



Parashat Va-yetze
Hosea 12:13-14:10
November 29, 2014 / 7 Kislev 5775

Hosea ben Beeri prophesied during the reigns of Kings Uzziah and Ahaz, King of Judah (769-698 BCE) and during the reign of Jeroboam 2, King of Israel (784-748 BCE.). Hosea was a contemporary of Amos and Isaiah and is one of the earliest classical prophets of ancient Israel. His was the first book in the series of prophetic books called "The Twelve" which are roughly arranged in chronological order beginning with Hosea in the mid-eighth century BCE. and concluding with Malachi in the mid-fifth Century BCE.

If you recall the story of Elijah contesting against the prophets of Baal in the first book of Kings and mentioned in a future haftarah, then you can begin to understand the world in which Hosea lived. Hosea prophesied in the north (Ephraim) and his entire book reflects an obsession with his adulterous wife who symbolically was supposed to represent either Israel or Ephraim. Let's just say, the Jewish people.

A number of rabbinic scholars have been challenged by this metaphor and the idea that a man-a prophet- could be in love with an adulterous woman; or, to be more current, an adulterous man. The standard explanation of this metaphor that has been transmitted to us through the centuries explains that God represents the husband and we the nation, the people, are the ones who strayed. We worshiped other gods and had relationships with others. But our loving husband, our true God, will eventually forgive us and take us back.

The haftarah is connected to the Torah reading because it begins with the phrase, "Then Jacob had to flee to the land of Aram." The Torah is concerned with Jacob's fleeing and arrival at the home of his uncle Laban, where he has to perform a series of services in order to obtain a wife, well actually two wives.

If one studies this haftarah from a literary perspective and attempts to understand its historical references, it is likely that its inner message will be lost.

I've known a number of couples who have taken back their wandering spouses and I've also known a great many that couldn't. I've spoken to men and women who tried, really tried to forgive and forget; but their pain grew and festered and tainted their relationship in a way that they never recovered. I've also known men and women who needed to have extra-marital relations in order to preserve their marriage. If Hosea's situation was real, he must have been powerfully smitten. If someone came to me with these concerns, I know I would have a lot of

questions to ask before I ventured an opinion. I might think he was naïve or lying to himself. I might think that they could work it out and a stronger relationship would result. Let's face it, relationships are complicated!

Perhaps on a national, peoplehood level this haftarah reflects the times when we were strong and faithful and the times when we weren't. Perhaps on a personal level the haftarah speaks to us differently.

Could Hosea's story challenge young adults to understand the importance of sharing and building relationships? Could it help young adults to overcome their desires to obtain the big apple? Could it help us? When Israel was young she strayed. The golden calf standing high on the mountain looked really good and she/we wanted it. All of it. When we, Israel, matured, then we the readers developed a firmer understanding of acquisition and loss, of fear and anxiety. Did we also develop an understanding that life is more than just about unconditional love?

Hosea challenges us to think about the nature of commitments we have made. Unconditional commitment seems to go against the message of most of the prophets. But perhaps Hosea challenges us to recognize that serious commitments constantly need to be re-examined if they are to retain value. Does Hosea challenge you to wrestle with your loving relationships? And if not, why?

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one written for the Unraveller for November 25, 2009 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership".