

Hashem - "He" or "She" or Both?

Haftorat Ekev

Yesha'yahu 49:14-51:3

In the Prophecies of Redemption, Hashem is often described through the metaphor of a wife and mother. In this commentary, I discuss the connection between this feminine imagery and redemption, and the difference between the masculine and feminine aspect of Hashem, and whether we should refer to Hashem as "He" or "She" or both?

Innate Maternal Mercy

This week's *haftorah* is the second in the series of seven "*haftorot* of Consolation." The children of Israel express their concern that G-d has abandoned them in the long-winding exile. G-d reassures Israel that it is not so, comparing His love and mercy for His people to that of a mother for her children. "Shall a woman forget her sucking child, from having mercy on the child of her womb? These too shall forget, but I will not forget you" (*Yesha'yahu 49:15*). In the comparison of Hashem to a nursing mother, His mercy on the Jewish people is even greater than the mercy of a mother on her suckling children. A mother has the deepest connection with her nursing infant, to whom she is tied, as with an invisible umbilical cord. The cries of her baby pull her heartstrings so strongly, that it can even bring about the flowing of her milk. The moment her baby is born, a young woman instantly turns from being a carefree, self-centered teenager, to a responsible caring mother. The needs of her baby take precedence over all her personal needs. As her womb expands and opens to give birth, her motherly mercy is born as well. This is why the Hebrew word for "womb" – "*rechem*" shares the same root as "mercy" – "*rachamim*."

Out of Tune with Innate Maternal Mercy – Access Hashem's Life-Giving Shechina

Unfortunately, there are exceptional cases, where the mother is out of tune with her innate maternal mercy, as in the quote above from Yeshaya'hu: "...These too shall forget." – In my practice of spiritual healing, I have come across numerous women with abusive, controlling critical mothers who must have forgotten their natural compassion for their children. It takes much spiritual healing and inner child work to mend the lack of self-esteem and neurosis stemming from lack of maternal mercy. "...But I will not forget you" says Hashem. No matter how much abuse we have experienced, we can still access Hashem's life-giving Shechina within us and emerge from the darkness. Hashem will never forsake us, neither on an individual level nor as a nation. Hashem will eventually redeem and heal us completely, revealing His Shechina within each of his children and restoring His chosen people securely to their Holy Land.

Is G-d "She" or "He"?

Many people have expressed difficulty when I call G-d: "He." Some suggest that I use "He or She." I find this too convoluted, as I always try to express ideas in the most concise way possible. We all know that G-d is beyond any comparison to human form or gender. Although the Torah unequivocally tells us that G-d is beyond form, it uses anthropomorphic metaphors, such as G-d's strong hand, His watchful eyes etc., because the human mind is incapable of grasping purely esoteric

concepts, without concrete images. Likewise, the Zohar describes how G-d's unity is expressed in male and female energies, consistently with the humanity, created in His image. Male and female genders are a living metaphor for the two ways that G-d makes His presence known. Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller writes beautifully how the Torah uses "He" when describing the external, revealed Divine interventions, comparably to the male external organs, and "She" when describing the internal, hidden spark of Divinity that gives life to every creation, and corresponds to the internal feminine genitals. For example, when G-d communicates by giving us the Torah, and when He performs open miracles, obvious to even the most cynical eye, such as the splitting of the Reed Sea, then G-d is called "He" or "Holy One Blessed Be He." On the other hand, the Feminine aspect of G-d, the *Shechina*, describes the permeating light of G-d's inner presence, hidden within each of us. Due to the internal nature of the feminine aspect of G-d, "She" cannot be expressed through the external nature of speech. This is why, although G-d is equally masculine and feminine, I address G-d as "He", unless I'm referring specifically to the *Shechina*.

Hashem our Mother

I believe that the image of Hashem as a merciful mother in our *haftorah* reflects the inner dimension of Torah and mitzvot, which is revealed during the messianic era and redemption from exile described by the *haftorah*. We learn from Tanya, that during this time, "The involvement in Torah and mitzvot will be through the inner teachings of Torah by fulfilling mitzvot with supreme devotions...the inner meaning to the mitzvot and their hidden reasons" (*Tanya, Igeret HaKodesh* 26). Most references to G-d, during the redemptive process are therefore expressed in feminine imagery, as the *Shechina* will then emerge from Her hiding and ultimately permeate the whole world with Her radiance.

Shaping the Rock of Sarah

Our *haftorah* culminates with a call to remember from where we came, and the rock from which we are hewn – Avraham and Sarah – our male and female role-models, which have molded the existence of the Jewish people. "Look to the rock from where you are hewn, and to the hole of the hollow from which you were dug out. Look to Avraham your father, and to Sarah that bore you." (*Yesha'yahu* 51:1). According to Rashi, Avraham is compared to the rock that protrudes outwards, whereas Sarah, is compared to the inner hollow from where we were carved. While Avraham is the raw material of the rock, Sarah shapes the rock by removing the undesirable parts. She ensured that Yishmael would be separated from Yitzchak, in order to allow the *Shechina* to be fully revealed. We, women, continue the work of Sarah. By removing negativity, and protecting the men in our lives from harmful influence, we carry on the carving, until the inner core of the rock is revealed. In this way, we fulfill our job as Jewish women, to refine and remove anything that separates the *Shechina* from being fully revealed in the world.

Hope after Despair

Consolation and hope is the main topic of our *haftorah*. Even when all seems lost, there is still hope for renewal. Rav Tzaddok Hakohen of Lublin explains that Avraham and Sarah were the first to reveal the concept of never giving up on anything. The Jewish nation emerged only after Hashem blessed Sarah to conceive a child, when all hope was lost. Therefore, the essence of Judaism is to

have *emuna* and never give up. “Ben David will not come until everyone has given up on redemption (*Sandhedrin* 97a). Even after giving up, there is still hope (*Divrei Sofrim* 16). It is time to believe that the light of the Shechina is about to shine forth in the world, and reveal the inner truth to all. Just as the merciful mother never gives up hope for the physical and spiritual survival of her children, so will Hashem never give up on us. “So says Hashem, G-d, See, I will lift my hand to the Gentiles, I raise My banner to the peoples. They will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders” (*Yesha’yahu* 49:22). Let us hold on tight, without being afraid of the ride!