

2000 11 09 Elie Wiesel Hosea The Strange Tale of a Prophet and  
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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) What is more difficult: to speak about someone nobody knows, or speak about somebody everybody knows? Tonight, I shall speak about somebody very few people know. Hosea. Let us imagine we are back in the distant past. Something is going to happen to a man who is perhaps our neighbor. On that day, as always, the prophet rises early to go to the temple in Jerusalem, and briefly pray for its welfare. The priests are still fulfilling their duties. Sacrifices are being offered to the Lord. It is only after the temple's destruction that they will be replaced by prayers.

The temple is still intact, [00:01:00] and the people of Judea are not on their knees. Life is more or less normal. The country is sovereign. In fact, there are two countries, and both are independent. Are they doing well? Are they happy? Maybe. If living in sin does not preclude happiness, the inhabitants of Judea and Israel have no particular reason to complain. Their military is strong. Their economy, prosperous. In spite of the tense geopolitical situation of the region,

forever plagued by strifes between neighboring great powers, the danger to the Jewish state is not from without, but from within.

Their structures are not stable. The kingdom of Judea is governed by Yotam, since his father Uzziah was afflicted with leprosy. [00:02:00] As for the kingdom of Israel, it experiences much turbulence. Since Jeroboam II's death, the throne has changed hands several times. Meanwhile, as we used to say, in distant Greece, Homer is completing his Iliad. There, culture will be, and to some extent, already is, shaped by its philosophers and oracles. In Judea and Samaria, as we shall see later, words are spoken by prophets.

Does Hosea know what his future might be? Does the prophet know that he will become a prophet? That God had chosen him for a mission whose nature is still concealed from him. If so, he must wonder what he will be called upon to say. More precisely, what form his message will take and to whom it will be addressed. Actually, this preoccupation surely [00:03:00] applies to all prophets. Both emissary and spokesman for God, the prophet is often surprised. He never knows beforehand the words he will be ordered to utter. Will he be expected to appease the people, or make them tremble? Still, tonight the prophet we are about to meet has not yet been given the task of

prophecy. He is still a simple person, and when God chooses to speak to him, ordering him to do certain things in His name, his astonishment will match our own. Let's read the text, shall we?

It opens with a customary introduction, the word of the Lord that came unto Hosea, son of Beerī, in the days of Uzziah, Yotam, Ahaz, and *Hizkiyahu*, kings of Judah, [00:04:00] and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel. Then comes the appeal, or the mission, which is rather perplexing, if not disturbing, to say the least. "And the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go. Take unto thee a wife of whoredom, and children of whoredom.'" What? Could this be the glorious and inspired beginning of a beautiful but unenviable prophetic career?

What kind of a prophet is this man, who instead of praying, studying, and fasting, meditating and working on himself in the depth of his heart and soul, is heading towards a woman known mainly for, say, her promiscuity? And what about God's role in this bizarre story? [00:05:00] Why does he dispatch Jonah to Nineveh, to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment, and send Hosea to enjoy the pleasures of the company of a woman whose social reputation is notably unvirtuous? Well, there we are. The text offers us an episode unparalleled in the dramatic history of Jewish prophecy. A prophet and a prostitute? United

by the same sentence? In the same design? Deprived of the slightest trace of sacredness. As we would say in the yeshiva, *mai kamashma lan?*, what in the world could it all mean?

Fortunately, generations of sages and their disciples were equally intrigued by our subject and his destiny. We shall explore some of the Talmudic and Midrashic sources that they have left behind, as we always do. [00:06:00] For those of you who have so faithfully joined us in these encounters in years past may remember that we have already studied the drama-filled lives and powerful words of the great prophets, such as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Every one of them was involved in the stormy events of our people, whose faith they tried to shake by orienting it towards redemption.

But tonight, we shall see to what extent Hosea belongs to their line. What we do know is that Hosea is one of the so-called *12 Minor Prophets*. Why minor? Not that he had a minor role. Simply because the 12 books that we talk about are very short. So they became minor. The others are major. And we shall see what lessons we may learn from Hosea's life, and struggle. After all, in this [00:07:00] hall of learning and memory, it is incumbent upon us to repeat here before you, friends and colleagues, the principal goal of our common endeavor. It is

simply, as always, to celebrate the Jewish passion for learning by illustrating the beauty of its quest for meaning and truth.

