

# A Jealous God

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As we spend longer than usual in synagogues these coming weeks, one of the biggest problems for most Jews is the language of prayer—particularly if we only understand the English translations, which are really very poor and uninspiring. So much of the language, even in translation, is obscure, if not confusing. There are words used to describe God—like big, great, powerful, and awesome—that in English we tend to apply to the most trivial of things. And why the constant repetition?

Take opera, for example. Most opera lovers do not understand Italian. But those of us who love it listen to the sounds and rhythms, to the music. We relax and go with the flow. But if we could translate the words into English they would sound stupid. “Yes, I will. Yes, I will. Yes, it’s done. It is done. No, you will not! You cannot.” Or “She’s my mother. She’s my mother. She’s his mother. She’s His mother. His mother, my mother, his mother, my mother.” It sounds so silly in English but can be elevating in Italian as an aria or duet.

Much of the prayer book is poetic language that does not translate well, without a sense of the nobility or rhythm of the original language. Given that the major Jewish texts began in a prerational, prephilosophical world and were sang or read and understood under many different cultures, it is not at all surprising that we nowadays, with our constantly fluctuations and changing usages and vocabularies, understand words very differently. The text of the prayers are preserved for valid historical and social reasons but the result is that they do not speak to most of us today . Words that once resonated with glory and nobility, like “king”, are now considered by many to be quite offensive, sexist, and politically regressive. Whereas once elegantly uniformed soldiers and household guards wearing fur busbies were objects of pride, dignity, and fear, today they are amusing tourist curiosities.

The Bible is full of anthropomorphisms. God speaks to Moses, mouth to mouth or face to face. He smells things; He stretches out his finger or His arm; He blows. No one seriously thinks God’s blood pressure rises when He is angry. Indeed, few think God is a “he” the way we use “he or she or it”. We understand that we have to use human language and that that language is designed for human activity and emotions, not intangible, nonphysical, mystical forces. So we who are both rationally and mystically animated find ways of understanding many biblical words as metaphors, and the same goes for the prayerbook. I am constantly faced with words that either upset me or sound archaic.

There are a couple of words that offend me and I think translation gets them wrong. And they recur in the services this time of year. One is the idea of “fearing God” (or one’s parents). Why fear? It sounds awful. Which parent nowadays wants to be feared? But in fact “fear” in Biblical Hebrew is the

word PACHAD. The Hebrew word YIRAH, which is used of the commands relating to God and our parents, really means what we now call "respect". But sadly when we read the English text, we get this very negative term, which really puts us off.

The other word is "zealous" or "jealous" as used of God, it all depends on what translation you have. As if God can be a petty human. The Ten Commandments include the phrase, "I am a jealous, avenging God, paying back the sins of fathers on their children." After the Golden Calf debacle and towards the end of the book, God says he is a jealous God. This idea is repeated in the Torah.

To describe God as jealous offends my sensibilities. Jealous is not a nice word or a positive emotion. We understand that humans are jealous and sometimes rightly so but why would one want to ascribe such a feeling to God? Others prefer an archaic word we rarely use nowadays: "zealous". Zealotry is used for narrow-minded extremism. It is used to describe Elijah's or Samuel's or indeed God's battle against idolatry or Pinchas's acts to defend Moses's authority. But to apply it to God is metaphorical, not literal. What is more, the Torah in Deuteronomy also says, "Sons should not be punished for the sins of their fathers, nor fathers for the sins of their children."

So why can't we find a more appropriate metaphor in regard to God that does not offend modern thinking? We could take some of the negativity out of a word like zealous or jealous and use the softer expression of "caring". It matters very much what happens, what humans choose to do. The Hebrew word KANA, the one the Bible uses and we translate it as jealous or zealous, is indeed used of a man being suspicious of his wife who has committed adultery. So one can see how it would be applied to someone who has betrayed God and been seduced by other gods.

But the common root KANA, can also apply to something straight and firm like a staff. Therefore it could equally be translated as "consistent or consequent." This is precisely what the Torah means when it says, "...visiting the sins of the fathers on the sons." It is not a judicial statement. It means that actions have consequences and that the consequences can affect the next generation, for bad as well as good. The text is therefore warning us to act with foresight and responsibility, otherwise the results could be disastrous if we make the wrong decisions.

Suggesting a different translation or meaning that previous generations did not is not disrespectful of tradition. It suggests that there are other ways of translating and understanding, in a language we are familiar with, while remaining loyal to the original intent.

So as you sit in the synagogue in front of a prayerbook that does not resonate, try to find specific words that interest you or strike a chord and reflect on them. Take them out of context and wonder what they could mean to you. Reflect on the text. Don't be a slave to it. But don't dismiss the text as pointless, meaningless, archaic verbiage.

The prayerbook was intended to be a menu, not a fixed meal. We inevitably

face the challenge of making our ancient tradition relevant and appealing in a new age. We love the old and ancient, but we need to present it to ourselves in a language that appeals to our modern minds.