**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**

**Shiur #08:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea:**

**Chapter 3: The Anonymous Mrs. Hoshea**

**Part 2: That Was the Metaphor; Now for the Moral (vv. 4-5)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we studied the first-person narrative section of Chapter 3 (vv. 1-3) in which Hoshea is (again) commanded by God to marry a woman of ill repute. This time, unlike the first directive with which the book opens, there are to be no children involved, nor is their union to be anything resembling a marriage. She is to remain chaste and, at least according to the mainstream interpretive tradition, he is to be celibate as well.

As we pointed out, this seems to be God’s “flexible” response to Hoshea’s non-fulfillment of the first command. After taking a proper wife and having legitimate children with her — children whose parentage is not shrouded in doubt — He has Hoshea give them names of cursedness, antipathy and initial rejection. These names are redeemed in the prophecy that follows, but that symbolic marriage to a harlot has not yet happened. That is the command in Chapter 3, which Hoshea loyally fulfills and, unlike Gomer bat Divlayim of Chapter 1, we never learn the name of this second wife, as is to be expected as regards a woman of iniquitous background. As the opening line makes clear, this relationship is to approximate God’s love for the Israelites, but how this modeling is to manifest itself and become a teaching model is not yet made explicit.

To be clear, for a symbolic act to carry a message, there are two independent stages that must happen. The connection between the symbolic act and the intended message must be made clear; the analogic bridge, as it were, is to be stretched over the chasm separating the world of the real and the world of the ideal. Secondly, there must be a manner in which both the symbol and the interpretive bridge are communicated to the desired audience. In other words, an **analogic** bridge must be built to span the gulf separating the action from its intended message, and then the **didactic** gulf separating the teacher from their audience must be spanned, bringing the message to the people.

The first of these steps will emerge in our analysis of the text of the final two verses, the “moral.” The final step will be addressed in the next *shiur*, in which we will discuss this entire opening section of *Hoshea*, comprising these first three chapters. At that point, we will look at the entire section, identifying its underlying structure and, thereby, the intended message along with proposing a manner by which the **didactic** gulf is bridged.

Strictly for context, here are the first three verses of the chapter:

And the Lord said to me: Go yet, love a woman beloved of a fellow 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 of barley, and a half-homer 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.

As can be seen in the bolded text, the “message” is already encrypted here, but how the metaphor will play out is yet to be seen.

And now, to the moral…

THE TEXT

*Ki yamim rabbim yeishevu benei Yisrael*

For the Israelites shall sit solitary many days

The opening word *ki* seems to be functioning as the entry to the moral, explaining the symbolism of Hoshea’s celibate marriage and so forth.

Ibn Kaspi notes that not every detail of the metaphor is explained in the analogy, such as the specific amounts and means of the transaction (fifteen pieces of silver, a homer of barley, and a half-homer of barley). His comment reflects an interesting methodology of interpreting symbolism which is certainly not to be assumed, keeping in mind that it is God who is sending the message that the prophet is to convey, and it is specifically His directives that comprise the foundation of the message. As such, the details of how Hoshea carries it out, unless we have reason to believe that they are also Divinely directed, have no bearing on the message and we have no reason to expect them to be part of the moral. Perhaps Ibn Kaspi understands that the prophet’s mention of his means of acquisition theoretically implies a message (else why tell us) and that we could reasonably expect that message to be translated for us. Hence, he notes that metaphors don’t necessarily match the message detail for detail, but we could easily sidestep the problem and take the position that it is only God’s instructions that need be rendered into the message. Hoshea could be simply conveying his readiness — this time — to completely fulfill God’s will and to pay what seems to be a steep price for a woman who should otherwise be, shall we say, more of a bargain.

Rav Yosef Kara points out the correlation between the “*teishevi li”* in verse 3 (rendered “sit solitary” above; see our discussion in *Shiur* #7) and “*yeishevu benei Yisrael*.” Just as she will be chaste, neither consummating her marriage with Hoshea nor engaging in any other relationships, the Israelites will spend some time in this sort of spiritual solitude and isolation. The nature of that solitude is outlined in the rest of the verse.

