**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**THE STRAINED BONDS OF DIVINE LOVE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

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In memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #02:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea**

**Chapter 1: Hoshea’s First “Marriage”**

**Part 1: The Command and its Fulfillment**

In last week’s introductory *shiur*, we considered the opening verse which establishes the time-frame during which Hoshea — as well as Amos, Yeshayahu and Mikha — prophesied. We compared and contrasted the superscription to these four books and then did a broad overview of the opening three chapters of this book.

We noted that these three chapters clearly constitute an independent unit which is **not**a rhetorical presentation. Rather, the first and third (short) chapters speak of God’s unusual command that the prophet marry a woman of ill repute and, in the first instance, have “children of harlotry” with her. These children are all given devastating names, after which (in Chapter 2), the children, their abhorrent names and the entire episode are redeemed, along with the people — in some idyllic future. At no point in this section, however, does Hoshea speak to the people, nor is he commanded to do so — a curiosity to which we will attend in the next few *shiurim*.

We concluded the introductory *shiur* with the thesis that in this post-Elisha era, we witness the arrival of a new type of prophet, one who speaks to the aristocracy, priesthood and royal houses with no authority but the Word of God. He isn’t a political appointee, doesn’t work miracles and is not a leader in any sense of the word, except by force of his personality, his ability to speak persuasively and his adept oratory skills. In order to establish his *bona fides*, so to speak, this prophet has to be able to “identify” both with Dispatcher as well as Audience; in order to do so, God commands him to, as it were, act out the Divine travail of the Jewish people’s treachery. As *Chazal* would have it, this is in response to Hoshea’s heartless counsel that God ought to reject His nation and choose another; instead of rebuking Hoshea, He teaches him the pain of sending away one with whom there is an intimate bond.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now we are ready to tackle the text of the first chapter, which we will do in this and the next *shiur*. We will use the same model as we did in the *Amos* series, presenting the text in transliteration along with translation; after analyzing the textual nuances and literary allusions and so forth, we will comment on the larger issues at play.

Since we have already discussed the first verse, we will begin with verse 2.

THE TEXT

*Techilat dibber Hashem be-Hoshea*

When the Lord spoke at first with Hoshea,

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan reads this opening phrase as indicating that Hoshea is the first of his colleagues to prophesy, reading it as “The Lord spoke with Hoshea first.”[[2]](#footnote-2) As stated in the introductory *shiur*, Amos seems to precede Hoshea and, as such, this odd opening phrase may need another *peshat*-oriented approach.

Ibn Ezra reads the phrase as meaning “The first prophecy that Hoshea had…” Radak and Rav Yeshaya of Trani follow suit. Significantly, so does Rav Yosef Kara, deviating from Rashi’s adoption of Rabbi Yochanan’s interpretation. He goes further to argue that the meaning “The first prophecy that Hoshea had” is **also** anchored in Midrash — from the passage in BT *Pesachim* which we saw last week. In other words, God’s **first response** to Hoshea’s advice that God “deselect” the Jewish people in favor of another nation is to tell him to take the harlot and so forth. Kara explicitly rejects Rabbi Yochanan’s reading by noting that if it means “The Lord spoke with Hoshea first” (before his colleagues) it would have said ***techila*** *dibber Hashem.* The use of the construct state *techila****t***argues against this rendering.

Most translations render it that way, as do the Septuagint and the Vulgate. We will follow this approach and read the text as stressing that these words are the first words **to Hoshea**.

There are other difficulties in this short phrase, which both the Rishonim and modern scholars address.

First of all, what are we to make of the word *dibber*? If the intent of the verse were, as we understand, “The first words of God to Hoshea”, we would expect *techilat* ***devar*** *(*or ***divrei***)*Hashem* — using a noun.

This is where Rav Yosef Kara’s interpretation of *techilat* is helpful. He understands that the phrase means: “First God **spoke** to Hoshea,” in which case the verbal form *dibber* is correct and expected.

Ibn Ezra also understands the word as a verb, as in the “The first thing that God **said** to Hoshea was…”

Radak accepts this meaning, then proposes an alternative, that *dibber* could be read as a **noun** based on *Yirmeyahu* 5:13’s “*ha-****dibber*** *ein bahem*.” Rav Eliezer of Beaugency reads it this way exclusively and marshals other nouns in *Tanakh* in this form, such as *kiter* (*Yirmeyahu* 44:21).

