**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 #10:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea:**

**Chapter 4: Now It Begins**

In last week’s *shiur*, we took a brief break from the specifics of the text and looked at the entire first section – some may even consider it a separate book – of Hoshea, comprising the first three chapters. We discussed the incomplete fulfillment of the directive in Chapter 1, and the “Divine adjustment” to the new reality of Hoshea’s growing family of legitimate children born to him by a proper wife. Chapter 2 followed with a healing prophecy. Chapter 3 brought the re-directive to Hoshea to take yet another wife, a “proper” *eshet zenunim* and practice celibacy with her as a demonstration to Bnei Yisrael of the relationship that God has had and will have with His people. All this provided what we called a “necessary prologue,” not only to the rest of Hoshea’s prophetic oeuvre, but also to the entire prophetic corpus of the era, that included the oratory of Yeshayahu and Micha and possibly Amos.

Now that Hoshea has established himself – or been established – as a proper spokesman for God, we are ready to hear the words, absorb the rebukes, and (hopefully) soar with the hopeful promises of a better day.

In this *shiur*, we will first engage in an overview of the chapter and its structure, then we will study the first half of the chapter in detail. The next shiur will be devoted to the second half of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

The chapters divisions throughout Tanakh are not inherent, nor do they have any Jewish tradition. They were instituted, with uneven results, by Bishop Stephen Langton, an English churchman, at the beginning of the 13th century. In numerous places in Tanakh, the divisions “missed the mark,” cutting stories in the middle, including unrelated passages in the same chapter, and so on. (The first chapter of *Bereishit* amply demonstrates that these divisions were apparently made not thematically, but rather as an attempt at standard chapter size–perhaps for daily devotional reading and the like). Some books in Tanakh are easy to divide. However, as we saw in our Amos series, the chapter divisions in the *nevi’im acharonim* (i.e. the literary prophets) are often awkward and misleading. Thankfully, that is not the case in Chapter 4, a single *parasha petucha* in the Masoretic text. It stands alone as a discrete section, clearly and graphically disconnected from chapter 3, as well as chapter 5. As such, it provides us with a ready-made division, whose internal structure we will assess.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROPHECY

The chapter is made up of nineteen verses and divides evenly[[1]](#footnote-1). The two groups of nine verses, which surround the “central axis in verse 10, each focus on their own sub-theme.

**Section One, verses 1-9**, describes the loss of the mandate to be *Mamlekhet Kohanim ve-Goy Kadosh* – a “Kingdom of Kohanim and a Holy Nation” (*Shemot* 19:6). The words *kohen* and *navi*, both references to those who should have been the communal leaders, the personalities worthy of emulation and the representatives of God’s word and will, repeat in this section. There are three mentions of *kohen* (and another in verbal form in verse 6) and one of *navi*. These – and other leaders – are completely absent from the second section. We will see whether the leaders have failed to lead or the people have brought them down when we analyze the text itself. In any case, it is clear that the people have lost their way and have distanced themselves from God and from His true service.

**Section 2, Verses 11-19,** focuses on infidelity and betrayal. At this point, the leaders are gone and the possibilities of *emet* (truth), *chessed* (loving kindness), and *da’at Elokim* (knowledge of God) - all mentioned in the first section - are not even on the horizon. The precipitous fall from a holy nation, a nation of *Kohanim* and *Nevi’im*, who practiced, promoted and propagated truth, kindness, and the knowledge of God, to a whoring people, barely ashamed of their idolatry, is almost too much to bear. To describe this devastating fall in a brief nineteen verses is a huge artistic achievement. And, in fact, we admire the elegant oratory that paints such a vivid and hard-hitting picture even as we gasp at the downward spiral described here. From “My people” to “your people,” from the somewhat affectionate *bnei Yisrael* to the antiseptic *Yisrael*, the chapter charts a loss of virtue and a severed connection with God.

Between these two sections stands the axis verse Verse 10:

**Axis**: *ve’akhlu velo yisba’u,* ***hiznu*** *velo yifrotzu*

*Ki et Hashem azvu lishmor*

And they shall eat, and not have enough,

They shall commit harlotry, and shall not increase;

Because they have left off to take heed to the Lord.

Note that the “axis” verse contains the first instance of the verb *zanoh* in the chapter (to stray/act as a harlot). Though it is completely absent from the first half, there are nine more instances of the root in the second half. This word is clearly the *leitwort* of the section and drives the *leitmotif* of betrayal and treachery, introduced in this central axis verse.