The adventure offered us by study, in which literary curiosity is combined with scrupulous textual analysis, is for us a haven as much as a challenge. Nothing is more stimulating for the mind, nor more comforting for the soul. To enter a text is to be warmed by its ancient flame. As we scrutinize its structure and language, and interrogate its signals and its silences, indeed, as we wander through its underground tunnels, so as to discover a trace left by a medieval commentator, or an obscure student from eras gone by, [00:08:00] we are overcome by a feeling of gratitude and exultation.

One enters into study as one enters into prayer. Has the Torah protected the Jewish people in its long exile? What is certain is that the Jewish people has protected the Torah. Theirs is a mutually gratifying relationship. *G'vilin nisrafin* declared Haninah ben Teradion, while burning at the stake. Parchment may be consumed by flames, but the letters and their spirit remain intact, unscathed, indestructible, as long as they are kept alive by those who invest in their study the energy of their mind, and the love of their spirit.

Conversely, so long as we learn Torah, it shields the learners. In the past, individuals and communities suffered physically for [00:09:00] their commitment to study. Spiritually, we emerged whole and creative. In the Middle Ages, kidnapped by pirates and ransomed by distant Jewish communities, great scholars brought their erudition inadvertently, unwillingly, to those forsaken places, and turned them into prestigious centers of learning. So cherished is the scholar in our tradition that his pupil is duty-bound to ransom him before his father. Unless the father is a teacher, his teacher.

What is there in the Jewish passion for study that makes it so singular? Why must it be acquired by suffering, as the Talmud says? Can one be happy and learn? Can one learn and still be happy? Let us open two parentheses. [00:10:00] One. Next week we shall study a topic under the title, the solitude of God. But also, the solitude of man, and the solitude of Israel. All three, as related to recent events in Israel. And the events are worrisome. Still, with all that is happening there today, since Rosh Hashanah, of course we worry. And we are trying to hang on to something, to invoke some measure of hope, to spark - - to find a spark, somewhere. But if by next week, by next Thursday, there will be a president-elect (laughter), we may speak about his solitude as well. (laughter)

Second is tonight is November 9th, and it is impossible for us not to mention its historical meaning. [00:11:00] *Kristall* Night, the first state-sponsored pogrom in Hitler's Germany. The ransacking of Jewish shops, the burning of synagogues, the arrest of hundreds and thousands of Jews. I wonder how many communities remember. Do we need another Hosea to remind them the dangers of forgetfulness?

For us, study means memory, and study also means joy. They are inseparable. One cannot open a page without finding a sign, a hidden meaning, but also a smile. When I study, it's always with a smile that I study. And that's true also when I teach. Joy, at times, is late in coming, so what? To be late is human. The answer is simple. It's enough to open the doors.

[00:12:00] Chronologically, the Book of Hosea comes after the Book of Amos. It is placed first simply because it is longer. Hosea, son of Beerli, hears the voice of God, ordering him to go and get himself a prostitute for a wife. What is his reaction? What does he feel? What does he do? Does he try to argue, or even to ask God to repeat the order? "Oh Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, could I have heard you correctly? Please tell me again, but slowly." (laughter)

If so, the text doesn't mention it. In fact, the text says very little about procedure. Between cause and effect, the distance is astonishingly short. God knows what He is doing. His logic is not necessarily ours. [00:13:00] His word is efficient. It is irrevocable. What follows is logically unavoidable. The divine order is, go get yourself a prostitute, and the prophet simply has to obey.

We know what God's thought is, but not the prophet's. What is going on in his head? In his heart? Is he perturbed by the unprecedented nature of his assignment? What is his reaction to it? But wait a second. Where does one find a prostitute, when one is a prophet? (laughter) Where would he get an address? (laughter) Just imagine knocking him at the door of a local rabbi, or policeman. "Sir? Could you help me?" (laughter)

Is it possible, on the other hand, that having heard the divine order, he knows how to fulfill it? It is the order alone that matters. The voice, [00:14:00] it now vibrates in him and will never be separated from God's. And his own. God's voice will now become part of his very being. Still, how can he be sure that the voice is God's, and not his own's? Or Satan's? How does one distinguish the source, the identity, and the truth of



a celestial voice? And there, a possible answer may exist. If the voice brings you back to yourself, it is not God's. It is God's only if and when it brings you closer to your fellow human being.

