**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 #13:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea:**

**Chapters 5-6: The Wayward People (Part 2)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we studied the introductory verses to the prophecy that recounts the specific societal sins of Ephraim and–surprisingly–Yehuda. In that section, the pairing Ephraim-Yisrael appeared three times (for a total of six mentions), with an added mention of (Ge’on) Yisrael, to perfectly create the sevenfold *leitworten*. However, note that Yehuda was also included in the rebuke (at the end of verse 5).

In this next section, which completes Chapter 5 and ends in a most awkward fashion, (as we will see at the end of the shiur) those sins will be alluded to in context. We will be surprised to see the nature of those sins. Since the introductory section seemed to focus on the self-indulgent back-sliding of the people towards Ba’al-worship, we would expect the rebuke to be aimed at the heresy of syncretism and the disloyalty to God inherent in such devotions. Although this section does not delineate the sins in details, rather focusing on the general malaise affecting the people and their inability to rouse themselves from it, the focal point seems *not* to be one of errant theistic beliefs or even worship. Rather, the sins seem to lie in the lack of justice in the judiciary. This is, of course, a theme with which we are all too familiar from our study of Amos–but one which we aren’t prepared for in Hoshea. In fact, the opposite is the case. The “necessary prologue” of the first three chapters repeatedly underscores the themes of disloyalty, betrayal, and “straying” (*zenut*) prevalent both in the symbolic marriages and names of the children as well as the prophecy which bridges the two marriage-narratives (Chapter 2). This subject is also the subtext of the first prophecy–Chapter 4–so we are set to experience Hoshea’s prophetic career as one single-mindedly devoted to … devotion. Yet, here we are. Surprised.

THE TEXT (verses 8-15)

*Tik’u shofar be-Givah, hatzotz’ra ba-Ramah*

*Hari’u Beit Aven acharekha Binyamin*

Blow the horn in Gib'e-ah, the trumpet in Ramah.

Sound the alarm at Beth-a'ven; they stand behind you, O Benjamin!

The call to “blast the *shofar*” appears a total of six times in prophetic rhetoric. Considering the tone of most prophetic oratory, this paucity is jarring–we would think that the prophets would call for public assemblies, invoked with the alarm-siren of the *shofar*, more frequently. Indeed, besides for this mention in Hoshea, this type of call is entirely absent from our period. Perhaps we can sense the unique circumstance that calls for the shofar blast from the two mentions in the second chapter of *Yoel*:

*TIk’u shofar be-Tziyon vehari’u be-har kodshi, yirg’zu kol yoshvei ha-aretz; ki-va yom-Hashem, ki karov*

Blast the shofar in Zion and sound an alarm on My holy mountain, let all inhabitants of the earth tremble, for the day of Hashem is coming, indeed it is nigh. (Joel 2:1)

And then, in the next *parasha in Yoel*:

*Tik’u shofar be-Tziyon, kadshu-tzom kir’u ‘atzara*

Blast the shofar in Zion, sanctify a fast, call for an assembly. (Yoel 2:15)

These two calls are symbiotic. The first prefaces a broad vision of the terrible “Yom Hashem” and then adjures the people to engage in reflection and repentance. The second is the more practical call, delineating the specifics of the fast and prayer to follow.

The other three instances of *tik’u*, all in *Yirmiyahu*, appear to be more poetic than the two in *Yoel*. The first instance (*Yirmiyahu* 4:5) appears to be part of an idealized religious renaissance, the second, (ibid. 7:1) of a theoretical gathering in anticipation of an enemy attack. The final one (51:27) is part of an eschatological vision. The two instances in *Yoel*, however, seem to be quite real; the impending (or already actualized) locust plague, whether literal or a metaphor for a massive military incursion[[1]](#footnote-1), threatens the entire land and there is a call for prayer, fasting, and repentance centered in the *Mikdash* around the *Kohanim*.

The question then, circling back to the lone *tik’u* of our entire prophetic period, is what does Hoshea mean here? Is he calling for a real gathering, trumpeting both anxiety and fear of an impending attack, along with motivation towards *Teshuva*? Or is he describing an imagined blast, as Yirmiyahu did to express to the people the sort of desperation they *ought* to be feeling?

One methodological note is appropriate here. When we have a phenomenon like this–a phrase that is sometimes meant literally and other times symbolically–it helps to line up the instances and find the common thread among those whose meaning is fairly assured. Then, by comparing and contrasting, we may be able to set a reasonable semantic or lexical marker that will help determine meaning.

In the case of the six instances of *tik’u*, we can be helped by geographic markers. Whereas Yoel’s two calls both assumed *Tziyon* as the place where the blasts would be heard and where the people would be summoned, Hoshea’s call, like Yirmiyahu’s, imagines the blasts at places which are the *settings for the troubles* that dictate those blasts. In the second instance, Yirmiyahu uses clever toponymic word play to mark the blast (*uviTekoah tik’u*). The other two mentions use the generic *aretz* and *ba-goyim*. Placing these three–and ours–against the two mentions in *Yoel* makes it clear that Yoel’s calls are concrete and actual and Hoshea’s (as well as Yirmiyahu’s) are symbolical and purely exhortative.