THE TEXT OF SECTION 1: THE LOST MANDATE

This first section is presented as a case brought before the (Heavenly?) court. It is made up of three stages, each comprising three verses. The stages follow the steps of a trial – a heavenly trial which exceeds the boundaries and limitations of a human court. As a matter of form, the proceedings begin with an indictment followed by a statement of the cause behind the criminal behavior and they conclude with a proposed sentence.

**First Stage: The Indictment – Statement of the *Riv* (Verses 1-3)**

*Shim’u d’var-Hashem Bnei Yisrael*

Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel!

The introductory *shim’u* is familiar to us; Amos uses it five times, each at the beginning of an oracle. Micha and (8th century BCE) Yeshayahu each uses it six times. A powerful word, it onomatopoetically silences the audience (with the sibilant *sh* at the beginning) and invites them to listen (with the open syllable at the end – *oo*), and we can regard it as a successful tool in the rhetorical arsenal of the prophets. All of which makes Hoshea’s selective use of *shim’u* – besides here, he uses it only once more at the beginning of the next speech – all the more unusual. If we take a look at the first instances of *shim’u* – “hear me” or “hear my words” – in Chumash, we will find that they are all spoken to potential (or actual) rebels. Besides the one mention in *Bereishit*[[2]](#footnote-2), the only appearances of *shimu* are in *Bamidbar*. Twice it is used by Moshe - once in his interactions with the Korahides (16:8), and a second time, when he explicitly calls his audience *morim* – rebels, before striking the rock (20:10). The other instance (12:6) is when Hashem begins his rebuke of Miriam and Aharon, who presumed to understand God’s prophecy, specifically as it affected them and their brother Moshe.

As Hoshea begins to speak, we will see that unlike Amos, Yeshayahu and Micha, he does not focus his accusations on the *rebellious* nature of the people nearly as much as on the moral softness and ethics of convenience practiced by the people. The root *p-sh-‘a*,which is so prevalent in Amos (10 instances) as well as Micha (6 appearances) and even makes its way into Yeshayahu once,[[3]](#footnote-3) does not appear at all in Hoshea. Their waywardness, unlike that of the defiant Samarians we met in our study of Amos, is a product of their fear and their sloth. Hence, the entire prophetic corpus begins (after our “necessary prologue” of the first three chapters) with a rousing *shim’u*. There will be one more reserved for the Kohanim (in the next chapter); otherwise, this implication is subdued.

Hoshea’s opening rebuke is directed to “Bnei Yisrael,” whereas the next prophecy is directed to the Kohanim. In contradistinction to Amos, whose diatribes were almost exclusively aimed at the royal house, the aristocracy, and the judiciary of Shomeron, Hoshea speaks here broadly and not to a specific group.

*Ki riv laShem im-yoshvei ha’aretz*

For the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land

We have already seen the word *riv* – in the prophetic utterance which bridged between Hoshea’s marriage to Gomer and the birth and naming of their three children, and his second marriage with the anonymous harlot. In Chapter 2, the people were adjured to take their leaders – their “mother” – to task for her disloyalty to God: *rivu b’imkhem rivu*. That *riv*, which was part of the prologue, now takes form as God Himself challenges His people – all of His people – regarding their wayward behavior. We can almost imagine God’s coaxing the people to challenge the national leadership and when that fails, He takes up the *riv* Himself, taking the people to task, for failing to take up the cause of the *riv*

*Ki*

*Ein-emet, v’ein chessed, v’ein da’at Elokim*

Because there is no truth, nor loving-kindness[[4]](#footnote-4), nor the knowledge of God

Note the anaphora here – the word *ein* is used at the beginning of each sub-clause to create a rhythmic epigram, one easily chanted and remembered. It’s the sort of ditty that could get stuck in your head, in spite of its dire description.

