

Whitewater Rafting, God and Metaphor

As Corey taught us earlier, in the Haftarah for this Shabbat, the prophet Hosea presents an extended metaphor in which God is the husband and the people of Israel are the unfaithful wife. The Hosea text is uncomfortable reading. Filled with sexual overtones, it forces us to say words like “whoring,” and “breasts” right in the sanctuary. As uneasy as that might make some people, I want to suggest that there is something more disturbing about the portion. Hosea portrays a very lopsided relationship between God and the people of Israel that is more unseemly, even unacceptable, in light of modern theological sensibilities. In the Hosea metaphor, God is clearly the master and the people of Israel the lowly servant. According to the URJ Torah commentary, it is a classic one-up, one down; male superior, woman inferior relationship. The commentary points out that we need to view this metaphor as a reflection of its time, a classical understanding of an all-powerful God in a relationship with a weak and dependent people. But most modern, liberal Jews, who see male and female relationships as more equal, tend to view the relationship between God and the people of Israel as more reciprocal as well. The URJ commentary states the common, contemporary view this way: “God needs us to perfect the world, even as we need God to make our lives more whole and meaningful.” The relationship is more of a partnership. So, tonight I want to share my own extended metaphor of the human-God relationship—one that I hope is more relevant for today’s world. This metaphor grew out of a frightening experience I had back in December while on a family vacation in Ecuador. In the end, the experience on the river will serve as support for a reciprocal view of the God-human relationship that fits better with modern, liberal religious sensibilities. One of the promised highlights of our vacation was a whitewater rafting trip on the Rio Blanco. There were thirteen people in two large rafts, including two river guides. One of the guides was a very experienced and competent leader who had done this trip hundreds of times. That guide, whose name was Miguel, will serve as the God figure in this extended metaphor. The other people on the trip and how they viewed Miguel will serve as examples of various attitudes toward or beliefs about God. Please note that I know nothing about the actual God concepts of the others on this trip, so using their actions and attitudes on the trip will serve strictly to illustrate the metaphor. From the beginning I had stated that this was one part of the Ecuador trip in which I would not partake, but I went with the group on the long bus ride to the river to see a part of Ecuador I did not want to miss, thinking I would loll about on the beach all day and read a book while the others had their adventure. But when we got there and I listened to the safety talk, Miguel exuded such confidence and was so reassuring about the rafting experience that I decided to go. Plus, he let me sit right in front of him and told me that he would tell me to drop inside the raft when big rapids were coming. He would do that for the 10 year old next to me as well. I took the leap and decided to go along. Over the first hour of the trip as we negotiated several rapids, with Miguel behind me, I began to actually enjoy myself. Miguel became like a classic “god” to me. I thought of him as the one who was going to protect me, take care of me, and make sure that nothing bad happened to me, my ten-year old counterpart, or any of us for that matter. Even though Miguel had clearly described possible worst-case scenarios during the safety talk, with Miguel in charge, I felt that if we followed his guidance, the safety measures would be unnecessary. He obviously had total control of the situation and was going to get us from point “a” to point “b” without incident. When I thought about Miguel, I even recited in my head a phrase from the book of Exodus, the Song of the Sea: “Zeh Eili v’anveihu—This is my God and I will exalt him.” As I said before, the attitudes of the individuals on this trip ought not be confused with God concepts. Although this is not my view of how God relates to the world, in that moment, I had a clear understanding of the classical view. The reactions of other people on the trip can be seen as analogous to other, very different, God-concepts. The other 7 people that I was traveling with were all very confident in their own abilities and felt competent whitewater rafting without much help from the guide. These folks really did not have much need for Miguel’s skills. They did not deny the value of his presence and his leadership on the trip but, in contrast to me, they did not see him as having a significant role in their personal rafting experience. I am going to lump all of these folks together in a category representing people who feel they really do not need an active God-figure in their lives. Many, many of the people I encounter in my work fall into this category. They do not deny the existence of God. They may see God as necessary to the functioning of the Universe. They may even enjoy religious rituals and attend services regularly. They may participate vigorously in discussions about God and Torah. Still, God does not play a role in their personal lives and experiences. These folks are self-reliant and may only find God to be relevant to them personally when grief or trauma encroaches on their world. The other people on the rafting trip, in addition to our group of eight and the two guides, were two women who were with their ten year-old boys. The two women seemed to share a third view of the rafting experience that, for me, represents a third God-concept. These women apparently did not want their lives circumscribed by conventions or rules. The literature about the trip clearly said that it was not recommended for children younger than 16. Yet they brought along their 10 year olds. One of them even told me (after we were done and getting back on the bus) that she knew someone who took their seven year old on whitewater rafting trip, and the child fell out of the raft and drowned. But, she concluded, she could not live her life being scared, so she brought her child on this trip to show she was not afraid. The mother of the child who sat with me, right in front of Miguel, had a similar attitude. When Miguel would tell the boy to drop into the center of the raft for his safety, she would complain: “Why does he have to go inside? Can’t he stay up on top more?” For these two moms, Miguel’s rules and advice were unnecessary and in the way of what they wanted to do. These women represent a theology that is dismissive of anything that a God might offer. They are like those who completely reject God and religion in general as placing too many limits or restrictions on life. They see their own human reason and intellect as paramount, no matter how misguided, and anything that contradicts that is irrelevant. Well, by now I’m sure you can guess what happened on our rafting trip. We came to an unexpected and unforeseen rapid that swallowed up the raft I was in, the one that Miguel, “my God,” was guiding. The entire raft capsized, and we all went under, including Miguel. Although we had all been told what to do in the event that we “went swimming,” as it had been euphemistically described, none of the techniques proved useful when the guide was in the water with us and the raft rushing down the river on its own, out of reach. I thought that I might find my end in that river. For the person totally dependent on God for survival, when that God is not available, there’s a serious problem. The person who looks to a personal God to protect and intervene and save when life as we know it is in peril is lost when this happens and his/her theology becomes useless. Surely, Miguel knew that he was powerless over the river to a certain degree. But he knew something else important as well: that each of us who were at the mercy of that river could do some thing to save ourselves without his help. He would not abandon us, but he would not help us if he saw that we could help ourselves. He had bigger issues to attend to. After going under and swallowing a lot of water, at least 3 or 4 times, seeing no one else around me and nothing except boulders and more rapids in my path, I finally saw Miguel near me and reached out for him. He looked at me and then, to my dismay, ignored me, while his eyes scanned the entire scene for information that was more important than the fact that I wanted to cling on to him. He knew something I did not know yet: That I was going to be fine, and that my survival and that of others depended on the bigger things that he was concerned about, like lassoing our raft so that we could get in it before we hit another rapid. He was surveying a much bigger landscape and making sure the overall project would come out OK. After we were all safe on land, enjoying a cold beer, I thanked Miguel for saving me. He responded: “Yeah, I saw you looking at me.” It was only then that I truly realized that I had saved myself. Yes, I knew that I had seen the other raft coming toward us and had swum to it. I knew that, with the help of others, I had hoisted myself in. I knew that I had been one of the first to quickly jump from the second raft into our now righted raft that the others had lassoed, and knew that I had helped others into our raft as well before we hit another rapid. But, it was only after the fact, when Miguel clarified for me that he had not personally saved me, that I understood that we had all participated in a team effort of saving ourselves, which he had merely overseen and guided. He had his role, and we all had ours, and it was a partnership that got us to safety. We are fortunate if we learn somehow, in the process of living, that we exist in this world in a great partnership with God. God has the overall project in mind that we cannot fathom. We cannot expect God to pay attention to our petty concerns, especially when there is so much that we are capable of doing to help ourselves. On the bus on the way home, we asked Miguel what exactly had happened on the river, and he admitted that this was the first time in 10 years of this work, that a raft that he was in had capsized. He let us know that we had experienced something profound and that he knew that he, too, was vulnerable. I sometimes wonder if God admits those things too, as when God was powerless to stop the Holocaust. While I don’t consider myself a modern prophet, I hope that this metaphor from my world is a helpful metaphor in attempting to make sense of our relationship with God. I learned more than crisis management and self-reliance while whitewater rafting on this trip, and I am grateful to God—and Miguel—that I lived to tell the story and find a lesson in it.

