



## Hearing the Whisper: God and the Limits of Language

Rabbi Shai Held

*In memoriam*

Howard Forster (1947-2015)

Deuteronomy 32, “the Song of Moses,” abounds with metaphors for God. In the span of just forty-three verses, God is referred to as a rock, a warrior, an eagle, a father, a mother, a provider, an executioner, and a healer.<sup>1</sup> In subtle but powerful ways, these metaphors point both to God’s uniqueness and to God’s unknowability.



The core theological metaphor of our chapter is the image of God as Rock: “The Rock, His work is perfect, and all his ways are just; a faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is

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He” (Deuteronomy 32:4).<sup>2</sup> No fewer than seven times,<sup>3</sup> the text invokes the image of God as Rock to suggest that God is “utterly

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Juliana Claassens, “‘I Kill and I Give Life’: Contrasting Depictions for God in Deuteronomy 32,” *Old Testament Essays* 18 (2005), pp. 35-46, esp. p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Nelson avers that in introducing the image of God as Rock, v. 4 gives voice to “the theological axiom that governs [the] poem.” Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (2002), p. 370. For an extended analysis of the image of God as Rock in our chapter, and in Tanakh as a whole, cf. Michael P. Knowles, “‘The Rock, His Work is Perfect’: Unusual Imagery for God in Deuteronomy XXXII,” *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1989), pp. 307-322.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 32:4,15,18,30, 31 (two times), 37.



dependable, empty of any wrongdoing, the very foundation of all integrity and justice”<sup>4</sup>; the description of God as Rock evokes “the strength, refuge, and stability” that God provides.<sup>5</sup>

God is dependable, Deuteronomy insists, but Israel is decidedly not; God is faithful, but Israel is faithless. “His unworthy children have dealt falsely with Him, a perverse and crooked generation” (32:5).

Although God is a rock, the support God provides is not unconditional: When the people go astray, they face grave consequences: “You neglected the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. The Lord saw and was vexed, and spurned His sons and daughters... I will heap disasters upon them” (32:18-19, 23). There is thus a crucial “ironic twist” to the way our text uses the metaphor of God as Rock. “Elsewhere in [Tanakh] and in the ancient Near Eastern use of the image, God as the Rock is usually portrayed as a strong refuge and fortress against disaster for God’s people. But here... the Rock no longer only

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (2003), p. 298.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (1994), p. 140. Michael Knowles observes that the metaphor of God as rock may “seem at first sight to convey [a] static image, the purpose of which is to delineate the divine identity: God as rock, fortress, stronghold and refuge. But the question of divine identity,” Knowles remind us, “cannot be divorced from divine activity. [God] is not one in whom refuge is simply to be sought, [God] is a ‘rock’ who both offers and effects deliverance.” Cf., for example, Psalm 19:15, where God is at once “my Rock and my Redeemer.” Knowles, “The Rock, His Work is Perfect,” p. 309. In contrast to many interpreters, Knowles argues that the emphasis of Deuteronomy 32 is on the Divine Rock’s “moral character and righteousness” rather than God’s status as fortress or refuge. He insists that “if any elements of the rock/refuge motif are present here, they are intended ironically, for [God] promises to deal with [God’s] people in such a way that they will require a refuge (vv. 23ff)” (313). Knowles’ understanding of God as Rock could easily buttress Dennis Olson’s interpretation, cited below,



shelters but also threatens Israel with judgment. Israel has sought refuge in other 'rocks,'<sup>6</sup> other gods, and so experienced the judgment of Israel's one true Rock, [God]."<sup>7</sup>

Israel's God is a Rock, in other words, but Israel may not take its Rock for granted. God will stand with Israel only when Israel's behavior merits it.