Each of these terms, an ephemeral quality that is missing, will be substantiated in the next verse. In order to understand what Hoshea means by opening up the *riv* by pointing out what *isn’t*, we have to see his evidence. That the **presence** of *emet, chessed* and *da’at Elokim* is the desirable, ideal even, condition of the national landscape is both self-evident as well as reflective of the great promise in the bridging prophecy of Chapter 2:

And I will be betrothed to you for ever

And I will be betrothed to you by justice and righteousness, with lovingkindness (c*hessed*) and compassion

And I will be betrothed to you by faith (*Emuna [=emet])*

And you will know Hashem (*veyada’at et Hashem*)

As we discussed in *Shiur* #6, the meaning of c*hessed* in Tanakh is most likely closer to “loyalty,” which fits the tone and setting of this rebuke quite well. It is indeed hard to chastise people for a lack of c*hessed* as understood in the conventional manner. Although we certainly understand the inherent moral imperative to act kindly, to extend a hand to those in need and so forth, it would be difficult to understand the justification of a rebuke based on a lack of that altruism. Although the Torah commands us regarding numerous expressions of kindness towards each other, we rarely find prophetic rebukes and never with such harsh consequences for failing to fulfill those commands[[5]](#footnote-5). “Loyalty” is also a closer pairing with “truth,” which is likely why *chessed* and *emet* are often paired together. The words form a hendiadys (two nouns in which the first should be understood as an adjective), whose meaning is essentially “an act of true loyalty” (for instance, Yosef’s commitment to bury his father in Canaan – see *Bereishit* 47:29).

The “knowledge of God” is joined here with the other proper interpersonal and social attributes (e.g. *tzedek, mishpat*) as it was in the great “betrothal speech” of Chapter 2. The establishment of a proper, just society based on truth and loyalty to its ideals, to its citizens, and to its destiny and history not only enables a knowledge of God, it also emanates from that knowledge. So the knowledge of God operates both as *cause* and *effect* of practicing these traits. The converse is also true. A lack of these traits means there is no authentic knowledge of God, and thus no *emet* and c*hessed*; a situation that prevents an even more intense knowledge of the Divine.

*Ba’aretz*

in the land.

The *navi* points out that this is the situation This last word, which would seem superfluous here, mirrors the use of *ha’aretz* earlier in the verse. God has a claim against the dwellers of the **land**, because there is no truth in the **land**. It is that land that was intended to become a lighthouse for the world, a beacon of righteousness that would draw nations towards God (see *Yeshayahu* 2:1-4), that now suffers from an utter lack of those qualities that would attract the nations.

*Aloh vekachesh*

Swearing and lying,

Hoshea begins, in clear and unadorned terms, to describe the ills of the society. These first two are the evidence for the lack of *emet*.

*Veratzoach veganov vena’of*

and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery!

There can be no compelling proof of a lack of c*hessed* in the way the word is generally understood. The sequence here is odd. It goes from the seemingly most severe, to a lesser crime and back to a more severe crime. Even if the Decalogue is the model (which might be assumed here, with the accusations starting with false oaths [Dibber #3], then moving on to murder, adultery, and stealing), our text subverts that sequence as well. I’d like to suggest that along with other rhetorical considerations (see below), Hoshea is teasing out the idea of “knowledge of God,” which is the culmination of the “betrothal passage” in Chapter 2. The sublime union of man and woman within the secure loyalty of the marital relationship is sometimes termed *yediah* in Tanakh (as in Bereishit 4:1), an idea we discussed in the previous *shiur*. The adultery which was rife (as seen from *paratzu*) flips *da’at* on its head: how can there be “knowledge” of God when that basic human union is betrayed?

*Paratzu*

They break all bounds,

All of these crimes are violations of boundaries, expressed by Hoshea as,

***Ve-damim be-damim*** *naga’u*

and blood toucheth blood.

This accusation highlights the notion of “breaking boundaries.” The *Rishonim*’s broad understanding of this phrase is as the proliferation of *ratzoach*, such that the blood of one murder victim mixes with that of the next victim. Even in death, the victims aren’t accorded any dignity or basic humanity; their blood mixes together like that on the floor of a slaughterhouse.

*Al-ken te’eval ha’aretz*

Therefore doth the land mourn

That same *aretz* which held so much promise and is now bereft of truth and loyalty, will mourn (this verse might be understood as future tense; see the next comment).

*Ve’umlal kol -yoshev bah*

And everyone that dwelleth therein doth languish

The next passage (both clauses) could be read as a threat that the inhabitants of the land will all mourn and suffer.