For B/M speech:

Dismantling of sanctuary—why would they die if they looked?

Various interpretations:

1. Fields-they’re (Kohathites? Levites who lifted and carried sacred objects of sanctuary) not to be present when dismantled or set up
2. URJ-they should not “look at the sacred objects even for a moment,” (Malbim?) which was likened to seeing God, which was a capital offense. I Sam 6:19.
3. URJ gleanings, A.G. Butzer: In our day, we “tear the mystery from everything.” (ME: We intellectualize everything. If it can’t be proven, it’s not imp.)
4. Eitz Chayim-Kohathites did not have “sacred status” so seeing uncovered objects could be fatal. Aaron and sons had to cover the items before they were transported. Even a chance viewing could prove fatal. Abravanel: Fear that Kohathites would be so fascinated that they would fall into a mystic trance and be unable to do their work. Hirsch: Kohathites might become too accustomed to the routine of seeing the sacred objects packed and unpacked “lest they die” spiritually, losing their capacity to see the tabernacle as holy. (Me: Assimilation has brought this about for many liberal Jews.
5. Hertz: Focuses on Hebrew term k’vala: from b’l’ayin, to be to divide, to take to pieces, to destroy? (Yoma 5a) (Me: to swallow?) “they would lose all reverence for the sanctuary if they were to witness it.”