

Drash on Hosea

Shabbat Shalom everyone

I am going to speak today about the haftarah. In the past, I have found this Haftarah difficult because I was put off by the harsh words of the prophet Hosea at the beginning of the reading where he says:

‘Rebuke your mother, rebuke her -

And let her put away her harlotry from her face

And her adultery from between her breasts.

Else will I strip her naked

And leave her as on the day she was born:

I will also disown her children;

For they are now a harlot’s brood.’ (Hosea 2:4-6)

These words, and others like them, unsettled me.

But this time, before I closed the book thinking, ‘No, this is too hard - prophets are always so hard to understand’, I paused and read it again carefully. Once I did that, I realised it is a love story, a beautiful and poignant love story. It’s not the usual story of young love like Romeo and Juliet. It’s more like the love that Shakespeare describes when he writes that love “is an ever-fixed mark, that looks on tempests, and is never shaken:” (Sonnet 116).

The Story of Today’s Haftarah

The story of today’s Haftarah is of an unfaithful wife, leaving her husband and having a series of lovers. The husband is angry, his harsh words show his pain and desperation, his heart is breaking - he says ‘decked with earrings and jewels, she would go after her lovers, forgetting me” (Hosea 2:15). But he never stops loving her and forgiving her. She thinks her lovers supply her with ‘her bread and water, her wool and linen’ (Hosea 2:7), but it is her husband, unbeknownst to her, who gives all these things to her and makes sure she can survive. He yearns for her to return to him. He dreams that she is saying “I will go and return to my first husband, for then I fared better than now.” (Hosea 2:9)

In the end, he persuades her to return to him. He says “I will speak coaxingly to her and lead her through the wilderness and speak to her tenderly, ...There she shall respond as in the days of her youth..”.(Hosea 2:16-17)

Hosea’s story has two levels. On one level, he used his own personal experience to preach to the people about the loyalty and trust that a marriage requires. Hosea’s own marriage was one where his wife was unfaithful to him while he remained unswervingly faithful to her.

On the second and deeper level, Hosea saw the relationship between the people of Israel and God to be like a marriage. The people of Israel had strayed from God’s ways to worship Baal and other gods. But God loved and forgave them, and longed for them to return to Him.

Hosea’s words often have this double meaning, referring to the two marriages, the marriage of God with his people, Israel, and Hosea’s own marriage to Gomer, his wife.

Hosea takes back his wife, and God takes back the people of Israel. Hosea never stopped loving his wife and wanting her back. He basically coaxed her back. And it is the same with God. Israel betrays the Covenant and worships other gods, but God wants Israel back and brings her back to Him. It is God who initiates this renewal and guides it. According to Etz Hayim, it does not depend on Israel’s repentance or initiative. It is God who longs for reconciliation with his people Israel. (EH p786)

Hosea’s life

It is 28 centuries since Hosea stood and spoke to the Israelite people. At that time, Israel was divided into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah. Hosea lived in the Northern kingdom in the 8th century BCE, and started his work as a prophet in the last years of King Jeroboam II’s reign and continued through the period of anarchy that followed that reign. The Israelite people were straying from their Covenant with God and were worshipping local gods such as Baal. The society was becoming more corrupt. Like the prophets of Israel before and after him, Hosea called to the people to repent and return to God but these warnings were not heeded.

What is a Prophet?

I will now say a few words about the prophets generally. The prophets spanned a limited period of time. According to Rabbinic tradition, Malachi was the last of the prophets, and he is thought to have lived during second Temple times. The prophet

was called to speak God's word, and serve as the moral and spiritual leader of his time. He criticised the evils of society, cried out against corruption among those in power, and provided comfort in times of despair and hardship. His fundamental objective was to reconcile man and God. He did not accept a half hearted commitment, but insisted on a full commitment to goodness, righteousness, justice and mercy.

Hosea's Message for us

So what is Hosea's message for us? If Hosea lived now what would he be saying to us? Are we also worshipping idols of the 21st century? Baal no longer exists, but hasn't our society made idols out of Materialism and Hedonism? And, in our culture, I think we also largely shut our minds and hearts from thinking about the injustices in the world and in our own society, of the poor and the needy. I am sure Hosea would rage against us for these things. He would want higher standards from us. He would be telling us to return to God, who longs so much for our return, and to renew our Covenant with Him.

I will finish my drash by reading from Hosea's own words from the end of the Haftarah. These words are recited by Jews whenever they bind the strap of the tefillin around the fingers of their hand. It is also sometimes said in the Jewish wedding ceremony. These words describe God's covenant with Israel with its divine attributes of justice, righteousness, goodness and mercy, and of God's everlasting commitment to us and our commitment to God. These are God's words to us:

“ I will betroth you to me forever:

I will betroth you to me with righteousness and justice,

And with goodness and mercy,

I will betroth you to me with faithfulness;

Then you shall be devoted to God.”(Hosea 2:21-22).

Shabbat Shalom