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Something similar is at play in another of the key images found in our chapter, God as a warrior. When Israel was "weak and powerless," Dennis Olson points out, "God cared for them in the wilderness and blessed them with the gifts of the promised land (32:10-14)." But when Israel then "spurns the Rock of its salvation" (32:15), God promises to go to war against Israel, "heaping disasters upon them, spending [God's] arrows<sup>8</sup> against them" (32:23). God sends another nation as an "agent of God's wrath," but this nation misunderstands what has taken place. Convinced that they have achieved victory all on their own, Israel's enemies declare: "Our own hand is triumphant; it is not the Lord who did this" (32:27). As a result, God promises, "the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly" (32:35). Olson argues that in our chapter God's "pattern of intervention" is "clear and consistent": "On the one hand, when God's people are weak and powerless, God turns to them with compassion and fights on their behalf against those who oppress. On the other hand, when God's people

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 32:37.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> God's terrifying arrows, it seems, are "wasting famine," "ravaging plague," "deadly pestilence," "the teeth of beasts," and "the venom of things crawling in the dust" (32:24).



or any people become powerful, self-assertive, and forget their dependence on God, then the divine warrior fights against them.”<sup>9</sup> When Israel forgets God, God sends its enemies to exact a price; when those enemies in turn forget God, they too suffer greatly.

***God is dependable, but God is not a patron.***

Olson strikingly contrasts the God presented here with other ancient Near Eastern depictions of gods. “The typical Near Eastern

warrior god fought for and protected the people or nation to whom the warrior god was attached. But the God of [Deuteronomy 32] was not always on Israel’s side. [God] did defend and fight *for* Israel and against its enemies. But [God] was also free to fight *against* Israel when the people... rebelled and forgot the God who gave them birth.” In other words, the image of God as warrior “affirms [God’s] freedom to discipline as well as protect Israel.”<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to overstate the significance of this point: God is dependable, but God is not a patron.<sup>11</sup> Divine blessings are conditional on Israel’s fidelity and faithfulness. If Israel becomes arrogant and self-assertive, then, like other nations, it will pay a hefty price.<sup>12</sup>

God will not be domesticated: God loves Israel, but God is Judge as well as Support. But through counter-intuitive means, our chapter also makes another, parallel point: God cannot be fully understood.

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<sup>9</sup> Olson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 142, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Olson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. what I have written about the theology of the prophet Amos in “A Bolt from the Blue, Or: When God Falls in Love,” CJLI Parashat Devarim 5775, available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Compare Deuteronomy 8:17 and 32:27.



As we've seen, Deuteronomy 32 bombards the reader with a seemingly endless array of theological metaphors. In order to understand the effect these images have upon the reader, it's important to consider how metaphors function in general. "Most simply," Sallie McFague writes, "a metaphor is seeing one thing *as* something else, pretending 'this' is 'that' because we do not know how to think or talk about 'this,' so we use 'that' as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known."<sup>13</sup> In the religious sphere, we talk about God as parent or spouse at least in part because we would not otherwise know how to think or talk about God. Speaking of God in these ways makes the ultimately unfamiliar seem at least somewhat more familiar and accessible.

But metaphors cannot be taken (too) literally.

***God is a king, but God is also not a king.***

As McFague astutely observes, "metaphorical statements... always contain the whisper, 'it is

*and it is not.*"<sup>14</sup> According to Jewish theology, God is a father—but God is also *not* a father; God is a king, but God is also *not* a king. God is other and therefore ultimately unknowable. Yet "an ever-present danger," the Christian theologian Vincent Brümmer warns, "is that we shall fail to hear th[e] whisper."<sup>15</sup> We become attached to this metaphor or that, and begin to imagine—consciously or not—that we now know who or what God really is. One of the tasks

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<sup>13</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> McFague. *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology*, p. 8.



of theology, I'd suggest, is to amplify that all-important whisper: No matter how precious a particular image of God is to us, theology prods us to remember: and God is not.<sup>16</sup>

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How does theology accomplish this task? The most obvious way is through explicit negation.

