



God's Unfathomable Love

Rabbi Shai Held

God finds the Jewish people exasperating. Again and again in the pages of Tanakh, God expresses frustration, disappointment, and anger over Israel's persistent waywardness. God dreams of living among a people who will be faithful—who will serve only God; who will love God with everything they have and everything they are; who will construct a society in which justice and decency prevail; and who will establish a community in which the widow, the orphan, and the stranger are protected, cared for, and even loved. But God's dreams are thwarted at every turn: Israel repeatedly descends into idolatry and allows the powerful to take advantage of the weak. Reading the prophets, one frequently wonders whether the covenant between God and Israel will finally come to an ignominious end. Yet it never does: Time and again, just when it seems that Israel's relationship with God has been irreparably breached, new hope emerges. The message of these texts is clear: Despite the depth of God's anguish, God will not abandon the people. To understand why is to learn something fundamental—and potentially transformative—about the God Jews worship.



Leviticus 26 contains an extensive list of conditional blessings and curses. If (*im*) Israel obeys

Despite the depth of God's anguish,

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God, it will reap blessing and prosperity

(26:3-13), but if (*ve-im*) it disobeys, it will face

a cascade of calamities (26:14-39). If the

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people refuse to change their ways after one series of dreadful punishments, another even more horrific one will follow. Ultimately, unless Israel changes its ways, defeat and disease, natural disaster and wild beasts, invasion, famine, and pestilence will ravage both people and land. Desolation and devastation followed by long exile will ensue; Israel will be in danger of extinction. Whereas in the past God took the people out of Egypt and made them walk “upright” (*kommemiyut*, 26:13),¹ now they will “revert to their pre-Exodus state,” unable “to stand” (*ein lakhem tekumah*) before their enemies (26:37).²

But then, when all hope seems finally and definitively lost, a ray of light suddenly appears. “Despite Israel’s propensity for disobedience, and despite the repeated warnings that God will punish it severely, in ways that seem to erase every possible avenue for escape, God now announces that Israel’s future remains open, not closed, to new possibilities.”³ Those who survive will grow “heartsick” with remorse, “and they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, in that they acted treacherously against Me, and moreover, were hostile to Me.” In the wake of exile in the land of their enemies, “their uncircumcised heart⁴ shall humble itself, and they shall make restitution for their iniquity.” The people having turned back to God, God, too, will turn back to them: “Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land” (26:40-42).

¹ I have explored what it means to “stand upright” in the presence of God in “Standing Tall: Serving God with Dignity,” CJLI Parashat Be-ḥukotai 5774, available [here](#).

² Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (2004), p. 454.

³ Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (2003), p. 201.

⁴ On circumcision of the heart, cf. what I have written in “Will and Grace, Or: Who Will Circumcise Our Hearts?” CJLI Parashat Eikev 5774, available [here](#).

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Leviticus as a whole is profoundly concerned with the sacrificial system—which makes it all the more striking that here, sacrifices are not mentioned at all; a humbled heart, genuine confession, and restitution for sin are enough.⁵

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On one level, of course, sacrifice could not coherently be called for in these circumstances; the people are, after all, in exile. Nevertheless, as Jacob Milgrom points out, “the importance of the concession should not be underestimated.” The text’s focus on confession rather than sacrifice “approximates, and perhaps influences, the prophetic doctrine of repentance, which not only suspends the sacrificial requirement, but eliminates it entirely.”⁶ The people do still need to pay their debt to God through the suffering they endure, but central to the passage is the power of divine mercy.⁷

As the passage continues, God affirms that despite their misdeeds, God will not repudiate the people or abandon God’s covenant with them: “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or loathe them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them; for I the Lord am their God. I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their

⁵ Cf. Leviticus 5:5 and 16:21, where confession and sacrifice seem to be inextricably linked.

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27* (2001), p. 2330. Samuel Balentine makes the important observation that Leviticus’ “endorsement of repentance for sin provides an important corrective to a long-standing caricature of the respective legacies of Israel’s priests and prophets. To be sure, the prophets were often critical of the abuses in Israel’s sacrificial system and of the priests who administered it. [This text], however, invites the consideration that Israel’s prophets came to their distinctive summons to repentance *as a result of* their immersion in the very ritual system they felt compelled not only to critique but also to preserve.” Balentine, *Leviticus*, p. 202.