Hosea should be able to discern the prophetic voice. After all, his father Beerli was a prophet, too. This is ascertained by a Talmudic source, for which we should be grateful, since in matters of biography, [00:15:00] that of Hosea is rather sketchy, at best. In fact, it's extremely poor. We know little about him as a person and even less about his father. On what basis does the Talmud find it proper to reveal Beerli's vocation? On this premise: whenever the text mentions the name of a prophet together with that of his father, it means that both were prophets.

The Talmud goes farther, adding a surprising detail. Only two prophetic verses are attributed to Beerli, and since in those good times, it was impossible to propose an entire book with only two sentences, they were included in the Book of Isaiah and attributed to him. Another biographical detail. We know where Hosea lived. His residence? Naturally, in Jerusalem. There, too, we learn it not from the text, [00:16:00] but from its Midrashic commentary. And we deduct that by omission. When the

text does not indicate the precise location of a prophet's quarters, it means he lived in Jerusalem.

Good. Thanks for the information, but, does this mean there were prostitutes in the holy city of David? And that it was possible, socially acceptable, for a nice young man of a respectable family to marry one of them? Without creating an uproar? Well, to understand the character and his problem, his dilemma, let's talk a bit more about prophecy and prophets in general. When you study ancient history, you read about Athens and its philosophers, Egypt and its pyramids, Babylon and astronomers, Rome and its senators. [00:17:00] And Jerusalem and its prophets.

Now, we face a question that's accompanied us throughout our entire pilgrimage to the kingdom of Judea in those days. What is a prophet? What makes a prophet? Is a prophet a preacher? A visionary capable of predicting the future, that's all? One who carries God's words to His creatures? Who intercedes in heaven on behalf of his people? How does God speak to him? In a dream? Through symbols? Is the prophet possessed by God's spirit only at certain moments, while remaining normal the rest of the time?

A fascinating character on more than one level, the prophet or the prophetess -- prophecy was not exclusively a male occupation -- is a profoundly human person, aware of his or her weaknesses and shortcomings. Few sought the appointment. To be God's emissary [00:18:00] is neither enviable nor pleasant. Eternally caught between polarized forces, he never knows a moment's peace. Involved in the thorniest matters of state and society, fearing no one and demanding nothing for himself, he is inevitably persecuted either by heaven or by the people. And he's never satisfied, rewarded, at peace with himself and his social environment. He constantly risks imprisonment, humiliation, and death. Disarmed, he's defenseless. In choosing him, God chooses for him. A prophet who rejects his prophetic vocation is theoretically guilty and punishable by spiritual death. That is the law.

Hence, the prophet is often tragically isolated and ontologically solitary. Is he different from the people around him? The message comes from God, but it is the prophet who delivers it, [00:19:00] who transmits it, and occasionally interprets it. The words he uses, the images he conjures, are theirs, too. But they resonate differently when they come from him. On his lips, everyday words acquire an unforgettable tonality, a lasting intensity.

We already raised questions regarding Hosea's special mission. In philosophy, all questions are varied, but in matters of faith, they better be preceded by answers. When a question brings me closer to God, God is the answer. When a question moves me away from God, God becomes a question. But isn't God present in both situations? God is forever in things, never outside. And this, of course, is what the prophet must say, must believe. Including Hosea.

[00:20:00] From the outset, the text offers an important element of information by placing the story in its time frame. Let us reread the opening lines. "The world of the Lord that came to Hosea, son of Beer, in the days of Uzziah, Yotam, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel." So now we know the period, around 750 before the Common Era. And that may help us comprehend somewhat -- somewhat more -- about both the events and the characters in the story.

Let us look at the four kings of Judea mentioned in the story. Uzziah, crowned at 16, reigned for 52 years. His son Yotam reigned for 16 years, as did his son Ahaz. His son Hezekiah, who succeeded him, reigned for 29 years. As for Jeroboam, king

of Israel, [00:21:00] he reigned for 41 years in Samaria. So many kings in the life of one prophet. But how old was he when he became a prophet? And how long did he live? A Talmudic source says 90. He was 90 when he died. No wonder he was called the old man.

But Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra says he was younger. It is possible that Hosea prophesized during the last year of Uzziah, and the first year of Hezekiah, and covered the kings in between. What is certain is that his mission lasted during the entire reign of Jeroboam. But what exactly was his mission? Listen to the second part of the verse, which I omitted earlier. And I did so intentionally. So let us now read the verse in its entirety.

When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go take yourself [00:22:00] a wife of harlotry, and have children of harlotry." And here comes the punchline. "For the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord." On the surface, this could mean, "Go and do what so many, too many, others are doing." In other words, go. Demean yourself in public to serve as an illustration of the other people's degradation. Let's stay there for a moment.

Hosea addresses himself mainly to the tribe of Ephraim, which to him personifies the northern kingdom of Israel, at the time of Jeroboam, and his immediate successors. Thus, it may be useful to learn more about its state of affairs. Materially, things are good. Militarily secure, the country's in a period of dazzling prosperity. Spiritually, the picture is less enviable. Soon after he ascends to the throne, [00:23:00] King Zechariah, son of Jeroboam, is slain by Shallum, who in turn is murdered by Menachem. In the 10 years following Jeroboam's death, five kings seize power, three of them through violence and bloodshed. Plots and counterplots constitute the fabric of political life.

As far as religion is concerned, the situation seems catastrophic. Animal idols made of wood or stone have again become popular. Idolatry is contagious. The God of Israel, forgotten. His laws, repudiated. His holy covenant, betrayed. Generally speaking, with the rare exceptions of the kings David and Solomon, a Jewish monarchy is not something to boast about. It's enough to read what the prophets say about it to measure the magnitude of its moral decline. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Amos, and Micah [00:24:00] -- their pain, anger, and desperate outbursts help us understand why, in the beginning, God would have preferred His people not to be a monarchy.

But the people stubbornly insisted upon having their kings, and so become like all the others. And like the others, they became. It is in this light that we can perhaps understand why God made Hosea marry a harlot. As if to say, "Look at yourself, people of Israel. Look who you are."

Hosea's task, after the third chapter -- the first three chapters are biographical. Hosea's task is then to put the situation to words. He shouts. He alerts. He protests. He warns. He threatens. Listen. "Oh, Ephraim" -- which is a northern kingdom -- "you have played the harlot. Israel is defiled." [00:25:00] Hosea speaks of God's anguish and sorrow, of course, disappointment. "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love. I became to them as the one who eases the yoke on their jaws. I bent down to them and fed them gently."

What emanates from these complaints? Don't look for an answer. You've found it already. It is a painful feeling that lovers and friends know all too well. Disappointment. When things go wrong, when one partner feels wounded, cheated, betrayed, and bewildered. Still in love, he or she can't understand. Why does he or she behave this way? What have I done to deserve

such a behavior? What happened to us? [00:26:00] And now, we might perhaps understand this drama. Since it unfolds on a higher theological level, it reflects the decadence in the relation between the unique couple, God and His people.

More than his peers, Hosea seems better qualified, and he was the first to do so -- to speak of the special bonds connecting the God of Israel and the history of Israel. And it is the story of a wedding, of a marriage. It took place at Sinai, and the Torah was and remains the marriage contract, the *Ketubah*. Thus, through Hosea, it is the voice of an unhappy husband, God, who feels abandoned, betrayed, by His beloved, the people of Israel. It is as if God said, "I chose you. I loved you. I protected you. I saved you. Remember? And you, what have you done to sustain the purity of our love? [00:27:00] You are searching for other possibilities, other outlets, other connections, other sources of joy, and in so doing, you have betrayed both of us. You have cheapened, trivialized, and blemished our love and our happiness. You have made yourself unworthy of our beginnings."

In His pain, God addresses Himself to the people themselves. He doesn't say to the prophet, "Speak." God speaks through him. He speaks to the people in the second person, and sometimes



also, of course, in the third person, "they." Let us read some more of the text inspired by disillusionment and anger. "She, Israel, did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil. It was I who gave her the silver and the gold, which they then used for the idol Baal." And further. "It was I who knew you [00:28:00] in the wilderness, in the land of drought. Yet when they were well fed, and their heart was uplifted, they forgot me." And also, "What am I to do with you, Ephraim? And with you, Judah? Your love is like a cloud in the morning. It is the dew that so quickly evaporates."

Other prophets are harsh, demanding, and rigorous. Their appeals are wrenching. They, too, denounce the people's promiscuity, complacency, and forgetfulness as they turn their back on their creator, and king, and judge. But Hosea's role is different. To them, God is father, judge, and king. To Hosea, He is husband. A humiliated husband, deceived and betrayed by His spouse. His adulterous wife. That is why Hosea is ordered to take a prostitute for a wife, [00:29:00] to show the people that they have prostituted themselves by espousing alien gods. As if He is telling the prophet, "You do in your private life what they have done to me in public. I am wedded to a people of prostitutes."

But is this explanation satisfactory? Isn't Hosea, by virtue of being a prophet, therefore different from other men, supposed to be better than any of them? Furthermore, doesn't he worry that they might reject his pleas? And what if they reacted with arrogance? They, meaning the people. "Hey, who are you to preach morality to us, when you yourself sought out the sweet company of harlots?"

On this last point, let's emphasize that a prophet -- and Hosea is a prophet -- is not obliged to defer to the people. Like all prophets, God alone [00:30:00] is his master and judge. Only God can make him alter his tone, or remain silent. Between popularity and faith, popularity and mission, his choice is made. God may hold it against him, but about that later. For the moment, I must admit that in spite of its theological implication, the story of the harlot on its purely personal level remains puzzling to me, as it does certain Talmudic and post-Talmudic commentators. Faced with its inherent enigma, they try to solve it.

The simplest and easiest way, as mentioned earlier, would be to declare that quite logically, Hosea had to follow God's will. When God orders, no one has the right to say no, or even to ask for explanations. God does not have to answer such questions.

Fortunately, certain great minds, [00:31:00] mainly from medieval times, choose to go farther and deeper in their inquiries. For Maimonides, ibn Ezra, and the RaDaK, for example, the whole story is either a vision or a dream. It didn't happen. Maimonides, as always, expresses himself with great clarity. Quote, "God would never do anything that would present His prophets as drunkards or imbeciles. No. This episode is part of a prophetic vision."

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, whom I love, conquers. "May God, blessed be He, save us from believing that He really ordered His emissary to take a harlot as a wife and to have children with her. All this took place in a dream only." Again, in other words, the entire story is nothing but poetic fantasy.

[00:32:00] Literary fiction. In real life as God's emissary, servant of His will and servant of His law, Hosea could not transgress the law. Doesn't the Torah explicitly state that a prophet who pretends to have the right to change the law is, by definition, a false prophet? Aren't we ordered to observe the biblical laws of purity? In other words, there was no such wedding between a prophet and a prostitute. It took place only in someone's imagination.

Or, was it perhaps a *lapsus*? A slip of the tongue? So dear to Freud. Was Hosea a victim of his own eloquence? Rashi's hypothesis is not far from such hypothesis. He also does not believe that we deal with a real event. The whole thing was a parable, says Rashi, an allegory. The prophet merely chose to tell it as if [00:33:00] he had himself lived it, to make its impact stronger. When you say "I," it means something. So now, this ought to satisfy even the fiercest skeptics in our midst.

Still, some difficulties do remain. And Don Yitzhak Avranel, one of my favorite commentators, is one of them, and he's aware of them. These difficulties derive from the fact that the text before us speaks of the episode as fact. God tells Hosea, "Go take a prostitute for a wife." And Hosea does exactly that. He does take a harlot. We even know her name, which is symbolic of qualities and talents. We don't know her address, but that doesn't matter. She's, in the meantime, too old. We know her name. Gomer, daughter of Dibalim or *Divlaim* -- [00:34:00] can use the word any way.