The second problem is the prepositional *bet* of *be-Hoshea*. Normally, verbs involving speech (*dibber*, *amar*) are followed by the prepositional *el* or *le.*

Radak cites several examples where this preposition is used in the context of receiving prophecy, for example, *“Ha-rak akh* ***be-Moshe*** *dibber Hashem? Ha-lo gam* ***banu*** *dibber?”* “Does the Lord speak solely **to Moshe** alone? Does he not speak **to us** as well?” (*Bamidbar* 12:2); “*Peh el peh adabber* ***bo,*”** “Mouth to mouth I speak **to him”** (ibid. v. 8).

Rav Yeshaya of Trani uses the *bet* to argue that *dibber* is a noun, and the phrase means: “The first word that Hashem spoke with/ through Hoshea was…”

Rav Eliezer of Beaugency has an illuminative explanation for this linguistic phenomenon:

The reason is that the spirit of God enters into [the prophets] and places the words in their mouths, as it states “And God placed a word in the mouth of Bilam” (*Bamidbar* 23:5), and “[The untransmitted word of God] would be in my heart like a fiery flame” (*Yirmeyahu* 20:9). We see that the spirit speaks **in** the prophet, in his innards.

We are not privy to how prophecy works. Does the prophet “hear a voice” audible to only him? Does he sense a message in his mind? We are never given any insight into an experience which is likely impossible to describe. However, Rav Eliezer here makes a bold suggestion, that the fine nuance of prepositional choice in the context of prophetic words may shed some light on that process.

*Vayomer Hashem el-Hoshea*

The Lord said to Hoshea

This seems to be the “formal” preface to the words, which makes the preceding phrase all the more unusual and so weighty with Midrashic import.

*Lekh kach lekha eishet zenunim*

Go, take for you a wife of harlotry

*Ve-yaldei zenunim*

And children of harlotry

*Chazal*, as we saw in the introductory *shiur*, read this passage as literally taking place. God commands Hoshea to find a harlot which, at the very least, means a woman who had already been intimate with other men outside of the context of marriage, and to take her as a wife. He is also to take *yaldei zenunim*, the meaning of which is subject to some dispute. On the face of it, it means (as Abravanel reads it) to take her along with her children, born to her out of wedlock.

Parenthetically, Abravanel makes an unusual observation here. He maintains that God commands the prophet to do **three** things that go against expectations: to marry, to take a harlot and to adopt her children. The second of these is to marry an unchaste woman. This is an unusual criterion — why couldn’t the prophet simply marry a divorcee or a widow to become a stepfather? Moreover, the ironclad proof of this woman’s licentiousness is her “children of harlotry,” and generally no man would want to bring such children into his own household.

Abravanel’s first point is itself odd. He maintains that prophets are celibate and, by implication, unmarried; so for God to command Hoshea to take a wife at all is surprising, with two further surprises to follow. Abravanel maintains that prophets ought to be celibate based on the experience at Sinai, when the entire nation, in preparing for mass revelation (prophecy) is to eschew marital intimacy (*Shemot* 19). This is an unusual application, as Moshe seems to be the only prophet who, by virtue of his always being “on call” (or “on Call”), has to remain separate from his wife. This is, of course, the most common way that Miriam and Aharon’s complaint about Moshe is read (*Bamidbar* 12:1-2, as cited above; see Rashi ad loc.).

The difficulty with the *yaldei zenunim* is that in the verses that follow, Hoshea marries a harlot and has three children with her, giving her names of rejection, per God’s command. So who are the *yaldei zenunim*?

Rashi explains that any children she bears to Hoshea will be under the cloud of suspicion of being bastards (i.e. born of an adulterous union), as he will have no way of knowing if her wayward behavior has been checked by their marriage. This is difficult, however, as the verb “*Kach”* applies to both the woman and her children, implying that the latter are already in existence when he marries her. It is as if God is commanding Hoshea not only to find a harlot who is willing to marry him, but one who already has children of her own, fathers unknown.