⁷ Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-37*, p. 2337.

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God: I, the Lord” (26:44-45). The Israelites “rejected” (*ma’asu*) God’s rules (26:43), but God will refuse to “reject” them;⁸ God “loathes” Israel’s behavior (26:30), but God does not “loathe” Israel (26:44).⁹ The lesson here, Bible scholar Yohanan Muffs explains, is as powerful as it is simple: “The rejection of Israel for defection, although demanded by logic, is precluded by the demands of divine love.”¹⁰

In reading this passage, some scholars focus almost exclusively on God’s startling mercy: Even though God has every reason to give up on Israel, God chooses not to do so. And yet, although God’s love and mercy do lie at the heart of our passage, we should not overstate the point. God’s commitment does indeed mean that God will not destroy the people, but the people are charged to mend their ways. They remain, always, “responsible for their actions. The blend of divine grace and human responsibility is apparent. This is a both/and situation precisely because it is viewed in relational terms. Both parties must respond and act.”¹¹ God’s turn to Israel comes in tandem with—and arguably in response to—Israel’s turn to God.

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For all the centrality of love and mercy in our passage, Bible scholar Baruch Levine detects something else at play too. Recall God’s words:

⁸ Cf. Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (2014), p. 323.

⁹ Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, p. 2337.

¹⁰ Yohanan Muffs, “Covenant Traditions in Deuteronomy,” in *Readings in the History of Biblical Thought, vol. 3: Lectures at the Jewish Theological Seminary* (1965), pp. 1-9; passage cited is on p. 5. Muffs continues: “Although God’s rejection of Israel is a logical possibility for... Leviticus 26, it is not a psychological reality: God loves his people too much to be logical.”

¹¹ Frank H. Gorman, Jr. *Leviticus: Divine Presence and Community* (1997), p.147.



“I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the Lord.” Noting that the text mentions—seemingly superfluously—that God liberated the Israelites “in the sight of the nations,” Levine explains that the nations “witnessed the covenant, so to speak. For this reason, to allow Israel to perish, though the punishment be deserved, would detract from God’s renown. Hence, if Israel shows remorse and mends its ways, God will not cause the entire people to perish.”¹² If we accept Levine’s interpretation, then it would seem that God’s willingness to forgive Israel stems both from God’s love and mercy, on the one hand, and from God’s self-interested concern with God’s reputation, on the other.¹³

The God of Hosea, too, is infuriated by Israel’s incessant unfaithfulness yet is willing—time and again, against all odds—to

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reconcile with God’s recalcitrant people. In contrast to Leviticus, in Hosea’s case what keeps God faithful to Israel is unambiguous: God loves Israel and simply cannot abandon them. In one of the most beautiful chapters in Tanakh, Hosea presents God as a parent¹⁴ filled with love for his or her children: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called

¹² Levine, *Leviticus*, p. 192. Cf. Isaiah 52:10 and Ezekiel 20:9,14.

¹³ For more on the role of self-interest in the biblical portrayal of God’s relationship with Israel, cf. what I have written in Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (2013), p. 236, n13; and cf. Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Ultimate Aim of Israel’s Restoration in Ezekiel,” in Chaim Cohen, et al, eds., *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (2008), pp. 305-319.

¹⁴ Some scholars see chapter 11 as describing God as the “Divine Father.” Cf., e.g., James Luther Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (1969), pp. 150ff. They may be right, but it is striking that many of the images of parenting evoked in the chapter are ones traditionally associated with the mother. God’s maternal role in this chapter is emphasized, for example, by Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1 (2000), pp.112-116. Cf. also Daniel Simundson, *Hosea-Joel-Amos-Obadiah-Jonah-Micah* (2005), p. 85.

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[him?] My son" (Hosea 11:1). The verse conveys the heart of Hosea's teaching—that God's relationship with Israel has always been animated first and foremost by love. But it also

subtly adds two crucial dimensions to that teaching. First, Hosea teaches that God loves Israel before God asks or demands anything of them. Second, Hosea does not attribute God's love to this attribute or that. God's love for Israel is a function of divine grace rather than human merit. In other words, Israel does not *earn* God's love; it simply receives it as a gift from God.¹⁵

Hosea poignantly evokes the tender care God took of God's beloved child. "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, and took them into My arms... I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks;¹⁶ I bent down to them and fed them" (11:3-4). Yet despite God's nurturing love, the people turn away, seduced by Baal and the worship of idols. One senses that God wants to walk away, but so deep is God's love that God cannot tolerate complete rupture with God's child. The immense pathos of the chapter lies, in part, in the audacious insistence that God *will not* give up on God's people because given the intensity of God's love, God simply *cannot* do so. The prophet daringly portrays God's internal struggles: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim?"

