

Ishi or Ba'ali

Appropriate Terminology to Describe One's Husband

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"הושע, ב, יח (מתוך הפטרה לפרשת במדבר):

יְקָהּ בַּיּוֹם-הַהוּא נָאֵם-יְהוָה, תִּקְרָאִי אִישִׁי; וְלֹא-תִקְרָאִי-לִי עוֹד, בְּעָלִי.

Hosea 2:18 (Haftarah for Bamidbar)

And on that day – declares the Lord – you will call me “my man (Ishi)” and no longer call me “my Ba'al.” (Ba'al can be understood as “husband,” “owner,” or the proper name of a Canaanite god.)

פירוש רש"י:

תקראי אישי וגו' - תעבדוני מאהבה ולא מיראה. אישי- לשון אישות וחיבת נעורים: בעלי - לשון אדנות ומורא.

Rashi ad. loc.

You will call me my man – you will worship me out of love and not out of dread. “My man” – the language of matrimony and youthful affection; “My Ba'al” – language of servitude and fright.

פירוש מלבי"ם:

והיה ביום ההוא נאום ה' תקראי אישי. שם בעל מורה על הממשלה והקנין, שמושל על הדבר מפני שהוא שלו וקנינו, ושם איש מורה על האהבה והקורבה והאישות, ועד עתה שלא היה לה' קורבה עמהם, והשגחתו היתה נסתרת ומעוטפת במסך טבעי היו עובדים מצד היראה וקוראים לו בעלי מצד ממשלתו עליהם, שבזה יביטו לפעמים אל משרתיו אשר הם אמצעיים אל השפע המגיע להם מאתו על ידם וייראו ויכבדו גם אותם, אבל לעתיד יתהלך בתוכם ויתן להם ברכותיו מבלי אמצעי כאשר יתיחד איש עם אשתו, כמ"ש חז"ל ע"ז שתהיה ככלה בבית חמיה ולא ככלה בבית אביה, כי יהיה מעונתו בעולם השפל לשכון כבוד בתוכם, ותקבל שפע האלהית פנים אל פנים, ותעבוד מאהבה ולא תירא ותכבד זולתו:

Malbim

And on that day declares the Lord you will call me my man. The name “ba'al” indicates control and acquisition, that he rules over (the relationship) because He acquired it, and the name “man” indicates love, closeness, and marital relations, and until this point God did not have that closeness with Israel, and his providence was hidden, and they worshipped God from a place of awe and called him “Ba'al” because of his rule over them, and would look at His servants that are instruments for the bounty that would reach Israel and would then fear and honor those servants,

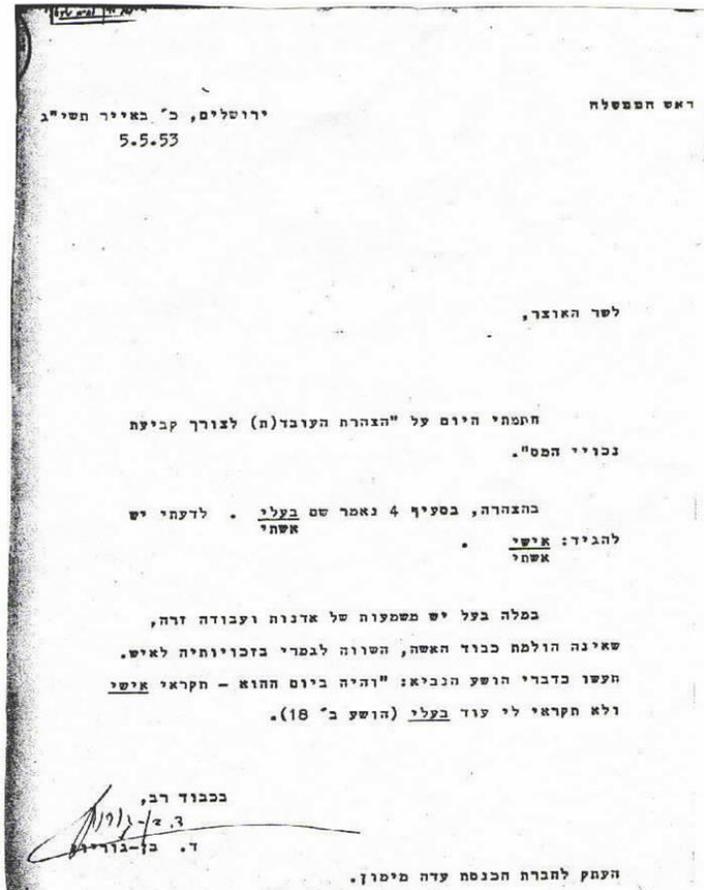
but in the future God will walk amongst the people and bless them without need for those intermediaries just as a man and a woman join together exclusively, as written by our sages, that Israel will be like a bride who lives with her beloved and not a betrothed woman who remains at her family's home, and God will make His presence in the earthly world, and God's bounty will be received face to face, and the people will serve God out of love not out of fear.

