

Torah Thoughts Mattot

5778:

I sometimes joke that studying Torah should be limited to those of adult age, since nearly every page of the text is filled with tales of sex and murder. Parshat Mattot neatly makes the point when Moses commands that after defeating the Midianites in battle, the Israelites should also kill the surviving male children and any women who have had sex. The context for that otherwise horrifying decree is that these are the Midianite boys who will grow up to be enemies of the Israelites, and that it was the Midianite women who nearly destroyed the connection between the Israelites and God by enticing the Israelite men into pagan, sexual relationships. From a modern point of view, even that context doesn't erase our unease about its content, and the metaphor itself challenges us.

The Torah often treats idolatry in terms of harlotry or sexual disloyalty. It speaks of following other gods in terms of wandering eyes, lusting hearts and so forth. It appears that the worst possible sin is that of turning away from the beloved God of Israel in order to 'take up' with a pagan god, and that the language that best suits that betrayal is that of betraying a spouse sexually.

In our time, we don't typically think of our relationship with God in those terms, but I wonder what we lose by not doing so. The terms are obviously metaphoric, and since the loyalty of marriage remains one of the strongest bonds we have, why don't we speak of God as beloved, lover or spouse? It may be that this kind of language fits poorly for us because we no longer live in a majority pagan culture – unless we do, which is a talk for another occasion – and so the metaphor no longer makes sense. Or perhaps betrothal to God is a concept that is too concrete, a relationship too intimate for us to comfortably use, that language of sexual disloyalty is simply too fraught for us to use in a religious setting; it remains one of the more dangerous aspects of our relationships with one another. Luckily there are many other descriptions of God in the Hebrew Bible that continue to shape our relationship with the divine in inspiring ways, and which further don't induce us to harm innocents. When we become nervous about one form of God-language, we can always resort to other, safer ones. God language is always metaphoric; we must therefore strive for metaphors that describe *our* relationship with God, even if they are quite different than those of the Torah.