*Ein melekh ve-ein sar*

Without king and without lord

*Ve-ein zevach ve-ein matzeiva*

And without sacrifice and without pillar

*Ve-ein eifod u-trafim*

And without ephod or teraphim

There are three pairs here which seem, at first blush, to be arhythmic.

It is highly unlikely that we could view these six terms as all being positive, since *terafim* is always presented in an idolatrous context and either with neutral[[1]](#footnote-1) or negative[[2]](#footnote-2) connotations. The *matzeiva*, although a favorite commemorative stele used by Ya’akov, is banned in *Devarim* and is considered henceforth to be odious to God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Seeing all of these as negative is also a challenge. Even if we wanted to interpret *melekh* as pejorative, relating to the experience of the idolatrous kings of the north, it is hard to see *zevach* as something the people are better off without.

It is preferable to read these as a mix of positive and negative things, just as the anonymous wife is to be without the blessed intimacy with her husband as she is to also spurn adulterous relationships; yet the pairings don’t seem to comfortably fit that symmetry. Whereas a “king” and “lord” are typically of one cloth — either good or bad but inherently neutral — the *zevach* is, as noted above, by and large a good thing; as opposed to the *matzeiva,* which is hated by God.

Rashi (in his commentary on v. 3) indeed reads this series as asymmetrical. The leaders of the first pair are somewhat neutral characters; the text is just stating that the Israelites will be exiled and without their own political system. The next two pairs are depicted as describing a lack of spiritual connection either with God (*zevach, eifod*) or with idolatrous entities (*matzeiva, terafim*). The point of the middle set is focused on worship and the final set revolves around the unknown future. An *eifod* is used, in pre-Temple times, as a mantic vehicle for an oracle (as evidenced in David’s use of it through the agency of Evyatar); *terafim*, as seen in *Zekharya* 10:2, are seen as prognosticative devices.

Rav Yosef Kara has an even more unbalanced reading, in which the king, lord, offering and stele, along with the *eifod*, are all part of proper Israelite life and practice, and the *terafim* are, as to be expected, idolatrous.

Ibn Ezra cites Yefet ben Eli, who proposes that all six terms are positive, maintaining that a *matzeiva* is only forbidden in a case where God states as such; here, it seems to be positive. Ibn Ezra attacks this approach by pointing out that there is no way to “purify” the *terafim* and make them part of proper worship. He then cites an anonymous opinion that all of these are negative things. In other words, within the frame of the metaphor, the Jewish people will spend a long time acting faithfully to God. Ibn Ezra rejects this on the grounds that an *eifod* is never mentioned in a disparaging context.[[4]](#footnote-4) He then settles on our yin/ yang understanding that *zevach* and *eifod* are proper vehicles for worshipping God; whereas *matzeiva* and *terafim* are idolatrous, thus approximating the statement in the metaphor that the woman will be celibate, both as regards her husband Hoshea, and towards other men. Radak follows this approach as well.

Rav Eliezer of Beaugency seems to be the first commentator to interpret this sextet as a **completely** parallel sequence. The king, he says, is akin to the husband in the metaphor; the lord is like the paramour. From there, he follows ibn Ezra’s direction. In the final analysis, the first of each pair corresponds to the husband, proper worship etc.; and the second, to infidelity and idolatry.

Note that Rav Eliezer seems to not be concerned that a real-world *sar* doesn’t operate on an opposite plane from a king. Ibn Kaspi picks up on this and argues for a tighter analogic relationship between the idolatrous allegiance and the *sar*, pointing out that *sar* is sometimes presented in the plural (akin to polytheism), whereas there is only one *melekh* in a given monarchy. Otherwise, Ibn Kaspi follows Rav Eliezer’s perfect alignment, explicitly stating that *melekh, zevach* and *eifod* are “good” whereas *sar, matzeiva* and *terafim* are evil.

The wide range of approaches to this linguistically simple but symbolically challenging metaphor and moral is a not atypical taste of the interpretive universe of *Tanakh*. Moreover, the gates of interpretation are never locked; they are open and beckon thoughtful innovation.

*Achar yashuvu benei Yisrael*

Afterward shall the Israelites return

The immediate sense is that the spiritual deprivation (in all directions) outlined in the previous verse will lead to a great thirst and desire for reaching out to something transcendent and that that will motivate the Israelites to return to God.