Hoshea calls for an (imagined) gathering, facetiously initiated by the *shofar* and by the cornet (both of which are used in the Sanctuary in Yerushalayim by the *Kohanim* as celebratory as well as alarm blasts). He imagines these gatherings as taking place at Giv’a and Rama, as well as Beit-Aven, with the armies of Binyamin at the rear, ready to attack.

Is this a call to defend the *Mikdash*, which sits at the southern border of Binyamin’s territory? If so, why not invite Yehuda into the fray? The mention of Giv’a, however, may lead us in a different direction entirely. The most painful story in the early settlement period was, without a doubt, “the concubine at Giv’a,” the horrific incident which led to a civil war which, in turn, led to the near-total demolishing of the tribe of Binyamin (see *Shoftim* Chapter 20, especially the wording in 21:3). Although this incident is not picked up in the prophecy, Hoshea may be evoking this well-known and, likely, oft-told tragedy, in order to create a vivid association for his audience.

All of the locations listed here are elevated, mountaintop towns in the territory of Binyamin. “Ramah” here is likely “Ramat-Binyamin” identified with the Arab village A-Ram a few kilometers north of modern-day Jerusalem.[[2]](#footnote-2) “Beit-Aven,” while used sometimes as a degrading nickname for “Beit-El,” is actually a village neighboring Beit-El (see *Yehoshua* 7:2). The sense is that the people are being called (or figuratively being called) from throughout that area which bridges the Judean province, with the *Mikdash* at its center, to assemble in the area of Samarian influence and control. Throughout the pre-prophetic period of the divided kingdoms, this border area was pulled to and fro between southern and northern domination, specifically during the era of Ba’asha and Asa (see *Melakhim* 1 15:16-22).

I’d like to suggest that Hoshea is deliberately invoking places that sit at the heart of Israel, places that are not only torn between Yehuda and Yisrael geographically, but which represent the essence of that tear. What better place to start than with Giv’a, site of the horrific civil war that, in a sense, was the primordial version of the monarchic split. Hoshea then invokes Rama–the core site of the conflict between Ba’asha and Asa (see above). He then mentions Beit-Aven, and not for the first time.

In the previous chapter, he echoed Amos’s call to the people to reject the foreign worship sites, including Beit-Aven. “Beit-Aven,” however, serves another purpose in this context. Its earliest mention in Tanakh is as a geographic marker for Ha’Ai, the location of Yehoshua’s one failed battle (*Yehoshua* 7:4-5). This battle was lost for two seemingly unrelated reasons: a failure of proper reconnaissance (*Yehoshua* 7:2-3) along with the sin of Akhan (see ibid. 7:1). These powerful and painful memories should effectively jar the people into realizing that their military power rests in loyalty to God (“Beit-Aven” here as the perversion of “Beit-El” as it is used several times in Tanakh) and national unity (the lesson of Ramah). The lesson of Giv’a is complex and could be read in nearly opposite ways–either as a further instantiation of the dangers of a “house divided against itself” or of the need for each tribe to police itself (the civil war began when the Binyaminites refused to judge and punish the wicked people of Giv’a). Different readers will react differently, and we can only guess which direction Hoshea’s audience would have taken.

The summoning of Binyamin’s army here seems to be a nearly-nostalgic call to the earliest days of the monarchy, when the power–in the person of Shaul (from Giv’a, no less), whose army was comprised chiefly of his own clansmen–rested with Binyamin.

All of these allusions and wistful images support the notion that Hoshea’s call is illusory, meant to communicate a broader message, and not actually summon the people with the shofar and cornets. This will be borne out by the next verses:

*Ephraim leshama tihyhe be-yom tochekha*

*Beshivtei Yisrael, hoda’ti neemana*

Ephraim shall become a desolation in the day of punishment;

among the tribes of Israel I declare what is sure.

Unlike Yoel’s summoning to Zion, which is followed by a description of what *may happen* and what *may be saved* if the people heed the call, here the description is already in the works. Ephraim–the name that Hoshea frequently uses for “Yisrael”–will be desolate. The “day of rebuke” is not presented here as a day that can be averted with Teshuva and prayer. It is a day that is inevitable and impending.

The final phrase is a bit opaque. Assuming that God’s voice is being represented here, what did He make known in a trustworthy fashion? And how did He do so “among the tribes of Israel”?

R. Yosef Kara and Radak understand that the reference in this phrase is to the Torah itself, the trustworthy document, which was given to all the tribes. In the Torah, God declares unreservedly that if the people sin, they will be punished, exiled, lose their king and sovereignty and so forth.