¹⁵ Daniel Simundson interprets Hosea similarly: "Love comes first. Before anything else happens, God loves Israel. No reasons are given why God should feel that way about Israel. It is simply stated as a fact. Everything else flows from that basic statement of feeling." Daniel J. Simundson, *Hosea-Joel-Amos-Obadiah-Jonah-Micah*, p. 84. Cf. Deuteronomy 7:6-8, and cf. what I have written in Shai Held, "A Bolt from the Blue," in *Shma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, available here: <http://shma.com/2015/02/a-bolt-from-the-blue/>.

¹⁶ Taking the Masoretic "Ol," seemingly meaning "yoke," as "ul," meaning infant. So NIV and NRSV. JPS renders: "I seemed to them as one who imposed a yoke upon their jaws."

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How surrender you, O Israel? How can I make
you like Admah, render you like Zevoim?"

*God's love always has the final
word.*

(11:8) (Admah and Zevoim were destroyed with

the neighboring cities Sodom and Gomorrah¹⁷). The implicit answer to this fourfold chain of rhetorical questions—"How can I?"—is that God cannot. Israel's betrayal and disloyalty notwithstanding, God's love always has the final word: "I have had a change of heart, My compassion grows warm. I will not act on My wrath, will not turn to destroy Ephraim" (11:8-9).

What stops God from acting on God's anger? "For I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst" (11:9). As any reader of Hosea can attest, "anthropomorphism is Hosea's stock-in-trade." Yet Hosea wants to be clear that metaphors for God are precisely that—metaphors and not "essential definitions."¹⁸ God is *like* a human parent, but God is not, in fact, a human parent. God's declaration that "I am God, not man" is one of the most arresting images in Tanakh: What makes God God and not a mere human being? The fact that unlike a human parent, God cannot ever truly give up on God's child. "Mere mortals might not be so generous. Their response to betrayal and deep hurt may be more vindictive, more punitive, with the dissolution of whatever vestige of the damaged relationship still remained. Even good parents... sometimes give up on their children."¹⁹ But despite all that has happened, Hosea insists, God remains "the Holy One in your midst." In other words, the greatness of God consists in the unfathomable depths of divine love and forgiveness. This is

¹⁷ Cf. Genesis 10:19; 14:2, 8; and Deuteronomy 29:22.

¹⁸ Mays, *Hosea*, pp. 151, 157.

¹⁹ Simundson, *Hosea-Joel-Amos-Obadiah-Jonah-Micah*, pp. 87-88

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how God explains God’s own “Godness”: God “defines [God’s] otherness, [God’s] divine uniqueness, not in terms of power, wisdom, or sovereignty, but in terms of love—constant, sure, steadfast.”²⁰

In the book of Numbers, the prophet Balaam announces that “God is not a man”—but God’s uniqueness lies in the fact that God is not “capricious” (Numbers 23:19). In other words, God’s “Godness” is evidenced by the fact that God will not change God’s mind. Hosea offers a radical—and indeed breathtaking—alternative: God’s “Godness” is evidenced by the fact that God’s love is so deep that God will in fact change God’s mind and pull back from the judgment God had planned to execute. What is adumbrated in Leviticus is fully fleshed out in Hosea: God’s greatness consists, ultimately, not in God’s inscrutability or in God’s power, but rather in God’s love and mercy. Hosea’s point is that God’s love is vast beyond measure. It behooves us to ask: What kind of communities, and what kind of world, would we build if we truly took that to heart?

Shabbat shalom.

See Shai Held’s other *divrei Torah* on parashat Behar and Beḥukotai:

- [Behar 5774](#) – [Another World to Live In: The Meaning of Shabbat](#)
- [Behukotai 5774](#) – [Standing Tall: Serving God With Dignity](#)

²⁰ David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary* (1989), p. 205.

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