**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 #11:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea:**

**Chapter 4: Now It Begins (Part 2)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we studied the first part of Chapter 4, which presented the accusation against the nation. Hoshea charged Yisrael with “back-sliding.” Terms of “rebellion,” prevalent in other prophetic rebuke, are nearly absent[[1]](#footnote-1). Rather, the prophet seems to take on the corruptible and self-indulgent attitudes of the people, attacking the two offices which should be standing in the breach against such behavior. Both the priesthood (*kehuna*) and the prophetic guild (*nev’im*) should be actively protesting against the excesses of the people. Instead, the (false) prophets are misleading the people (and, perhaps the Kohanim as well), who are only too happy to follow.

As I pointed out in the last *shiur*, this chapter is a complete and single *parashat Mesorah* of nineteen verses that should be viewed as a unit in itself. From a literary structural perspective, it divides quite organically into two equal halves of 9 verses with the middle verse (#10) serving as an axis. An “axis verse” serves as a transition from the first half to the second. It also connects the two halves and serves as literary justification for the inclusion of the two halves in a single unit.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE AXIS VERSE

An excellent example of the role of the axis verse is found in *Bereishit* 21:1-21 (the story of the birth of Yitzchak and the exile of Yishmael). The first 10 verses are completely devoted to Yitzchak and words from the root *tzechok* appear 7 times, serving as the *leitwort* of that section. The last 10 verses are singularly focused on Hagar and the boy she takes into the desert. The middle verse not only transitions from Sarah’s demand that Avraham exile the boy and his mother, it also binds the two halves together:

*Vayera hadavar b’einei Avraham, ‘al odot beno*

And the matter was difficult in Avraham’s eyes, regarding his son.

The lack of identity ascribed to the “son” at the end of the verse is intentional. Is Avraham sad on behalf of the son he is told to send away, or on account of the son who will stay behind, now as an only child, without an older brother and companion? This “delicious ambiguity” (to borrow a phrase from the late, great teacher Rabbi Moshe Besdin z”l) allows us to infer both and thus feel Avraham’s pain in a deeper, more immediate way.

We will begin this week’s analysis with the axis verse (#10), studying it for its own textual weight. We will then study the second half of the *nevu’a*.

**AXIS: The Futility of Their Path (Verse 10)**

*Ve-akhlu ve-lo yisba’u*

And they shall eat, and not have enough

Nearly all bible translations render“*Ve-akhlu*” in the future tense as above.[[2]](#footnote-2) Does the opening word really intend the future? In other words, these activities have yet to take place – their *future* eating will not bear fruit – but what of their current sinful eating (e.g. of the offerings, as delineated in Verse 8)? The phrase *ve-akhlu ve-lo yisba’u* seems, interestingly, to be a deliberate and pointed reversal of the blessing promised in *Devarim* 8:10:

*Ve-akhalta ve-savata u’veirakhta et Hashem Elokekha al ha’aretz ha-tova asher natan lakh*

You shall eat and be sated and bless Hashem your God for the good land which Hashem your God gives you.

This same question, about the time frame of the prophet’s words applies with more force to the second clause, below:

*hiznu ve-lo yifrotzu*

They shall commit harlotry and shall not increase.

As we asked above, is the *zenut* (“harlotry”) something that they are going to engage in at some later date, with the consequence that their numbers will not increase? This is odd, considering that they already stand accused of sexual immorality in Verse 2, where *na’of*- adultery – is listed among their crimes.

This phrase raises its own challenges. We can understand that the eating without being sated, mentioned in the first part of the verse, is a deprivation and a punishment. But the punishment here is difficult to understand, since we would be surprised to find that people engaged in *zenut* would want to reproduce. We would assume the opposite[[3]](#footnote-3).

R. Yosef ibn Kaspi seems to suggest that the intent of this punishment/curse is that because they are whoring with other men’s wives, their relations with their own wives will not produce children. This solves our contextual difficulty, but it doesn’t address the language of the verse. Just as *lo* *yisba’u* is the negation of the expected result of *akh’lu*, *lo* *yifrotzu* should represent the negation of the expected result of *hiznu*.

We are left with a conundrum. Another linguistic difficulty, however, may hold the key to a solution for the whole verse. The verb *paratz*, although occasionally used to denote successful and plentiful reproduction,[[4]](#footnote-4) is usually more general, and not always positive. It is used to denote financial success (e.g. in describing Yaakov’s success in Haran), as well as a breach. The noun *paritz* – thief – seems to be anchored in this meaning. The overall meaning of the root seems to be “to break boundaries,” which can, of course, be a positive development or a negative one.