ספר נצח ישראל למהר"ל, פרק מז :

וזה שאמר הנביא הושע (ר' הושע ב, יח) "ביום ההוא תקראי לי אישי ולא תקראי לי בעלי". פירוש, כי שם 'אישי' ו'אשה' נקראו כאשר יש לאיש ואשה חבור ביחד, ושם י"ה הוא מחבר אותם בחבור גמור. אבל שם 'בעל' נקרא על שם שהוא בועל אותה ופועל בה. והרי תמצא "ובעלה" (דברים כד, א) שהוא לשון פועל, ולכך הדבר הזה הוא מצד האיש הפועל בנקבה. וכיון שהוא מצד הדבר הפועל החבור, אפשר שיהיה פירוד לדבר זה מצד ישראל. אבל שם 'אישי' לא נקרא מצד שהוא פועל בה, רק מצד חבורם יחד. וחבור שלהם מצד עצמם, לכך אין בטול לזה... אבל לעתיד לא יהיה הוא יתברך פועל בהם חבור, אבל ישראל יהיו מתחברים בו יתברך.

Netzach Yisrael, The Maharal of Prague:

Regarding the verse "on that day you will call me my man and not my Ba'al," the meaning is that "man" (ish) and "woman" (isha) are used when two people join together, and the letters added that they don't share are "yud" and "hey" (the name of God). The word, "ba'al" however is used because the man has intercourse (bo'el in Hebrew) with her and uses her. The word is used in Deuteronomy (21:1) to describe the man's sexual encounter with the woman, and because the connection is sexual, Israel can decide to break off the connection with God. In the future, the relationship will not be of this sexual nature but rather a mutual joining in which Israel will cling to the Holy One.



The Prime Minister
Jerusalem 20th Iyyar 5713
5.5.53

Dear Finance Minister,

Today I signed an “Employees’ Declaration for the Purpose of Determining Tax Deductions”.

Section 4 of the declaration uses the Hebrew word “ba‘al” to mean husband. In my opinion it should use the word “ish”.

The word “ba‘al” has connotations of supremacy and idol-worship incongruent with the dignity of women, whose rights are completely equal to men’s. You should follow the words of the prophet Hosea: “And in that day — declares the LORD — You will call me Ishi, and no more will you call Me Baali” (Hosea 2:18)

Yours sincerely,
D. Ben Gurion

Ba'al – should an alternative word be found?

From the responses of the Academy of the Hebrew Language

This response is based on material written by Academy member Menahem Kister, chairman of the General Terminology Committee from 2000-2004, in response to an enquiry on this topic

Questions are sometimes raised concerning the use of the word “ba'al” with reference to the man’s role in marriage. Many people take exception to the association with other words from the same root which have connotations of ownership and copulation, and the Academy has received requests to oppose the use of the word, ban it, or “replace” it.

Firstly it should be noted that it is not the Academy’s job to prescribe usage on the basis of value judgments in cases where a word has various synonyms belonging different registers or periods (for example, euphemisms and their more explicit alternatives). However, in response to the enquiries received concerning the word “ba'al” we can clarify the existing state of the language, and since language is determined first and foremost by the consensus of its speakers, Hebrew speakers are the ones who need to make the decision, and the accepted meaning of a word will be determined by current usage. In English also, politically correct terms were coined by English speakers who felt the need for them, and were then accepted to a lesser or greater extent.

