דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

A Text That Mirrors Democracy

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The book of Numbers does not start with the word *bemidbar*, which occurs a little later in the first verse, but rather with *vayedabber* ("and he said"). In the standard Rabbinic Bible (Mikraot Gedolot), the first word of the book is introduced with an extraordinary flourish: The word *vayedabber* is printed in giant letters and enclosed in a decorative woodcut border in the shape of a parallelogram. This is surrounded by another rectangle consisting of two lines of Masoretic notations (traditional notes on the Biblical text) on each side; these notations are, in turn, surrounded by two biblical verses, one from Nehemiah and one from Daniel.

All this attests to the great democracy of our Jewish tradition of learning Torah: The word *vayeddaber* means "he spoke" and, in context, refers to God speaking. But the recipients of this divine word are not limited to a priestly hierarchy guarding to themselves the word of God. The text from Nehemiah on this page recalls the first time that the Torah was read in public when the Israelites returned to Eretz Yisrael from exile in Babylon, which marked a turning point in Israel's religious history. Now everyone, not only the priests, would have access to the word of God. As the Nehemiah verse (8:8) says: "[T]hey read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense: so [all the people] understood the reading."

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Our Sacred Partnerships

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The Midrash teaches us that God destroyed the world several times before creating our world (Bereishit Rabbah 3:7 and 9:2). Famously, after the flood, God establishes a covenant with Noah, Noah's sons, and all living things. God says: "I will maintain My covenant [*beriti*] with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11). When we read this verse in light of the midrash, we understand that God came very close to destroying the world again, but managed to enact a symbolic destruction, providing some people and some of the living creatures with a way to survive. This covenant is the vehicle for keeping humanity and all of creation connected with the divine even when rupture looms as a possibility.

In this week's Torah and haftarah portions, the specter of rupture looms repeatedly. First, we are reminded of the deaths of Aaron's two older sons, Nadav and Avihu. Though they had entered into a sacred pact to serve God in the intimacy of God's holiest places, they got it wrong—they "offered alien fire before the Lord" (Num. 3:4)—and died as a result. Their missing the mark led to their deaths and a transfer of the sacred role from the older to the younger sons. Similarly, our parashah then recounts the undoing of the sacred place held by the firstborn sons, chosen to be dedicated to God when they were saved from the tenth plague, *the* plague of the slaying of the firstborn. While God simply asserts that Moses should substitute the Levites for the firstborn sons (Num. 3:41), we must notice that, once again, a special relationship of service has been abrogated and a new group has replaced the original one.

Finally, in the haftarah, Hosea tells the story of Israel the unfaithful, through the vehicle of Gomer, his harlot-wife. While there is much in this haftarah to suggest that rupture is imminent, the haftarah ends with the words of a covenant renewed:

> And I will espouse you forever:
> I will espouse you with righteousness and justice,
> And with goodness and mercy (*hesed verahamim*),
> And I will espouse you with faithfulness (*be'emunah*);
> Then you shall be devoted (*veyada'at*) to the Lord. (Hos. 2:21–22)

Growing up, I always felt deeply confident that God's covenant with the Jewish people was inviolable. No matter what we did, God would always be connected to us, bound up in our fate. I have always found this promise tremendously reassuring. But when I read these texts, I start to feel an anxiety that the possibilities of rupture are real. The power of Hosea's words is precisely the knowledge that the binding of God and Israel cannot be taken for granted. We cannot read the verses I have quoted without having an awareness of the danger of that covenant being dissolved. Surely the naming of Gomer's son makes the reality of the severing of relationship very clear. "Then He said, 'Name him Lo-ammi [not my people]; for you are not My people and I will not be your [God]'" (Hos. 1:9).

Given that Hosea's story focuses on the relationship between God and Israel through the paradigm of marriage, the haftarah quite naturally leads me to think about the reality of covenant in terms of divorce. The Jewish wedding incorporates the possibility of the rupture of the marriage, by way of either divorce or death, through the vehicle of the *ketubbah*. The *ketubbah*'s original purpose was to protect the woman in case of divorce or death. One might ask: Why must the specter of separation enter into the joy of the wedding day? While that desire to flee from reality is understandable, I find it heartening that Judaism does not indulge us in this way. Even on the day when we commit ourselves to our beloved, we must acknowledge that the union cannot rest on the reassurance that the covenant is permanent. We must make provisions for proper treatment of one another even in worst-case scenarios. It is

only when we make room for those possibilities that we can make the difficult choices that will enable us to live in right relationship. Only when I know that divorce is real can I stop and listen to my partner when he or she is frustrated with the same fight we've had over and over. Only when I know that death is real can I make choices about how to live in the face of overwhelming limitations. A marriage that cannot envision that the marriage itself is a fragile arrangement is not a marriage that can be challenged to make difficult choices when crises emerge.

So I return to the verse from Hosea, "And I will espouse you forever." How does that espousal work? Judaism guides us in making this process concrete. Every day (except Shabbat), when Jews wrap tefillin (phylacteries), we say these verses as we wrap. The wrapping and reciting become a meditation about recommitting ourselves to the hard work of being espoused. I cannot be passive. I must act. So I affirm, "I will espouse you with righteousness and justice." There's a promise in there that my actions will lead to just desserts. So then I say, "And with goodness and mercy (*hesed verahamim*)." These attributes reassure me that even though I must focus on what I can do, the reality that follows my actions is tied up in God's boundless love and mercy, the boundless love and mercy of the other. Even when I err, rupture is not decidedly what follows. So then I say, "And I will espouse you with faithfulness." This faithfulness, *emunah*, draws on the idea of trust and steadfastness. When we live with a balance of all these attributes, then we can be faithfully bound to one another and to God. This sense of balance enables us to say "*veyadat et Adonai,*" which I would translate as "then you shall know God."

The sacred partnership with another human being echoes our sacred partnership with God. When we know another person in loving relationship, and respect that we cannot take that relationship for granted, then we become motivated to make the choices that keep the relationship vital. We must do the same in our relationship with the Divine.

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