Ray, an important *amora*, a teacher of the third generation, *Shmuel's* friend and adversary, comments on the name *bat Divlayim* as follows. "It is a girl of whom everybody had something bad, something derogatory to say." On the name Gomer, he offers a

pun or play on words. "*Gomer she'hakol gomrim ba.*" Gomer means conclusion, end, attainment. In other words, either they all ended up with her or came to an end with her. (laughter) Or all who had an encounter with her went to the limit and beyond. And Rashi, the eternal Frenchman, does not hesitate to be more explicit. "*Bi'atam ve'ta'avat libam.*" I will not give you the real literary translation. [00:35:00] Let us simply say she was a woman with whom men full of desire could accomplish the act without obstacle.

Well, *Shmuel's* commentary centered on *Divla'im* or Dibalim. She was sweet like a fig. Rabbi Yochanan believes that Dibalim comes from *debala*, meaning everybody could trash her. A later rabbinic commentator was kinder. Everybody looked at her, so great was her beauty. Oh yes. Gomer, daughter of Dibalim did exist, and her avowed profession? We already read it in the text: Prostitute. It is as simple as that. It's in the text.

However, some commentators don't give up, trying to defend the prophet and, indirectly, his spouse, too. To limit the damage, they make use of the expression *Esheth Zenunim*, which in their view does not mean "harlot," [00:36:00] but a woman capable of harlotry. Or a woman of harlotry, whatever that means. It doesn't mean much. (laughter) In other words, when Hosea

married her, she was not yet a prostitute. And thus, the narrative quietly continues. There was a wedding. Afterwards? Listen. I quote. "Gomer conceived and gave him a son, and the Eternal One told him, 'Call your son *Jezreel*, for soon I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood shed in *Jezreel*. I shall put an end to the house of Israel. On that day, I shall break the ark of Israel in the valley of *Jezreel*.'" "

So, the prophet became husband and father, and God, who mingled in Hosea's private life by playing the matchmaker, got so far as to suggest a name for Hosea's [00:37:00] firstborn son. But the story doesn't end there. Let's read. "Gomer conceived again, and gave birth to a girl, and God said to Hosea again, 'Give her the name *Lo-ruhamah*, the one for whom there is no pity, for I shall no longer have pity for the house of Israel. It will no longer be forgiven.'" Hosea considers his own life irrevocably linked to the life of Israel. His third child, a second son, is named by God, "*Lo-ami*, this people is not mine. Its god is not Me."

And here, one fails to understand. Why are the prophet's children punished? Why are they humiliated and made to bear such shameful, horrible names? Children of prostitution, they? And if they are, [00:38:00] is it their fault? And why does

every name predict catastrophe? And God in all that? "Upon her children, I shall have no pity," says God. No pity? Why? Few prophetic sayings are as severe, as harsh. His predictions and warnings, born of bitterness, seem to be designed solely to elicit fear and cause pain. Listen. "Plead with your mother, plead, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband, that she put away her harlotry from her face and her adultery from her breasts, lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness and set her a parched land, enslave her with thirst."

And later he continues, lashing out at the people, "So I shall be to them like a lion, like a leopard, [00:39:00] I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breasts, and will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast I would rend them." Listen further. "I will destroy you, oh Israel. The children will fall by the sword. The little ones, dashed in pieces. The pregnant women, ripped open."

How could Hosea, a prophet who is human, more human than others, live with such dreadful premonitions, with such images fraught with horror and death? How could he carry such images of cruelty, and visions of death? How could he live with a woman

who evokes and illustrates such sin and inevitable punishment? With the birth of every successive child, the family's collective misfortune grows more cruel. [00:40:00] Then why have more children? Why maintain the appearance of family life? Hosea ends up, at the order of God, by repudiating Gomer, daughter of Debalim, and God again interferes in his private affairs. Let's listen to Hosea.

"And God speaks to me and says, 'Go once more and love a woman who is beloved by another, and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other Gods and love cakes or raisins.' So I bought her for 15 shekels of silver, and a *homer* and *lethekh* of barley, and I said to her, 'You must stay and remain mine for many days. You shall no more play the harlot or belong to another man. So I will be to you.'"

Question: who is this woman? [00:41:00] Is she the first wife or a new one? Also, God tells him to love her, whereas earlier, He told him to take her. Hasn't God given Hosea a much more difficult task? What is easier? To seize a woman or to love her? The consensus among commentators is that in both situations, the woman is the same, and therein lies the key to the tale. It can be expressed in one familiar word: *teshuva*.



