Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

Reading Hosea Anew

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Hosea: A Textual Commentary by Mayer I Gruber (Bloomsbury, 2017)

For 41 years, I taught and researched the biblical prophets, first at Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago and later at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva, Israel. I applied and developed the insights of my teachers at JTS—H. Louis Ginsberg, Robert Gordis, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, all of blessed memory, and, may he be distinguished for long life, Shalom M. Paul—into the intricacies of the biblical book of Hosea. The result is my new translation, introduction, and commentary.

Hosea consists of two distinct parts. Following Ginsberg, I identify the first three chapters with a prophet of the 9th century BCE. This prophet employs the metaphor of marriage to shed light upon Israel's relationship to God, using sociodrama to make his arguments more vivid. Complicated rhetorical devices convey powerful messages concerning both interpersonal relations and proper devotion to God.

Chapters 4–14 of Hosea, written in the 8th century BCE, demand a single standard of marital fidelity from both husbands and wives. In fact, the Mishnah cites Hosea in support of the single standard. This part of Hosea teaches us that the highest form of worship is ethical behavior. This message is especially relevant today, when all too many leaders in many spheres have been exposed as committing acts of moral turpitude.

The book of Hosea has inspired music, literature, and even phrases in daily use, providing, among other things, the name of the city Petah Tikva; the name of Israel's national airline, El Al; and the title of Maurice Samuel's treatise on anti-Semitism, *The Great Hatred*. I invite educated laypersons and students, scholars and clergy, to utilize my book to delve into the often forgotten but perennially vital messages of the book of Hosea.

TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Shemot 5778

שמות תשע"ח

Summoning a People

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

This week's commentary is part of a special series for 5778, in which Chancellor Eisen reflects on the main themes of each of the five books of the Torah and their meaning for contemporary Jewish life.

Two very different stories about who we are as Jews are forcefully presented in the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus. One of them—captured in the Hebrew title of the book, *Shemot* or "Names"—declares that we are the Children of Israel: a *nation*, a people, defined in the first instance and forever after by our ancestors and the paths they travelled. The other story teaches that we are disciples of Moses, the human protagonist of the book, and, like him, are *servants of the God* Who called to Moses out of the Burning Bush and bound us in covenant at Sinai.

The Torah wants its Jewish readers to make *both* of these stories their own, and for many centuries Jews complied with that directive. It was virtually impossible to be a Jew who did not practice the religion called Judaism, and no less difficult to hold to Jewish faith and religious practice without seeing oneself as a member of the Jewish people. Communal norms and sanctions militated against either move. Non-Jewish rulers and neighbors would not allow it in any case. One's fate as an individual depended on the rights and privileges available to Jews as a community. A Jew, with few exceptions over the course of nearly 2000 years, ate with Jews, studied with Jews, and married a Jew. Otherwise, he or she would eat and live pretty much alone.

The reality today is of course very different. After two centuries of uneven progress toward equality and acceptance, Jews in North America and several other places in the world find ourselves highly respected both as a community and as individuals when it comes to employment, friendship, and marriage. At the same time, traditional belief and practice in all their varieties have attenuated, moving from the center of many Jewish lives to the margins. Allegiance to the Jewish people has become problematic. Why should one identify as a "child of

Israel" just because one's parents did so? The matter is all the more complicated, the choice for Judaism more counter-intuitive, if one has a non-Jewish parent or marriage partner. Other Americans too are less inclined than in the past to maintain ethnic difference and religious affiliation. The Exodus story carries a universal message of hope and liberation to Jews and non-Jews alike—but less and less binds Jewish individuals to a people or a distinctive set of religious beliefs and practices.

The historian David Hollinger has lauded this "postethnic perspective." In his words, the new American sensibility "favors voluntary over involuntary affiliation, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial background." Post-ethnicity "resists the grounding of knowledge and moral values in blood and history." (*Postethnic America*, 3) Some contemporary Jews have argued that Judaism should adapt to this change, move to a new paradigm, see Judaism as an ethical or "wisdom tradition," and let go of "tribalism" and "exclusivity." I strongly disagree. Hollinger to my mind is reiterating the argument made for centuries on behalf of Christianity and against Judaism. As Rabbi David Wolpe succinctly put it, "Unlike Christianity, which is a belief based system (believe in Jesus and you are Christian), Judaism is familial. You are born Jewish. Like any family, you can join (through conversion), but you are expected to "feel" like family. You are implicated in the fate of all Jews."

Many Jews over the past 150 years have left Jewish belief and practice behind but retained a robust sense of connection to other Jews., Most religious Jews, for their part, have continued to regard "secular" Jews as members of the Jewish family, people toward whom they bear responsibilities above and beyond those to humanity in general. Liberals often make common cause on Jewish issues with conservatives. Israel and diaspora (with rare but highly visible exceptions) work together. A principle reason for that, I believe, is recognition of what Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (in his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*) called the "covenant of fate" that binds Jews to one another despite huge differences of belief and religious observance. We know that Hitler did not distinguish among the various sorts of Jews when he set about exterminating our people. All Jews everywhere are affected by the existence, character, and actions of the State of Israel. The lives of all American Jews are shaped by the political, cultural, and social profiles that define American Jewry.

Soloveitchik argued that Jews are bound by a second covenant as well: that of "destiny." To me this means that our collective past—including the historical

experience of the Jewish people over the centuries, and the values and worldview that have been passed down to us—influence the way we think about the future and inspire us to work to improve that future. The conviction that the world can and must be made better—more just, more compassionate—resounds loudly in our religious texts. It has motivated numerous modern Jews, whether personally religious or not, to become active in a host of political and social causes. The Prophets and Sages of old disagreed on what shape redemption of the world would take, but not on the belief that "messiah" would come and that what we do as Jews will somehow assist in that process.

Disagreement over this and every other element of Jewish theology was made possible by the fact that Jewish unity was never dependent on uniform belief. Jews were a people, not a church. Our collective identity was guaranteed—leaving ample room for diversity, imagination, and innovation. Give up ethnic attachments, render Judaism a group defined by belief in X or Y, and that freedom is lost. So is the ability of an individual to go in and out of faith without fearing that he or she will be any less welcome in the Jewish community, or even in shul, where—as the old joke wisely tells is—Jews have long debated whether God exists, broken off the argument to daven minhah, and then picked it up again afterwards. Judaism, thanks to Jewish peoplehood, is like one big Passover Seder: one sits around the table, matzah and bitter herbs on the plate before you, and for hours on end debates the meaning of those symbols and the significance of being there.

We will never know exactly what the Torah means when God tells Moses in this week's portion, "*eheyeh asher eheyeh*," (Exod. 3: 14; one possible translation reads, "I will be that which I will be. ") What does it mean that the Lord our God is "one"? What we do know is that, as Jews, we are heirs to this text. It addresses us. Having been freed from Egypt, we must work to free all who are enslaved. Our minds, hearts, souls, and might should be devoted to this task. The sense of responsibility we feel to all humanity grows directly out of our solidarity with other Jews.

It saddens me when I hear Jews say they "do not believe in God" and therefore see no point in being Jewish; it saddens me still more when Jewish thinkers propose that Jews in North America sunder connection to Israel, give up on particularism, eliminate all boundaries separating Jews from others, and redefine Judaism as a "wisdom tradition" available to all. Boundaries have long been crucial to Judaism—as has the imperative to cross them, make alliances, and better the lot of all humanity. *Am Yisrael hai*—"the people of Israel lives"—so as to do precisely that. May it continue to thrive.

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