If so, they are presumably being held accountable for not correcting the course of their society. Alternatively, it may be read as a *description* (which is how the translation here presents it). In this case, the inhabitants of the land are not the guilty enablers, rather the secondary victims of the sinful society, that will inevitably and fairly immediately impact in a horrific manner on all of its residents. The second half of the verse seems to argue for this “present-tense” reading. We would have no reason to think of the beasts of the field, birds, and fish as guilty and worthy of punishment. Yet they too are victims of the sinners. This is the direction taken by most of the medieval commentators. There may, however, be other ways to understand the phrase.

*Bechayat ha-sadeh*

With the beasts of the field

We may be reading of a society that has become so dysfunctional as a result of its waywardness that all manner of life is suffering due to neglect, a paucity of resources, and the like. Alternatively, we may be reading about a Divine punishment, where the center (mankind) sins so grievously that the entire environment is made to suffer. The “just effect” of this punishment is that the human inhabitants now find that their material resources are diminished and their way of life, ipso facto, is directly and significantly harmed.

*Uv’of hashamayim*

and the fowls of heaven

This threesome, of beasts, birds, and fish, seems to radiate further and further away from the core of society. Mammals have the most direct interaction with humans and also rely, to some extent (if they are domesticated) on human success to provide them with necessary resources. Birds are further removed, with fish the furthest. The image of the fish also dying (or migrating away) due to a lack of food means that the land is completely devastated in an almost unimaginable way.

*Ve-gam-d’gei ha-yam*

Yea, the fishes of the sea also

*Ye’aseifu*

are taken away.

**Second Stage: The Cause of the Delinquent Behavior (Verses 4-6)**

Hoshea, again demonstrating clever rhetorical technique, begins this second stage by telescoping down from the society and all of its broader exo-systems to the “man,” the individual, who is the focus of this verse – the clause begins and ends with *ish*:

*Akh* ***ish***

*Al-yarev*

*V’al-yokhach*

***Ish***

Yet let no man strive, neither let any man reprove.

This statement speaks of the absolute hopelessness of the prophet’s endeavor; there is no point in trying to rebuke anyone. This can be for one of two reasons. Either everyone is guilty such that any rebuke will be met with “let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” or because anyone who would try to rebuke would be ignored (best case) or threatened. This is implicit in the next clause:

*V’amkha kim’rivei kohein*

For thy people are as they that strive with the priest.

Comparing the incorrigible populace with “those who challenge the Kohen” opens an unpleasant window into the reality of Hoshea’s time. If someone charged with teaching God’s word to the people (i.e. the Kohen) would give instruction, his audience, instead of eagerly listening to learn how to properly fulfill God’s will, would challenge his teaching. Now, anyone who tries to correct his fellow is met with the same obstinance.

*Vekhashalta ha-yom*

Therefore shalt thou stumble in the day

According to ibn Ezra and (apparently) R. Eliezer of Beaugency, these next words are directed to the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) whose words should be moving and improving the nation:

*Ve-khashal gam-navi imkha layla*

And the prophet also shall stumble with thee in the night.

Since he is not prepared to challenge them, rather he listens to the (false) prophets who assure him that all is well, he and they will all trip up and fall.

Radak understands that the object of this verse is the nation, who will fall along with their false prophets. Either way, they will trip and fall as if it were nighttime.

*Ve-damiti imekha*

And I will destroy thy mother.

*Damiti* is a relatively rare verb (appears less than twenty times in the canon) and means “cease” or “cut off.” The “mother” here is, as we saw at the beginning of Chapter 2, the nation or its leaders. This notion continues into the next clause, along with another instance of the root *d-m-h*, hinting at a root cause of the “destruction”:

*Nidmu ‘ami mib’li* ***da’at***

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge

We come back to the theme of “knowledge.” *Daat Elokim*, which, as we pointed out above, is both the **source** as well as the **result** of a proper value system. Its lack is the rotten core that eats away at the society and will be the cause of its destruction:

*Ki-atah* ***hada’at******ma’asta***

Because thou hast rejected knowledge

Artfully, Hoshea turns that lack of knowledge into something the people cannot excuse due to lack of opportunity (see *Devarim* 30:11-14):

***Va’emas’kha*** *mikahen li*

I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to Me

The people have rejected *daat*, and they will be rejected. The notion of “rejection,” *ma’os*, is often presented as a tit-for-tat. For example, Shaul is accused of “rejecting” God’s command regarding Amalek, so God “rejects” Shaul as His king. (Shmuel I 15:26). Hoshea, however, intensifies matters here. His consistent use of doubles and triples (*ein-ein-ein*, *ish-ish*, *kashal-kashal*, and now *ma’os-ma’os*) creates an entrancing rhythm and a strong sense of both inevitability (repetition as a guarantee of it happening, see *Bereishit* 41:32) and justice (just as you rejected Me, I reject you).