Thus, for example, the prophet Hosea hears

God declare: "For I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hosea 11:9). Although both God and human beings love their children, God's love is uniquely boundless and expansive.<sup>17</sup> The prophet Samuel explains to King Saul that "the Glory of Israel does not deceive or change His mind, for He is not human that He should change His mind" (1 Samuel 15:29); and the prophet Isaiah hears God announce: "For My thoughts<sup>18</sup> are not your thoughts, nor are My ways your ways... As the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My thoughts above your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). God's intentions are different from human intentions, according to Isaiah, at least in part because God's plans are never thwarted (55:10-11). Philosophers are especially adept at reminding believers that the language we use for God is always inadequate and sometimes downright misleading. To take the metaphors we use for God (too) literally is to slide down the path to idolatry.

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<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, I hope, this is not theology's only task—or even its primary one. Negative theologies of various kinds depend on standing in dialectical relation to more positive theological statements. Without such a counter-weight, negative theology descends into incoherence and irrelevance.

<sup>17</sup> I have explored the stunning implications of this verse in "God's Unfathomable Love," CJLI Parashat Behar-Behukotai 5775, available [here](#).

<sup>18</sup> Or, perhaps better: "plans."



But our chapter takes a very different tack in pointing to the limits of our metaphors: Instead of negating images for God, our chapter actively multiplies them. How does a proliferation of images draw attention to their limits? Think for a moment about two of Judaism's most fundamental ways of imaging God. "You are children of the Lord your God," says Deuteronomy (14:1), powerfully reminding us that God is our Parent; "I will be your God and you will be My people," says Leviticus (26:12), explicitly invoking a marriage formula to describe God's covenant with Israel. Not only is God our Parent, in other words, God is also our Spouse. Taken on its own, each metaphor gives voice to critical aspects of our relationship with God. But God obviously cannot be both Parent and Spouse at the same time—and the pairing of these two images, I'd suggest, has the vital effect of reminding us that God is not literally either.

Now consider our chapter's employment of a range of metaphors "aris[ing] from the realms of nature, families, and warfare."<sup>19</sup> Bible scholar Juliana Claassens explains that "this

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multitude of images is a great example of the biblical text's commitment to employ a wide variety of metaphors, male and female, animate and inanimate, to describe God, expressing the... conviction that no one image could capture or exhaust the meaning of God."<sup>20</sup>

In reprimanding Israel for its treachery and unfaithfulness, Deuteronomy 32 reminds the people that God is their father: "Is not He the Father who created you, fashioned you and

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<sup>19</sup> Olson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 140.

<sup>20</sup> Claassens, "I Kill and I Give Life," p. 35.



established you?” (32:6). Yet a dozen verses later, the text suggests that God is also Mother: “You neglected the Rock that begot you, forgot the God who gave you birth (32:18). On one level, of course, the notion that God is simultaneously Father and Mother suggests that “Israel owes its existence *totally* to God, its father *and* mother.”<sup>21</sup> But at another level, the combination of these two metaphors complicates any attempt to understand God as literally gendered. As Olson notes, in our chapter “male and female metaphors are used because they illuminate particular characteristics of God. [But crucially,] the interchange of... gender-specific metaphors... suggests [that] no one image captures or exhausts the understanding of God.”<sup>22</sup> Just as God is not literally Spouse or Parent, God is not literally male or female. God always escapes our attempts to categorize—and thus limit—God.

***A God we know too well is not God at all, but an idol, a figment of our own imagination.***

To realize that God cannot be fully and finally understood is, again, to resist the domestication of God. A God we know too well, a God we can, as it were, take out and look at—such a

God is not God at all, but an idol, a figment of our own imagination. The Song of Moses reminds us that God’s love for Israel notwithstanding, God is always also a judge; and it subtly prods us to recall that God is Holy, transcendent, and therefore far beyond all of the images and metaphors we regularly employ in talking to God, and about God.

Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (1996), p. 307.

<sup>22</sup> Olson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 141.



See Shai Held's other *divrei Torah* on parashat Ha'azinu:

- [5774 – "I May Not Get There With You": The Death of Moses and the Meaning of Covenantal Living](#)

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