For our purposes, I’d like to suggest an even more heinous intent on the part of Hoshea’s audience than is readily apparent, based on the opening accusation in Verse 2 – the only other place in Hoshea where the root *parotz* is used:

*Aloh vekakheish veratzo’ach veganov ve-na’of*,

Swearing, lying, murder, thievery and adultery

*Paratzu, vedamim bedamim naga’u*

and blood touches blood.

Note that our key word, *paratzu*, comes *after* the “etnachta,” which signals a pause in mid-verse. In other words, the first half of the verse is a list of specific crimes. What is the second half of the verse? It seems to be the ugly result of those crimes.

I’d like to suggest that the second half of the verse operates as a response to the last two sins, the most severe crimes listed, and is presented in chiastic fashion. The association of “blood touching blood” with murder is an obvious and easy one to see. We can also understand how adultery is a breach – a break in the relationship between husband and wife. The verb *paratzu* is presented in the plural form – “they have breached.” In our read, it refers to both the paramour and the adulteress. They are both participating in a deliberate break in the marital relationship. By using this verb to describe the *result* of the adultery, perhaps Hoshea is suggesting (a suggestion we realize more fully only when we get to our verse) that the intention of both parties is not only to break the boundaries of that particular relationship, but to create a breach in boundaries throughout society. Thus, this, and the other crimes listed in Verse 2, impact on the entire society and not just on one family.

Hoshea, in our axis verse, suggests that just as they (sinfully) eat (the sin-offerings) but find no satisfaction, similarly, they *attempt* to break the societal boundaries of sexual exclusivity but without success.

*Ki et Hashem azvu lishmor*

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

Based on the previous analysis, this phrase is nearly incomprehensible. Without a doubt, this clause is intended to demonstrate Divine justice. They will not be sated *because* they have abandoned God and thereby (or by virtue of their having) abandoned His law. This is, however, not the case. And it is the interpretation we proposed for the first half of the verse that gives meaning here. Had their participation in the Korbanot been of a lofty nature and altruistically driven, they would have found satisfaction and been satiated. Likewise, had their sexual activities been circumscribed by the Torah’s moral and legal code, they would have been successful in breaching boundaries, not those of marriage but of those boundaries breached positively in Tanakh – with boundless wealth and children “like the sand at the seashore.”

There are two immediate difficulties in the next verse:

*zenut ve-yayin ve-tirosh yikach-lev*

Harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the heart

First, why mention *yayin* and also *tirosh*? Also, what is the meaning of the phrase “take away the heart”?

By and large, the *Rishonim* agree that *tirosh* is “new wine” (like the translation here). R. Yosef ibn Kaspi notes the apparent redundancy and explains that new wine is a sweeter, more powerful inebriant. This may be the case, but then the list of three things that “take the heart” is odd. We would think that *zenut* would be the most powerful inducer away from proper behavior. Why then is *yayin*, the “weakest” of the three, in the middle?

Ibn Ezra, as well as R. Eliezer of Beaugency, read the verse as *zenut, yayin ve-tirosh* – i.e. with no *vav* before *yayin*. Perhaps we should understand the verse as follows: *zenut*, that is to say *yayin ve-tirosh*, takes the heart away. In other words, in this verse *zenut* doesn’t necessarily mean sexual immorality, rather any form of straying from the proper path. The word *zanoh* has that broader meaning in dozens of instances in Tanakh, and *zona* and *zenut* (as referring to improper sexual behavior) are derivatives of the base meaning of “straying.”

We can now address the second clause, *yikach-lev*. The “heart” in Tanakh is not the “coeur” of western culture, the seat of emotions; rather, it is the seat of the intellect. The word *lev* is synonymous with “brain” or, better yet, “mind” in English. This can be easily seen in numerous verses, with a survey of the second half of *Sefer Shemot* (where the artisans are called *chakhmei* ***lev***) and *Sefer Devarim*[[5]](#footnote-5) providing the best proofs. To be sure, the associations with “courage” are also present, but those are also functions of “the mind.”

The sense of this verse is that the vehicle of straying – wine – will lead the mind away, effectively keeping the person from hewing to the proper path.

That *zenut* here is not about sexual immorality per se can be seen from the next verse, which explicitly associates idolatrous practices with having *ruach zenunim*, which has led the people astray from God:

*Ami b’etzo yishal u’maklo yagid lo,*

*ki ruach zenunim hit’ah va-yiznu mitachat Elokeihem*

My people ask counsel at their stock, and their staff declares to them;

for the spirit of harlotry has caused them to err, and they have gone astray from under their God.

