

Divine love in Hosea 11

Human parents, even good ones, have limits. God does not.

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(Illustration by Brian Rea)

At its heart, Judaism is about love. If you find that claim surprising, you're not alone. Many Christians and Jews—and, sadly, even some of my rabbinical students—view Christianity as a religion of love and grace while viewing Judaism as a religion merely of law and justice. We assume that Judaism values rituals and actions more than beliefs and emotions, and we're taught that the God of the Hebrew Bible is angry and vindictive while the God of the New Testament is loving and forgiving. These ideas are the legacies of anti-Judaism, propagated by a long-standing stream of Christian thought that David Nirenberg and Leonardo Capezone describe as “powerful theological discourse about the supersession of a loveless Judaism by a loving Christianity.”

This is all hopelessly misguided. Judaism is a religion of love and law, of action and emotion. Jewish liturgy reminds us daily that Jewish law is itself a manifestation of divine love, not a contrast or alternative to it. Jewish texts push us to love both more deeply and more widely, to want our neighbors to flourish, to love the stranger, to see the world with eyes of love and generosity of spirit. The God of Judaism is a God whose love is unfathomably vast, vaster and greater than anything human beings can imagine, let alone embody. What makes God worthy of worship is the depth, steadfastness, and extent of God's love.

Nothing makes this clearer than Hosea 11. In one of the most exquisite chapters in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet imagines God struggling with how to respond to a recalcitrant people. So exasperated and hurt is God by the people's constant backsliding that God considers walking away from them altogether. But Hosea discovers that God just can't do that.

The premise of the chapter is simple: God loves Israel. Everything that God feels, thinks, and says stems from that basic commitment. “When Israel was a child,” God recalls, “I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (11:1). God has loved Israel, the prophet says, since it was a small, helpless child. Nothing about Israel's character is offered as an explanation or justification of God's love. The people have not done anything to earn God's love; God's love is grace. God's love comes first, before any divine command or expectation.

But the people have repeatedly turned their back on God. Hosea portrays God as a loving parent who is distraught over the stubborn waywardness of her children; here, God appears to struggle with sadness rather than anger. The more God calls

her people, the more they turn away (11:2). With great tenderness, God recalls times when Israel was a small child and God provided nurture and succor:

It was I who taught Ephraim [i.e., the people of the northern kingdom of Israel] to walk, I took them up in 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. I bent down to them and fed them. (11:3-4)

But things have since turned sour. Time and again Israel has betrayed and rejected God. God is tempted to withdraw from the relationship and “return to God’s place” (5:15), but somehow God cannot bring Godself to do that. So deep is God’s love for God’s children that God will not let their relationship come to an end.

The prophet daringly portrays God as internally tormented: “How can I give up on you, O Ephraim? How surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah, render you like Zeboiim?” (11:8). Admah and Zeboiim were cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah; if you’ve never heard of them, that may be the point: God cannot tolerate the thought of a world without Israel. Implicit within all of God’s “How can I?” questions is an answer: God can’t.

Sure enough, we soon hear—three times—that God will not act on God’s anger and frustration any further (11:9). As Bible scholar Marvin Sweeney explains, God “gives in to the emotional bonds of mother and child, and reverts to the traditional promise of protection for Israel.” Although the people will be exiled for their sins (11:5-7), God will not completely and permanently reject them. Israel’s disloyalty notwithstanding, God’s love 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).

The Hebrew phrase *nehepakḥ alai libi* (“I have had a change of heart”) could perhaps be more literally rendered as “My heart is overturned within me.” Those who know Hebrew might recall that in Deuteronomy 29:22, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is described using the same Hebrew root *h-p-kh* (*mahapeikhat Sedom va-Amora*, literally “the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah”). In that case, the cities were themselves overturned; now, Israel will not be overturned because God’s heart has been (instead).

What stops God from acting on God's anger? "For I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hosea 11:9). It may seem odd to find Hosea, of all people, insisting on God's radical otherness. After all, as any reader of Hosea can attest, "anthropomorphism is Hosea's stock-in-trade" (to use the memorable words of commentator James Luther Mays). Hosea's God is nothing if not personal.

Yet Hosea wants to be clear that metaphors for God are precisely that—metaphors. The way metaphors work is to tell us that *x* is *y*, of course. But as Sallie McFague reminds us, they also "contain the whisper, 'it is *and it is not*.'" God is *like* a human parent (11:1-4), but God is not, in fact, a human parent (11:9).

Human parents, even good human parents, have limits. Sometimes a child grows so wild, so wayward, that the parents feel they have no choice but to sever ties, at least for a time. God does not. Unlike human parents, says Hosea, God will never truly give up on God's child. What makes God so different from us, what makes God God, is that God's love is inexhaustible.

Think about how radical this is. Imagine hearing someone say that God loves us like a mother loves her children. Now imagine that they add, "But keep in mind, God is *like* a person but God is not *actually* a person." You might be tempted to think, "Okay, since God is God and not a person, then God doesn't really love us. After all, that's anthropomorphism. People love, but God doesn't. To say that God loves is just a figure of speech."

But Hosea argues precisely the opposite: the fact that God is God and not a person in fact means that God can love in a much deeper and more enduring way than we can even begin to fathom, let alone embody ourselves. We are reminded that God is God not so that we remember that God doesn't really love us, but on the contrary so that we understand that God's love for us far outstrips anything we could possibly imagine.

If we accept the Bible's claim that God loves in ways that are deeper and more enduring than the ways we do, then to talk about both divine love and human love is not necessarily to project human emotions onto God. On the contrary, it may be a way of saying that our love is a (pale) imitation of God's much more powerful love. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in *The Prophets*, "The idea of the divine pathos combining absolute selflessness with supreme concern for the poor and the exploited can hardly be regarded as the attribution of human characteristics [to

God]. Where is the man who is endowed with such characteristics?”

In a similar vein, to talk about a God who loves the Jewish people and all of humanity, a God who loves every human being on the face of the earth and who has especial love for the poor and downtrodden, is emphatically not to describe God in human terms—for no human being has ever, or could ever, wholly embody that kind of love. To borrow another term from Heschel, to talk about God’s love is not anthropomorphism; on the contrary, human love is *theomorphic*. We attribute to human beings something that belongs most fundamentally and fully to God.

We are created in the image of a God of immeasurable love. At its best, Jewish theology stretches beyond conventional religious thinking; it refuses to domesticate God or to cut God down to our own size. It imagines God’s love and mercy as endlessly vast, extending beyond any boundaries that we might be inclined to set for them. God loves those near to us and those far from us; God loves even those whom we’re convinced that we have good reason to hate. God’s love is not subject to human control or limitation.

Yet the God we worship is a power-sharing God. God restrains Godself and refrains from using all of God’s power. God delegates to us, appointing us as vice-regents, charging us with “tilling and tending” the earth (Gen. 2:15), bidding us to establish justice (Gen. 9:6). God wants partners: partners in love and partners in world-building.

A God who loves and grants freedom is, unavoidably, a vulnerable God. To love is to take the risk of being hurt and disappointed. Like any parent, God takes risks; there are no guarantees as to how our children will turn out.

There is both beauty and tragedy in this picture. God knows full well the good and the bad of which we are capable, and God chooses to believe in us. There are moments when God’s faith is richly rewarded, and there are moments when God’s faith in us seems like a divine delusion. Looking down on human life, sometimes the heavens shriek with disappointment. And yet divine love is *hesed*, one of the central meanings of which is “steadfast love.” God’s love is stubborn, persistent, and faithful.

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