For those who prefer not to use the word, there are a number of possible alternatives in Hebrew, and we will list a number from the sources that come to mind:

1. The best-known is the one suggested by Hosea “And in that day — declares the LORD — You will call me Ishi, and no more will you call Me Baali” (Hosea 2:18). Anyone can choose to fulfill Hosea’s prophecy, and this was what David Ben-Gurion proposed for official state forms (see above). This is an explicit biblical alternative to the word “ba'al”.
2. The word “raya” is also found in the Bible, in the Song of Songs. It is doubtful whether the word is intended to refer to a married women there, but it is in common use in contemporary Hebrew in expressions like “the minister’s wife”. The Song of Songs also uses the masculine equivalent “re'a”: “Such is my beloved, such is my companion [re'i]” (5:16). Although the word is used in literary language to mean “friend” or “comrade” this usage is not common in spoken Hebrew, so there is no reason not to apply it specifically to a marital relationship, and this is supported by the context (just as the word “partner” can refer either to a marital partnership or to a partnership in a wider sense). If “re'a” comes into use by a large number of speakers, others will understand it.

3. Another Biblical word for wife is “havera” (comrade), as in Malachi 2:14 “She is your comrade and covenanted wife”. This word and its masculine equivalent “haver” were once used in some circles to mean a partner (married or unmarried), but today “haver” and “havera” are used to mean “boyfriend” and “girlfriend”, so it would be difficult to make a realistic proposal to use them in the sense of “husband” and “wife”.

4. Following the verse from Malachi quoted above, one might suggest the phrases “ish brit” and “eshet brit” (covenanted husband and wife).

5. The phrase “ben zug” (partner) appears in Rabbinic Hebrew and its feminine equivalent “bat zug” in Medieval Hebrew, and some modern Hebrew speakers who want to avoid the word “ba‘al” already use them today. The expressions are also used in legal documents and appear on ID cards with reference to married couples.

6. In Rabbinic Hebrew (under Aramaic influence) we sometimes see the word “zug” used to refer to either member of a couple: the husband is the wife’s “zug” and the wife is the husband’s “zug”, or in later usage “zuga”. There is no reason why someone who deprecates the word “ba‘al” should not use this alternative, which is an available parallel to the English “spouse”. The feminine form “zuga” was already used in some earlier Hebrew sources to refer specifically to married women, and there is no reason why “zug” should not be used in the same way. The base meaning of “zug” is “yoke”, a bar on an animal’s neck attached to a harness, dividing the weight equally between two animals. There could hardly be a more egalitarian word.

Returning to the word “ba‘al” in contemporary and earlier usage. Without qualification, the word “ba‘al” in the singular means a husband, not the owner of a field, object, or animal. The sense of “owner” only applies when the word is in the plural, or in the construct state (e.g. “ba‘al hashor”, the owner of the ox; or today “ba‘al haneches”, the owner of the property). In contemporary Hebrew “Ba‘al” on its own is always used to mean a husband, never in the sense of ownership of, say, an apartment. So living usage over the generations has made a clear distinction between “ba‘al” in the sense of a husband and “ba‘al” in the sense of master or owner. The split between the two meanings of the word “ba‘al” may be compared to the Arabic word “Sahb” (which entered Hebrew slang as “Sahbak”). It means both “master” of something, and “friend”. Nobody would feel subjugated by calling somebody “sahbi” (my friend), even though it could also mean “my master”.

Somebody can be the “sahb” – master – of property or animals, and the “sahb” – in the sense of friend – of a (male or female) person. Context removes the ambiguity, even though Arabic lacks the differentiation that developed in Hebrew, which leaves no room for uncertainty and distinguishes the two senses completely. In this respect there is no linguistic justification for inventing a new word and interdicting “ba‘al”. Let us reiterate that a language is only what its speakers make of it. In this case the words are available in the sources and there is no need to innovate. The riches of Hebrew lie waiting in the sources, free for the taking. As usual there is no ideal, problem-free word. While “ba‘al” remains in common usage, it will be the only word that can precisely and unambiguously express the relationship between a married man and his wife. If we become accustomed to hearing “re’a”, “zug”, or “ben zug”, they will become clearly understood words, but if the Hebrew-speaking public is unwilling to accept them they will go on using “ba‘al”, either because of a hidden sexist ideology or because a non-egalitarian conception of marriage.

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