Repentance is possible. And it is endowed with a healing and redeeming quality. At the end, husband and wife are reconciled, as are God and Israel. In Jewish history, no breakup is eternal. As a consequence of *teshuva*, God the husband will love Israel the wife with greater passion.

It is no accident that that particular chapter of Hosea, *Shuvah Yisrael*, Repent Israel, is read in the synagogues on the Shabbat [00:42:00] between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, *Shabbat Shuvah*. "*Shuvah Yisrael*," says the Lord. "Return oh Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity, take with you words and return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Take away all iniquity except that which is good. Our lips will replace the offering of bullocks. Assyria shall not save us. We will not ride upon horses. We will say no more our God to the work of our hence, men. In Thee alone the orphan finds mercy.'" And suddenly, all is well.

The last chapter reads like a happy ending. All is forgiven, Israel will blossom. "Who is wise, and he shall understand these things," wonders the prophet. "For the ways of the Lord are right, [00:43:00] and the righteous shall walk in them, but the sinners shall stumble in them." The same story, we are told, therefore, may have contradictory effects. It can

strengthen the faith of the believer, just as it may diminish it in the nonbeliever. Does this apply to the stranger and more disturbing tale of Hosea, and even stranger relationship he has with the adulteress Gomer, daughter of Debalim?

In the text, the tale of prophet Hosea finds its denouement, but not so, neither in Midrashic literature nor in popular fantasy. Thus, in the volume *Sefer HaDoroth*, the Book of Generations, one may read the following passage on Hosea's death. The ancient sages of Saloniki believe that the prophet, still in Babylon, asked to put his [00:44:00] coffin on the back of a camel, which would find its way to the place where he will be buried. And the camel arrived at the cemetery of Safed. There, the local Jews found in a satchel his letter with specific instructions, and so he was buried there, with the requisite honors.

In the Midrash, Hosea's destiny is less glorious. There, one encounters towards him a kind of distancing, which ought not surprise us. One feels a certain resentment over his harshness towards Israel, as is reflected in his horror-filled premonitions for its future. Granted, he only said what God told him to say, but it is easier to be angry at the messenger than at God who sent him. We know that in some cases, God Himself turns against his emissary. When *Noach* after the floods

asks God why he hasn't shown compassion towards the children, as it is reported in the Midrash, [00:45:00] God admonished him.

"What? Now you are talking." *Noach* should have spoken up earlier, before the tragedy. Moses has done it. When at time of the Golden Calf, God tells His favorite prophet, "Your people have sinned," Moses answers, "My people? Not Yours?"

As far as Hosea is concerned, we read in the tractate of Passover a disturbing passage in which God tells the prophet, "It is because of you that I inflicted on my people three punishments." Hosea in the biblical text was infinitely obedient. Perhaps a bit too obedient. Is this why in Midrashic sources he became a symbol of reconciliation and peace?

Whenever the Talmud wishes to emphasize the importance of peace, almost at any cost, it quotes two verses of his book.

[00:46:00] One, , *habor atzabim Efraim, hanah lo*, which means, "Join by idols, leave, or let him alone."

Comments Rashi -- always rely on Rashi to come with a good comment -- "Ephraim is so attached to idolatry that he's unable to detach himself from it. Therefore, dear prophet, stop reprimanding him. It's pointless. It's useless." Usually, Rashi's commentaries are rooted in Talmudic sources, and when faced with two interpretations in the Talmud, he chooses the one

favorable to Israel. But not now. Actually, he could have chosen the one attributed to Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kappar, a sage of the fifth generation after the destruction of the second temple, who taught at the academy of Lod. Rabbi Eleazar transforms the meaning of the words, making it positive. Uplifting. Playing on the term *habor*, [00:47:00] which means adhesion, cohesion, unification, he says, "When the people of Israel are united, God leaves them in peace. Even if they remain attached to idolatry."

Fortunately, now, Rashi comes to his senses, and he uses the same idea for his understanding of the second verse, which reads, "Their heart is divided. Now shall they be found faulty. He shall break down their altars. He shall spoil their images." Comments Rashi, "Great is the value of peace, for even when the children of Israel adore idols but live in peace among themselves, Satan is powerless to denounce them, for in the time of Hosea, God said "*Hanah lahem*, leave them alone."

