesah. The Mishnah rules that in general, the assumption is that she joins her husband’s group. However, if she is a newlywed, and the norm was that new couples would spend the first holiday at the bride’s parents’ home, she can join either group.

MISHNAH: A woman, when she is living in her husband’s house, if her husband slaughtered the Paschal lamb on her behalf and her father also slaughtered the Paschal lamb on her behalf, she should eat from her husband’s lamb because it is assumed that the wife intended to be included in her husband’s group. However, if, as was often customary, she went on the first Festival following her marriage to observe the Festival in her father’s house, then, if both her husband slaughtered the Paschal lamb on her behalf and her father also slaughtered the Paschal lamb on her behalf, she may eat in whichever place she wishes, since it is not obvious with whose group she intended to be included... (*Pesahim* 87a, William Davidson [Koren] Talmud)

At first, the Talmud suggests that this rule depends on the law of *be-reirah*, retroactive clarification, which allows the woman to choose her group later. The Talmud then rejects this and assumes that she chose at the time of slaughter:

GEMARA: The Mishnah states that in certain cases one partakes of the lamb of whichever group he desires. One’s inclusion in a group requires that he be registered with that group from the outset, before the lamb is slaughtered. The Gemara suggests: **You learn from it that there is retroactive clarification.** One’s ultimate decision as to which group he wishes to be part of retroactively indicates that, from the outset, he was registered in that group. This is problematic, as no halakhic conclusion has been reached in the matter of retroactive clarification. The Gemara therefore rejects this suggestion: **What** is the meaning of the phrase: She may eat in whichever place **she wishes?** It is referring to a case where a woman has already expressed her choice before **the time of slaughter.** Therefore, this case does not relate to the principle of retroactive clarification, and no conclusion concerning it may be drawn from it. (*Ibid.*)

The Talmud then notes a contradiction from a *Baraita* that states that even after the first holiday she can join her father and is not presumed to join her husband. The Talmud responds that the latter case

refers to a woman who always joins her father's home but is not indicative of a more general principle.

At this point, the Talmud launches into a relatively long allegorical explanation of *Shir HaShirim* that builds on the process of a woman being integrated into her husband's home and family. This, however, subtly turns the topic of the Talmud from actual brides and grooms to the metaphorical marriage of God and Israel.

There is a homiletic interpretation of verses that conveys a similar idea, **as it is written**: "I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers; **then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace**" (*Song of Songs* 8:10). **And Rabbi Yoḥanan said**: She is **like a bride who was found perfect**. She was warmly received **in her father-in-law's house**. **And** she eagerly hurries, as one **pursued**, to go to tell of her praise, i.e., her warm welcome, **in her father's house**. **As it is written**: "**And it shall be at that day, says the Lord, that you shall call Me: My Husband, and shall call Me no more: My Master**" (*Hosea* 2:18), of which **Rabbi Yoḥanan said**: She shall be **like a bride in her father-in-law's house**, where she experiences a close relationship with her husband. **And** she shall **not be like a bride** still in the betrothal period and living **in her father's house**, during which time her relationship with her husband has still not developed. (Ibid.)

After several passages expounding verses from *Shir HaShirim*, the Talmud turns to the central analysis of *Hosea* we mentioned above. After framing the timing of his prophecy, the Talmud turns to the narrative.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: Your sons, the Jewish People, **have sinned**. Hosea **should have said** to God in response: But **they are Your sons; they are the sons of Your beloved ones**, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **Extend Your mercy over them**. Not only did he fail to say that, but **instead he said before Him: Master of the Universe, the entire world is Yours**; since Israel has sinned, **exchange them for another nation**. **The Holy One, Blessed be He, said**: What shall I do to this Elder who does not know how to defend Israel? I will say to him: **Go and take a prostitute and bear for yourself children of prostitution**. And after that I will say to him: **Send her away from before you**. If he is able to send her away, I will also send away the Jewish People. This deliberation provides the background of the opening prophecy in Hosea, **as it is stated**: "**The Lord said to Hosea: Go, take for yourself a wife of prostitution and children of prostitution**" (*Hosea* 1:2). **And then it is written**: "**So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Di-**

blaim” (*Hosea* 1:3), and the Sages interpreted her name homiletically. **“Gomer”**; Rav said she was so called **because everyone would finish [gomerim]** having relations with her and satisfy their desires with her. **“The daughter of Diblaim”**; the name Diblaim can be taken as the dual form of the word *dibbah*, ill repute. It suggests that she was a woman of **ill repute, daughter of a woman of ill repute. And Shmuel said:** The name Diblaim is the plural of the word *deveilah*, a cake of pressed figs, indicating that **she was as sweet as a cake of pressed figs**, and therefore everyone used her services. **Rabbi Yoḥanan**, based on a similar derivation, **said** the name signifies **that everyone would tread [dashin] upon her**, a euphemism for sexual relations, **like a cake of pressed figs. Alternatively**, with regard to the name **Gomer**, **Rav Yehudah said:** The name can be understood as deriving from the root *gamar*, to finish. It alludes to the fact that the gentiles **sought to finish the money of the Jewish People in her days. Rabbi Yoḥanan said:** They did not just seek to do so, but were successful. **They plundered and finished it**, as it is stated: **“For the king of Aram destroyed them and made them like the dust in threshing”** (II *Kings* 13:7). The passage in *Hosea* continues: **“And she conceived, and bore him a son. And the Lord said to him: Call his name Jezreel; for soon I will visit the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will obliterate the kingdom of the house of Israel... And she conceived again, and bore a daughter. And He said to him: Call her name Lo-ruhamah, for I will no more have compassion upon the house of Israel that I should bear them... And she conceived, and bore a son. And He said: Call his name Lo-ammi; for you are not My people, and I will not be yours”** (*Hosea* 1:3-9). After two sons and one daughter had been born to him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: **Shouldn’t you have learned from the example of your master Moses, who, once I spoke with him, separated from his wife? You too, separate yourself from your wife. He said to Him: Master of the Universe, I have sons from her and I am unable to dismiss her or to divorce her. In response to Hosea’s show of loyalty to his family, the Holy One, Blessed be He, rebuked him and said to him: Just as you, whose wife is a prostitute and your children from her are children of prostitution, and you do not even know if they are yours or if they are children of other men, despite this, you are still attached to them and will not forsake them, so too, I am still attached to the Jewish People, who are My sons, the sons of My faithful who withstood ordeals, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are so special that they are one of the four acquisitions that I ac-**