Is this Hoshea speaking, or God? Whose people is it? We can read the verse as God’s voice, bemoaning His people’s treachery and foolishness. Or as Hoshea’s, lamenting his own people’s waywardness. The difference between these two approaches is more one of mood than of exegesis. Do we sense the frustration of a parent dealing with an incorrigible child, or the despair of a countrymen who sees his fellow citizens behaving in a self-destructive manner that will ultimately take them down? The final word – *Elokeihem* – with the third person genitive suffix, may support the second reading. Keep in mind that in Tanakh, God’s words are occasionally delivered in a hybrid form of first person and third person[[6]](#footnote-6). However, it is far more prevalent for the speech to be consistent; as such, the word *Elokeihem* should tip the scales in favor of this being Hoshea’s lament.

What about the imagery? Is the *etz* here a “tree” or “wood” (i.e. a staff or other artifact made of wood)? Although the word *etz* exclusively means “wood” in rabbinic Hebrew, in Tanakh it may take either meaning. In this case, we will use context to determine the meaning. The second clause references the staff (*makel*) which is a common mantic device in biblical times (Moshe and Aharon both use staffs to perform miracles). The *etz* here, as Rashi (and, subsequently, most *Rishonim*) explains, is “an image that he made ***of*** wood.”

Interestingly, R. Yosef Kara sees the *etz* as a tree. The picture here is of people consulting their (personal) idolatrous oracles either to predict the future or tell them how to act. The phrase *yagid lo* is troubling because, of course, the wood “says” nothing. R. Yosef Kara explains that the cult priest, who was in charge of guarding the “holy tree,” would tell the supplicant what he wanted to hear. R. Yosef ibn Kaspi, on the other hand, sees no intermediary here and explains *yagid lo* as according to his own thinking. In other words, the idolatrous worshipper has convinced himself that his wood statue is speaking to him!

The second half of the verse, *ki ruach zenunim hit’ah va-yiznu mitachat Elokeihem*, is an explication of the previous verse, returning to the “spirit of straying” that has misled the people and is the cause of their grievous errors.

The prophet now turns to an additional grievous error:

*Al-rashei heharim yezabeichu v’al-hageva’ot yekateiru tachat alon velivne, v’eila ki tov tzila; al-kein tiznena benoteikhem ukhaloteikhem tena’afna.*

They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains, and offer upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and terebinths, because the shadow there is good; therefore your daughters commit harlotry, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.

Worship at high places, as well as under large, spreading trees (like a terebinth) is well-documented in Tanakh, beginning with this passage in *Devarim*: “Destroy completely all the places on the **high mountains**, on the **hills** and under every **spreading tree**, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods.” (12:2) But what is the connection between the first and second halves of our verse? Why does the prevalence of worship on high places and under trees lead to widespread sexual immorality?

The *Rishonim* take two broad positions here. Some (starting with Rashi) understand that the assimilation into pagan society via those rites atop the mountains and under every leafy tree lead to a full adoption of their mores, including licentiousness. Others, beginning with R. Yosef Kara, interpret it differently. Since the men all go up to the mountains to worship and the women are left alone, these women take that opportunity to engage in adultery.

Both approaches are difficult. In the first instance, why does the location of mountain tops etc. lead to a greater likelihood of adopting pagan mores (even if we were to posit that the Canaanite pagans at the time, Baalists of one type or another, all engaged in this type of behavior)? The second approach is even more difficult. Are we to assume that most (or all) women are waiting at home for their husbands and fathers to go away so that they can act in this manner? And why wouldn’t the same be said of their “menfolk” going to the marketplace, or herding for months at a time, or even going up to Yerushalayaim to bring proper *Korbanot*?

I’d like to propose that the *al-ken* connector which establishes a causal relationship, should be understood as follows: Since you are so eager to run away from Hashem and find so many places and things – wood, sticks, mountains, trees – to serve as vehicles for straying, you set an example for the other members of your family. They therefore see no reason to maintain loyalty to their husbands or to their families. The causality is not one of adoption or opportunity, but of modeling.

This verse (Verse 13) is clearly mirrored by the one that follows (Verse 14):

*Lo efkod at-b’noteikhem ki tiznenah v’al-kaloteikhem ki t’na’afnah; ki-heim im-hazonot yefareidu v’eim-hakedeshot yezabeichu; v’am lo-yavin yilaveit*

I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; for they themselves consort with lewd women, and they sacrifice with harlots; and the people that is without understanding is distraught.