Malbim allows for both possibilities: either she already has children whom he is to adopt, or the children they bear “together” may be suspected of being bastards. Either way, we do have something of an obstacle, unless we posit two sets of children: one that the harlot already has and the other which they will ostensibly have together. We will return to this point forthwith, after completing our study of this verse and the next.

*Ki zano tizneh ha-aretz*

For the land surely commits harlotry,

Does this mean that “the land **will** commit harlotry” or “the land **has committed** harlotry”? If the former, why is God responding to something that hasn’t happened yet? If the latter, why phrase it in the future tense?

Rashi interprets the phrase as present tense, and he likely means the continuing future. In Hebrew, we often have a word or phrase presented in the imperfect future which implies continuous action, such as “*Kakha* ***ya’asu*** *banav,”* “So his sons would do [literally: will do, shall do]” (*I Shemuel* 2:14). This describes a pattern of behavior that, from the perspective of the writer, is long past.

*Mei-acharei Hashem*

Departing from the Lord

To clarify the meaning behind the metaphor, commonly used throughout Prophetic literature, of idolatrous betrayal of the covenant with God as “harlotry”, the text adds this short phrase. Not only is engagement with idolatry a violation of a pact with God, it also represents a deliberate move **away** from God, leaving Him behind, so to speak.

*Vayelekh vayikach*

So he went and took

So far, the language indicates that Hoshea does exactly what God has commanded. God says “*Lekh, kach lekha”* and Hoshea complies verbatim: *“Vayelekh vayikach*.”

*Et Gomer bat Divlayim*

Gomer the daughter of Divlayim

Who is this woman and why mention her personal name — and patronym?

*Chazal* famously read lurid associations with in both of her names,[[3]](#footnote-3) but from the perspective of *peshat*, we would expect him to take an anonymous woman — at least anonymous to us. Even Yeshayahu, who seems to have a normal and healthy marital life (see Abravanel’s comments cited above), refers to his wife as “*ha-nevia”*[[4]](#footnote-4) and not by name.

*Vatahar vateled lo ben*

And she conceived and bore him a son

This phrase is surprising. If God’s intent is for Hoshea to take a women who will betray him and while married to him have relations with other men, such that any children she bore will be under the cloud of possible bastardy, then we would expect the text to omit the possessive *lo.* The point would be far more powerful if it said: So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Divlayim, and she conceived and bore a son. The pronominal *lo* makes it clear that this is Hoshea’s child, with no doubt about the child’s legitimacy. Although *lo* is not applied to the other two children, using it for the firstborn seems to inform us regarding the rest as well.

THE COMMAND AND THE FULFILLMENT

I’d like to suggest that we go back and look at the command and then Hoshea’s actions. Let us ask the question that, well, doesn’t seem to have been asked.

God tells Hoshea to take an *eishet zenunim* and *yaldei zenunim*. He doesn’t tell him to marry her, although we might reasonably conclude that the verb *kach* means that (see *Devarim* 24:1 and Sifrei ad loc.). Why would he engage in intimacy with her? If that sounds like a strange question and an odd assumption, a quick look at the first three verses of Chapter 3 is enlightening:

And the Lord said to me: “Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend and an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods, and love cakes of raisins.”

So I bought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver and a homer and a half of barley.

And I said to her: “You shall sit solitary for me many days; you shall not play the harlot, and you shall not be any man's wife; **nor will I be yours**.”

We might further ask, once Hoshea has taken the harlot Gomer, why is there a need for another “adulteress?”

I’d like to suggest that whereas God commands Hoshea to take a harlot **and her children of harlotry**, Hoshea does something much “milder.” He gets married to a “proper” woman who is known by her own name (unlike the adulteress in Chapter 3) and even by her father’s name. Note that several “problematic” women in *Tanakh* are identified without a patronym, like Delila (and even Tamar!). So he marries Gomer and begins a family with her — and God “adjusts” the command by telling Hoshea to turn, as it were, his children into “bastardized” offspring with their awful names.