This stands in clear apposition to the anticipation of Chapter 2, where simply robbing the people of their material success and the comfort of their homes will rekindle the old romance of Sinai. Here, we are to imagine a prolonged period of emptiness, either dispersed or under foreign domination, the people forcefully held back from any form of worship, which will enable a reckoning and a thoughtful renascence. Instead of the nostalgic, romantic *teshuva* pictured in the previous chapter, the feeling of these verses is of a return born of an emptiness and a longing for **something** beyond.

*Uvikshu et Hashem Eloheihem*

And seek the Lord their God,

Unlike the reunification imagined in Chapter 2, this one is a unilateral search on the part of the spurned and exiled children, seeking their father. The imagery is distinct; not only is the catalyst for return different, but the active partner seeking to return has flipped from God to the people. Indeed, we might posit that if the image in Chapter 2 is one of a marital separation healed, the image here is more of a banished child returning to their parents, begging for a restoration of their “good old days.” We will see this even more clearly in the next phrase.

*Ve-eit David malkam*

And David their king

There are some scholars who have suggested that the notion of an anticipated messiah, specifically as a scion of the Davidic line, begins here. The explicit mention of David here seems to argue in favor of this. The likely earlier mention of *sukkat David*, which will be raised again in the prophecies of Amos (9:11), may provide an alternate starting point.

I believe, however, that neither of these verses points to such anticipation, certainly not in the manner that it develops in rabbinic eschatology or in medieval thought. In both contexts, the prophets are invoking a sense of longing for a glorious past, embodied in the person of David.

It is interesting to note that these two mentions from the 8th century BCE have another thing in common, as follows.

It is generally a matter of consensus that *matres lectiones* (Hebrew consonants used as vowels, specifically *vav* and *yod*) were rarely used during the First Commonwealth and that they came into common usage at the end of that period (in *Yirmeyahu*). Their usage expanded until the end of the Second Temple Era, as is evidenced by the prevalent use of these letters in Qumran. As such, the name David is typically spelled *daled-vav-daled* in early literature (e.g. *Shemuel*) and *daled-vav-yud-daled* in Second Temple books, most notably *Divrei Ha-yamim*.

However that claim has to contend with both of these mentions, which is food for thought. See Freedman’s article, cited in “For Further Study.”

*Ufachadu el Hashem ve-el tuvo*

And shall come trembling unto the Lord and to His goodness

The use of *pachad* here is unusual and is hard to decipher. Here is ibn Ezra’s explanation, which seems to be closest to the intended meaning of the text:

They will return speedily to their land when the End of Days comes, running suddenly, as in: “They will come quivering (*yecherdu*) as a bird out of Egypt” (below 11:11) which is followed by: “And I will cause them to dwell in their houses.” The clear evidence of this explanation is the next phrase, “at the end of days,” which is the end of the prophecies of the Prophets.

In other words, the people will come streaming back to their land, as part of their return to God and to the Davidic monarchy, with a suddenness which will **seem** to be driven by fear.

*Be-acharit ha-yamim*

At the end of days

Although often appearing at the beginning of a prophecy (e.g. *Bereishit* 49:1, *Bamidbar* 24:14, *Yeshayahu* 2:2) this is a fitting end of this section of the book, as we will discuss in next week’s *shiur*.

**For Further Study:**

*Terafim*:

Moshe Greenberg, “Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 81, No. 3 (1962), pp. 239–248.

*Matzeiva*:

Joshua Berman, “A Common Base for Jacob’s Four *Matzeivot*” (Heb.) *Megadim* Vol. 13 (1991), pp. 9-23.

Spelling of David:

David Noel Freedman, “The Spelling of the Name ‘David’ in the Hebrew Bible,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983), pp. 89-104.

1. E.g. *Bereishit* 31:19 and *I Shemuel* 19:13; see Prof. Moshe Greenberg’s article on the role of the teraphim in the Rachel story, cited in “For Further Study.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Most notably, *Zekharya* 10:2; see also *I Shemuel* 15:23 and the story of Mikha’s idol in *Shoftim,* Chapters 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Devarim* 16:22; interested readers are encouraged to read Prof. Joshua Berman’s article about the *matzeivot* of Ya’akov, cited in “For Further Study.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Shoftim* 18:14 seems to give lie to this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)