Both verses use the same pairing of *banot::kalot* and *zenut::ni’uf*. The match goes further and is part of a larger causal chain. Since you have set such an awful tone and poor model for your daughters and daughters-in-law (and, by implication, wives), God will not hold them accountable for their actions. They will betray you and I will not punish them for it. The second half of the verse supports our read of the first half. As a result of your (the men) engagement with the idolatrous cult, your women now participate and join the cult-prostitutes, and I will not hold them liable, as it is a catastrophe of your own making[[7]](#footnote-7).

As we saw earlier, this lewd spirit “takes away the heart” and the nation has become one that does not understand – not what they are doing, not what the consequences of their behavior might be, not Who is really their God and so forth. They just “don’t get it.”

The rare word *yilavet* appears three times in all of Tanakh, here and twice in *Mishlei* 10. In all three cases, it signifies some sort of negative consequence for bad behavior. In *Mishlei*, “the wise of heart” will receive commandments; But a prating fool shall *yilaveit*. He who walks uprightly walks securely; But he that perverts his ways shall be found out. He that winks with the eye causes sorrow; And a prating fool *yilaveit*.” Both times, it is the destiny of the fool to *yilaveit*. The first is presented as the opposite of “receive commandments”; the second seems to be parallel to “causes sorrow.” Not much help there.

The commentaries on Mishlei present a wide range of meanings, from “leave mitzvot,” to “be hit” or “become foolish.” All imply sorry endings, but what does the word mean? BDB suggests that it means “thrust down, out, or away.[[8]](#footnote-8)” This does seem to fit all three verses. The wise man who accepts more mitzvot is esteemed, but the prating fool is discarded (by society). Someone who winks (either to defraud someone or as part of a licentious plot) gives sorrow, and the prating fool is completely pushed away by his society. In our case as well, the nation that doesn’t understand what it is doing will end up being thrust away. The passages in *Mishlei* are instructive, as if Hoshea was using them as a springboard for his words here. Just like the ne’er-do-well who is always stirring up trouble is ejected from proper society, similarly Am Yisrael, if they continue on this shameful path, will be thrust out of God’s good graces and, perhaps, from the community of nations as well.

The next verse serves either as Divine commitment or as warning:

*Im-zoneh atah Yisrael, al-ye’sham Yehuda; va’l-tavo’u haGilgal v’al-ta’alu Beit-Aven v’al-tishav’u “Chai-Hashem”*

Though you, Israel, play the harlot, yet do not let Judah become guilty; and do not come to Gilgal, neither go up to Beth-aven, nor swear: “As the LORD lives.”'

Either Hashem will not hold Yehuda culpable for the sins of Yisrael or He warns them: “Just because your brothers to the north have behaved that way, don’t follow suit.”

Either approach further supports our interpretation of the previous verse. Either they are being told that, like the sinning women who followed the example of their husbands and fathers, Yehuda, (who has, in any case, remained loyal to Hashem and His Sanctuary) will not be punished. This is an unlikely reading, since the disanalogy is stronger than the analogy. Yehuda has **not** sinned (yet). Therefore, I prefer the second approach. Unlike those women who followed the lead of their husbands and fathers, Yehuda is being warned not to follow the example set by Shomeron.

The mentions of Gilgal and Beit-Aven, already documented in Amos[[9]](#footnote-9) as places of worship (and it is unclear, both here and there, if this was just “wrongful off-site worship of Hashem” or idolatry), seem to point to behaviors that the Samarian kingdom and their population engaged in. The peroration, which warns against taking what seems to be a perfectly legitimate oath, *chai Hashem*, would seem to be a warning against making such oaths in these places. That would support the notion that it was worship of Hashem, but away from Yerushalayim, that was the referent here.

The next image is of a satiated nation rebelling against its master:

*Ki k’fara soreira sarar Yisrael; ‘ata yir’eim Hashem k’kheves bamerchav.*

For Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer; now should the LORD feed them as a lamb in a large place?

This verse recalls the image in Chapter 2. Yisrael has become a fattened cow; the wealth and plenty that God showered on her has spoiled her. This image goes back to Moshe’s Song: “*Vayishman Yeshrun vayiv’at* – Yeshurun became fattened and kicked (in rebellion) (*Devarim* 32:15).” The “fattened cow” metaphor finds an early model in the famous line of Amos aimed at the wealthy women of Shomeron: *Shim’u ha-davar hazeh parot ha-Bashan*, “Hear this word, you cows of the Bashan” (*Amos* 4:1).