*CHAZAL* AND THE RISHONIM ON HOSHEA’S MARRIAGE

Rambam (*Moreh Ha-nevukhim* II, Chapter 46) states that this entire episode is a vision and does not take place in “the real world.” This is part of Rambam’s tendency to see any prophecy besides that of Moshe Rabbeinu’s as taking place while asleep, per *Bamidbar* 12 (and his own seventh principle of faith). Ibn Ezra follows him — as do several other *Rishonim*, although not for the same reason. Some of them (notably ibn Ezra) are scandalized by the thought of God commanding His own prophet to take a harlot, have children with her etc.

This is an interesting twist, as *Chazal* quite clearly take the position that Hoshea really does take Gomer, that Hoshea really has relations with her, and that the three children Yizre’el, Lo Ruchama and Lo Ami are real people. Rambam is driven by his commitment to philosophical truth and a strict reading of the key passage in *Bamidbar*. Ibn Ezra and Radak, however, seem to be pushed by other considerations — might they have been polemic concerns? The horrified language used by ibn Ezra implies that his refusal to read this text as *peshat* (and this is the ibn Ezra we’re talking about!) is due to broader concerns extrinsic to the text or philosophical speculation:

The words of Avraham the author: Heaven forfend that God would command to take a harlot and to bear children of harlotry. And one who argues “it is sufficient for the servant to be like the master,” this idea does not apply to this case. For whoring away from God is a metaphor; it is only “real” with people. The correct view, in my eyes, is that this prophet would see prophetic visions in a dream at night, and that God told him: “Go, take for you a wife of harlotry,” and he went and took a well-known woman and she conceived and gave birth.

By the way, Abravanel weighs in on the question and uses an interesting measure for determining if a prophetic statement should be seen as real or imaginary: if the text follows up with confirmation of the event, it is real. Therefore, he concludes that Hoshea really does have children with Gomer.

What is interesting about Rambam (on one hand) and ibn Ezra and Radak (on the other) is their willingness to reject *Chazal*’s clear take on the story due to their own considerations, whether philosophical or moralistic.

In the “For Further Study” section, I’ve provided a few sources that document and deal with this phenomenon elsewhere. Our friend and teacher, Rabbi Dr. Joshua Berman, has written a wonderful article about the exegetical development of the story of Yiftach’s daughter. Whereas it is clear that the Rabbis understand that Yiftach really goes through with his vow and kills his daughter, Berman traces a broad medieval interpretive tradition that has her cloistered in a nunnery of sorts.

In a somewhat similar vein, even though *Chazal* are quite clear that *Tehillim* is an anthology and that David is not the author of all of the psalms, a number of Rishonim insist that he is the sole psalmist. This alternate approach begins with Saadiah Gaon in his famous and unusual introduction to *Tehillim*, where he posits that the entire book is given prophetically to David. Prof. Uriel Simon discusses the possible motivations for Saadiah’s deviation from Rabbinic tradition in this case, and they are most enlightening.

This is highly recommended reading. Enjoy!

Next week, we will complete our study of Chapter 1 as we meet Hoshea and Gomer’s three children.

**For Further Study:**

Joshua Berman, "Medieval Monasticism and the Evolution of Jewish Interpretation of the Story of Jephthah's Daughter," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, 2 (2005), pp. 228-256.

Moshe Sokolow, “Saadiah Gaon's Prolegomenon to Psalms,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 51 (1984), pp. 131–174.

Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra*, SUNY Series in Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism and Religion (January 1991), pp. 31-41.

1. This is reminiscent of God’s lesson to Yona with the tree; see *Yona* 4:6-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BT *Pesachim* 87a, *Bava Batra* 14b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gomer — Rav said [she was so called because] everyone would climax (*gomerim*) with her. “The daughter of Divlayim” — [as the name Divlayim can be taken as the dual form of the word *dibba*, this suggests that she was] a woman of ill repute (*dibba ra’a*), daughter of a woman of ill repute.

And Shemuel said [that the name Divlayim is the plural of the word *deveila*, a cake of pressed figs, indicating that she was] as sweet as a cake of pressed figs to everyone’s taste.

Rabbi Yochanan said [the name signifies that] everyone would tread (*dashin*) upon her [a euphemism for sexual relations], like a cake of pressed figs. (BT *Pesachim* 87a-b) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Yeshayahu* 8:3; [↑](#footnote-ref-4)