Hosea, the tormented prophet of doom, is now a messenger of peace. And hope. [00:48:00] But a hope born of frustration, incomprehension, and distress. Listen now to a Midrashic tale in which the reader surprises himself or herself by feeling sorry for our angry prophet. It is offered in the same

tractate, the tractate of *Pesachim*, on Passover, in which Hosea's behavior is described and discussed and finally even explained.

When the holy one, blessed be He, tells the prophet Hosea, "Your children have sinned," he should have answered, like Moses before him, "My children, not Yours? Aren't they the descendants of Your beloved Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Have mercy on them. They are worthy of Your compassion." But he did not respond that way. Instead, says the Midrash, he displayed a greater detachment, saying, "Master of the universe, the entire world is Yours. [00:49:00] You don't like them? Go ahead, You are free to do whatever You want. You are displeased with Your people? Take another in its place."

Then, shocked by His emissary's words, God wondered, "What shall I do with this old man, or with this sage?" And He prepared -- God prepared -- an elaborated script, which we can read together. God thought to Himself, says the Midrash, "I shall tell him, 'Go take a woman of prostitution for a wife who will give you children of prostitution,' and he will obey. Later, I shall order him to send her away. If he is capable of doing it, I shall do so, too. I shall send away *Yisrael*. I will choose another people." So Hosea, obedient as always, goes to see

Gomer, daughter of Debalim, a woman of bad reputation, and marries her. [00:50:00] She gives him two sons and a daughter, and it's quite possible that they led a normal life until the holy one, blessed be He, told the prophet, "Didn't you learn anything from your teacher Moses? Don't you think you should follow his example? From the moment I spoke to Moses, he separated from his wife. Yet you, you remained with yours."

In other words, what are you waiting for? Leave her at once. Hosea's answer? "Master of the universe, I cannot do that. I have children. She is their mother. I cannot divorce or repudiate her." That is the moment God was waiting for, He said. "You whose wife is a prostitute. You, who don't even know whether your children are truly yours. You cannot leave her, and them, and you dare to tell me to separate myself from my children, the descendants of Abraham, [00:51:00] Isaac, and Jacob, all tried and chosen by me? Have you forgotten that the people of Israel are one of my masterworks? The Torah, the heavens and the earth, and the temple of Jerusalem are the three others? For whom -- don't you know that it's for them that the world has been created? And you have the audacity to tell me to change my people for another?"

Realizing the seriousness of his sin, Hosea burst out in tears, begged the Lord's forgiveness and mercy. For the holy one, blessed be He, went on reprimanding him. "Rather than plead for yourself, why not plead for Israel?" That is how Hosea, the prophet of anger, became the defender of his people, and ours. And now, we see him as a trusted ally and benefactor. His weaknesses? The prophet is a divine messenger but a human being nevertheless. He can make mistakes, [00:52:00] but they are always rectified. And forgiven. *Teshuva* helps.

Thus, his visions of catastrophe still materialize in our time. But surely not in his. On the contrary, his words became carriers of promise and of exultant blessings. And the children of Israel will be as numerous as the sand of the sea. Or, *Lo-ruhamah*, the negation of mercy, becomes *ruhamah*, compassion will vanquish cruelty. *Lo-ami*, not my people, will become *ammi*, yes, my people. There was no divorce. There never will be a divorce between the God of Israel and the people of Israel.

And so, in conclusion, it is in his book that we read the beautiful benediction one recites every morning when wearing the phylacteries or *tefillin*. And just before we came in, Rabbi Woznica asked, "Why did you choose Hosea?" I said to him, "Every morning, I repeat his words. How can I not pay him his

due, [00:53:00] and give him credit?" What do we say in the morning? We say *Ve'erastikh li le'olam*. And I shall betroth thee forever; yes, I shall betroth thee unto me in righteousness and in judgment and in grace, and in compassion. I shall betroth thee in faith. And you know the Lord. Who makes that vow? God. God makes that vow. And so all we are called upon to do, these days and always, is possibly to echo His words. And allow them, again and again, to penetrate our very being, and so, make them part of our own. (applause) [00:54:00]

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