quired in My world. The Gemara proceeds to enumerate all four... **The Jewish People are one acquisition, as it is written: "The nation that You have acquired" (Exodus 15:16). And you, Hosea, said that I should replace them with another nation? Once Hosea realized that he had sinned, he got up to request that God have compassion upon him for having spoken ill of the Jewish People. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: Before you request compassion upon yourself, first request compassion upon the Jewish People, since I have already decreed upon them three harsh decrees on your account, in response to your condemnation of them. There is an allusion to these three decrees in the names of the children born of the prostitute. Jezreel is an allusion to a decree for Jehu's actions in the Jezreel Valley (see II Kings 9-10). Lo-ruhamah, one that had not received compassion, suggests that God will no longer have compassion for the Jewish People. Lo-ammi, not My people, indicates that the Jewish People will no longer be considered God's people. Hosea stood and requested compassion upon the Jewish People and nullified the decree. God responded and began to bless them, as it is stated: "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered. And it will be that instead of that which was said to them: You are not My people, it shall be said to them: You are the children of the living God. And the children of Judea and the children of Israel shall be gathered together" (Hosea 2:1)... (ibid. 87a-b)**

In the spirit of Rav Tzadok, I would ask why this passage is here. Is it accidental? Does the Talmud merely begin with a law about the Pesah that depends on the psychology of newlyweds, which leads into a discussion of *Shir HaShirim* which reflects that relationship on the allegorical plain, and then segues into the narrative of *Hosea* because a verse became relevant? Or is there more to it?

The answer, it seems, is hidden in a verse in the second chapter of *Hosea* and several in *Jeremiah*. In God's blessing to the Jewish People in *Hosea*, he invokes a memory of the early days when the Jews left Egypt:

I will give her, her vineyards from there, And the Valley of Achor as a plowland of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, When she came up from the *land of Egypt*. (*Hosea* 2:17)

The second chapter of *Jeremiah*, like the opening chapters of *Hosea*, details the treasonous sins of the Jewish People against God. As in *Hosea*, the organizing metaphor is an unfaithful wife. There, however, God bemoans the contrast between this infidelity and the devotion of the Jews when they first left Egypt. In the metaphor, the willingness of the

Jews to follow God into the desert is attributed to their love for God, the love of a [new] bride.

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the LORD: I accounted to your favor The devotion of your youth, Your love as a bride—How you followed Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, The first fruits of His harvest. All who ate of it were held guilty; Disaster befell them—declares the LORD. Hear the word of the LORD, O House of Jacob, Every clan of the House of Israel! Thus said the LORD: What wrong did your fathers find in Me That they abandoned Me And went after delusion and were deluded? They never asked themselves, “Where is the LORD, Who brought us up from the land of Egypt, Who led us through the wilderness, A land of deserts and pits, A land of drought and darkness, A land no man had traversed, Where no human being had dwelt?” I brought you to this country of farm land To enjoy its fruit and its bounty; But you came and defiled My land, You made My possession abhorrent. (*Jeremiah* 2:1-7)

Following this metaphor, the time of the Exodus, when the original Pesah was offered, was a time in which God and the Jews were newlyweds. The first Pesah was thus the first holiday for the new couple. If so, the legal case of the Mishnah parallels the metaphorical state of the Jews when they offered the first Pesah.

However, the case of the Mishnah is not the first Pesah, but every Pesah. As the Haggadah tells us, “every man must see himself as if he left Egypt.” Thus, the extended exegesis of *Shir HaShirim* and *Hosea* are conceptually on point. They are pointing us to the Biblical stories that remind us of the emotional state we should be in with God. Like the Jews leaving Egypt, those who brought the first Pesah, we too are newlyweds with God. As with the woman in the Mishnah, this affects how we fulfill our obligation on Pesah. The second chapter of *Hosea* ends with God and the Jews becoming betrothed again forever, despite the Jewish People’s missteps. By remembering that even when we sin, God gives us the chance to renew our relationship, we enable seeing ourselves in the same emotional/metaphorical state as the first Jews when we celebrate our Pesah, no matter how many years have passed. As such, the analysis of *Hosea* conceptually captures the emotional power of the Pesah, and the feelings of the bride bringing her first Pesah, moving from her father’s home to her husband’s. While the precise metaphor can be unpacked for its many layers, I hope this analysis encourages us to think about the relationship between halakhah and aggadah, as well as

the human relationships that can shed light on our relationship with God as we renew our marriage to God on Pesah.⁶ ❧

⁶ Charly Piwko notes that the comparison breaks down because God is also our father. This contrast may highlight how God's relationship with the Jewish People is even more powerful as it reflects multiple kinds of relationships. Alternatively, it is pointing to a change in our primary mode of relationship, from that of a parent/child to that of husband/wife. See Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein's profound reflections on the reason Tanakh uses different metaphors at different points. <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/three-weeks/vaetchanan-shabbat-nachamu-comfort-my-people-comfort-them>.