Now Torah appears, the first time in Hoshea (it will show up twice more). It seems that Hoshea is speaking to the keepers of the Law – the Kohanim – who have forgotten to teach it to the people. Alternatively, he is accusing the people of forgetting the lessons and value system implicit in the law of God, which they have thus failed to uphold in their communities.

***Vatishkach*** *torat Elokekha*

Seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God

The consequence is, *Eshkach banekha gam-ani*, “I also will forget thy children.”

Compare this with the promise (in Deutero-Isaiah):

*Hatishkach isha ulah, meracheim ben-bitnah*

Can a woman forget her sucking child,

That she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?

Yea, these may forget, Yet will not I forget thee. (Yeshayahu 49:15)

In that passage, God presents Himself as **incapable** of forgetting His children. That is the soul of consolation and belongs to the period of Shivat Tziyyon. Our verse, from the Assyrian era, reflects a different, threatening, and frightening possibility.

**Third stage: The Sentence (Verses 7-9)**

Instead of the great vision of the multitudinous nation of Avraham, who are a source of blessing to the world, this nation has grown in its sinfulness as it has grown in its numbers:

*K’rubam kein hat’u-li*

The more they were increased, the more they sinned against Me

And, as a result,

*Kevodam bekalon amir*

I will change their glory into shame.

*Kavod* and *kalon* - literally “gravitas” and “insubstantiality” – are often presented as opposites in Tanakh. There is a subtle harshness here beyond the obvious. God commanded His people not to engage in *temura,* switching one sanctified animal for another (*Vayikra* 27:33), yet here, He is ready to engage in a “swap,” changing the glory of His people into degradation.

*Chatat ami yokhelu*

They eat the sin-offerings of My people

Some *Rishonim* (e.g. R. Eliezer of Beaugency) understand that the reference here is to proper sin-offerings, but the charge is against those Kohanim who only engage in the *Mikdash* worship in order to be able to eat. As a result, they have every interest that the people continue sinning so as to increase their offerings. Others (e.g. R. Yosef Kara) read it as priests of the Ba’al cult, who eat My people’s offerings, which should be eaten by the proper *Kohanim* of the Mikdash.

*V’el avonam yis’u naphsho*

And set their heart on their iniquity.

This could be read either way (see previous comment) and would serve to explain their interest in seeing the people continue to incur *chatat*-liability.

*Ve-haya ka’am kakohen*

And it is like people, like priest

The sense here is that even though the *Kohanim* (of the *Mikdash* or, per R. Yosef Kara, of Ba’al) are misleading the people, God will hold the people as guilty as He holds the *Kohanim*.

*Ufakadti alav derakhav*

And I will punish him for his ways

This is the culmination of the indictment, the proposed punishment.

*Uma’a’alav ashiv lo*

And will recompense him his doings.

The verb *ashiv* here perfectly sums up the terms of the accusation, which frequently uses repetition to give a sense of poetic justice (as pointed out above). What happens to the people is the direct result of their own behavior and they will be punished in kind. Their failure to listen to the proper teachers of the law, to internalize the proper system for their society from the Torah, and their willingness to be led astray by the failed teachers and leaders will all come back to them. They will not be able to hide behind a claim of (feigned) innocence or ignorance.

We will begin the next shiur with an analysis of the axis verse (verse 10) and then address the second half of the prophecy.

1. This is often the case in narrative texts; less frequent in poetic texts, of which prophetic rhetoric is a type. Nonetheless, our prophetic section does follow this scheme. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 37:6, where Yosef summons his brothers to tell them about his first dream – the dream of the sheaves. That instance is (possibly) mitigated with the word *na*, yet may actually allude to the lordly position that he occupies in the family; see their reaction – *hamalokh timlokh aleinu*…? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It does appear 11 times in Yeshayahu, but 10 of them are in the latter half of the book which we generally date to the period of Shivat Tziyon and are not the prophecies of Yeshayahu of Yerushalayim of the Assyrian period. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See below for a discussion about the meaning of *chessed* in Tanakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The one counter-example may be *Yechezkel* 16:49. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)