Taking the fattened “cow,” however, and bringing her (back) to being a lamb herding in the open fields, certainly seems to be a mild and peaceful method of rehabilitation. There are two interesting directions taken by the *Rishonim* in response to this difficulty. R. Yosef Kara understands that God will take the fattened cow – as is, still a cow – to graze in a place which has sufficient grass for sheep, but not enough for cows. In other words, He will put the cow on a sheep’s diet, and that is distinctly a punishment. Ibn Ezra understands that the *‘ata* here is not sequential-causal, rather a disjunct. In other words, now God *would be* herding them like sheep in the pasture, were they not like a rebellious fattened cow.

Commentators are divided in their explanations of an ambiguous phrase in the next verse:

*Chavur ‘atzabim Ephraim; hanach-lo*

Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone.

What does *hanach-lo* refer to? Who is speaking? Is, as ibn Ezra thinks, Hoshea pleading with God to stay His hand from Ephraim (Shomeron) because they are so attached to idolatry? Or is Hoshea speaking *to* Ephraim and asking them to leave Yehuda alone and not drag them into their sinful behavior, as per R. Eliezer of Beaugency? Or, as Radak believes, is Hashem speaking to Hoshea and telling him not to bother with Ephraim because they are so tied into idolatry that there is no point in trying to persuade them away from it.

Resolving this odd phrase depends on how we read the entire verse. Is it God’s voice speaking or Hoshea’s own voice. Is it directed chiefly at Shomeron, at Yehuda or at both? Or is it Hoshea’s voice turned at once to the people, then to God on their behalf, like Amos’s voice in the “Yaakov” visions of Chapter 7? Many readings are possible. I am inclined to read this line as Hoshea’s plea to God to hold back from punishing Ephraim, and perhaps to take the gentler form of correction alluded to in the previous verse and already prefigured in Chapter 2.

The next verse points to the extent of the people’s sins:

*Sar sov’arm; haznei hiznu ahavu heivu kalon megineha*

When their carouse is over, they take to harlotry; her rulers deeply love dishonor.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency offers an insightful explanation:

*Sar sov’am*: the usual way of the world is that when a person is drunk then he errs and strays, and when his wine lifts from him he ceases to err. But these (people) have had their hearts so taken by *tirosh* wine to stray from Me, that even after their carousing is over and the wine leaves them, they still love to stray, to lie with other men’s beloveds, in order to stray from under Me.

Ibn Ezra takes an interesting approach to the final verse:

*Tzarar ruach otah vikhnafeha; veyevoshu mizivchotam*

The wind has bound her up in her skirts; and they will be ashamed because of their sacrifices.

He understands it as describing the people tying their hopes in idolatry in their skirts; what they have really tied there is “wind” – vanity and nothingness – and when they open them, they are gone. Radak takes a similar approach.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency reads the verse in an innovative manner. He sees it as describing Yisrael’s station – like someone who has gotten the wind tied up in his skirts, and falls and can’t get up – a fitting conclusion to this dismal picture of Yisrael.

Elegantly written and profound, Hoshea’s words are sadly not persuasive enough as a vehicle for returning the people to God.

**For further study on the role of the axis in a chiasmus:**

Nathan Klaus: *Pivot Patterns in the Former Prophets*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (June 1999)

1. A notable exception might be *ke-fara sorera*, below v. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The one exception among English translations is Young’s Literal Translation (YLT). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The one exception is Tamar (*Bereishit* 38) but that is, of course, a unique circumstance with entirely different motivation. For support for our contention about assumed interest in someone engaging in harlotry even in Tanakh times, see *Melakhim* I 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. *Bereishit* 28:15, *Shemot* 1:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g. 4:39, 6:5-6, 8:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See e.g. *Shemot* 11:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A tangential but crucial interjection is called for here. The old canard of “look how he grew up, what do you expect” which seems to be the lesson here is not, when all is said and done, consistent with the Tanakh’s image of justice. As Yechezkel forcefully and repeatedly intones (in Chapter 18), every individual is responsible for his or her own behavior. Nonetheless, the message *to the men* is that God will not hold their *“womenfolk”* liable for whoring. God’s accounting with those women, independent of the men, is another matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Brown-Driver Briggs; 1951 edition, p. 526 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 5:5, 4:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)