Rashi and Radak cite a poignant Midrash worth sharing here:

R. Abbahu, in the name of R. Yossi b. Hanina, expounded: “Ephraim will be desolate. When? On the day of rebuke, they say when the Holy One, Who is blessed, is destined to rebuke you in judgment. We find that at the time that the ten tribes were exiled, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were not exiled. The ten tribes were saying: ‘Why did He exile us and they weren’t exiled?’ Because they are the members of His royal family. Is there, then, favoritism here? God forbid. There is no favoritism, rather, they had not yet sinned. Once they sinned, He exiled them. The ten tribes then said: ‘Indeed, He is our God, He is strong, He is true [righteous], He doesn’t even show favoritism to the members of His own household – once they sinned, they were exiled, and once they were exiled, Yirmiyahu began lamenting for them ‘Eikha.’” (Petichta of *Eikha Rabba* par. 6).

The majesty of *Eikha Rabba*, at its most poignant in the proems (*Peticha’ot*), cuts to the depth of the existential crisis of exile here. Exile is seen here not as an antiseptic retributive or rehabilitative model, rather as the acute pain experienced, as it were, by HaKadosh Barukh Hu for the sake of His truth. Hence, *hoda’ati* ***ne’emana*.**

The text continues:

*Hayu sarei Yehuda k’masigei gevul*

*Aleihem eshpokh kamayim evrati*

The princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark; upon them I will pour out my wrath like water.

There is a broad dispute among the *Rishonim* as to whether the *hasagat gevul* (encroaching on property lines–see *Devarim* 19:14) is literal or metaphoric. Most of the *Rishonim* assume the latter–perhaps influenced by Saadia (see below)–and understand that the leaders of Yehuda “encroached” on the spiritual territory, so to speak, of their northern brothers by adopting their Ba’alist devotions. Radak takes another tack, while giving a nod to this approach:

…and he said that the princes of Yehuda encroached on the borders of their weak neighbors, who had territory abutting their territory and they would “move the boundary” and take some of their land, as it says in the prophecy of Yechezkel: “Moreover the prince shall not take of the people's inheritance, to thrust them wrongfully out of their possession” (Yechezkel 46:18). Rashi explained it to be like a man who attaches himself to his fellow’s border, similarly they quickly grabbed on to the behavior of their fellows, therefore “I will pour out….” Our master Saadiah z”l explained it as those who encroach on the border – of Mitzvot, that the princes of Yehuda were like the princes of Ephraim who encroached on the borders of Mitzvot and violated the imprecations of the covenant, they also did thus. My father z”l explained that the princes were *like* border-encroachers because people who owned property would come and lodge complaints before them that their neighbors were moving the borders of their fields and vineyards or of their houses and they wouldn’t listen to their cries; therefore, the princes were like those “border-robbers” as they were enabling their encroaching on the boundary. The sage, R. Abraham ibn Ezra explained that they were doing evil to those who were in their domain, as if they were moving boundaries discreetly.

The general divide here is whether we take *hasagat-gevul* in some literal or contextual sense, such that it refers to property theft or something related, or as a metaphor for “buddying up” to the bad behavior of Ephraim. Since this term is not otherwise used as a metaphor–and there are plenty of opportunities in the prophetic oeuvre–we are inclined to read it as being about actual *hasagat-gevul*. The remaining issue is whether the princes are, in Achav-fashion, actually robbing other people’s land or are they ***ke****masigei gevul*,*[[3]](#footnote-3)* like them, in enabling that sort of behavior or engaging in something of equivalent opprobrium.

The punishment is that “I will pour out My wrath **like water.**” Is there an allusion to Amos’s justice that ought to “roll down like waters”? (5:24)

Hoshea continues:

*Ashuk Ephraim r’tzutz mishpat*

*Ki ho’il halakh aharei-tzav*

Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment,

because he was determined to go after the command.

The juxtaposition of this verse to the previous one is likely the cue for those commentators who saw the *hasagat gevul* in the previous verse as being an appropriation of the bad behavior of Ephraim, wherein the princes of Yehuda were aping the sinful ways of their northern brothers.

The description of the society of the north as being oppressed in judgment is consistent with what we hear in Amos, but the reason given is strange. What “command” did they follow that led to such an atrocious reality? Some of the *Rishonim* assume it refers to the “commands” given by (the assumed[[4]](#footnote-4)) Yerovam b. Nevat and those kings who followed him. Others (ibn Ezra) see the “commands” as those given either by false prophets, or (R. Yosef Kara) the priests of Ba’al. R. Yosef Kara actually turns the causal relationship in the verse inside out, explaining that their being oppressed *led* them to seek help from the Ba’al priests–an interesting take on the relationship between justice and fealty to God.

By this point, the fates of Ephraim and Yehuda are aligned and God’s punishment will slowly eat away at their foundations:

*Va’ani kha’ash le-Ephraim*

*Ukh’rakav le-veit Yehuda*

*Vayar’ Ephraim et-cholyo vi-Yehuda et-metzoro*

*vayelekh Ephraim el-Ashur vayishlach el-melekh yareitz*

*Vehu lo yukhal lirpo lakhem velo-yigheh mikem mazor*

Therefore I am like a moth to Ephraim,

and like dry rot to the house of Judah.

When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound,

then Ephraim went to Assyria and sent to the great king.

But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound.

It seems clear that whatever ails Ephraim is already obvious. They have sought help from foreign powers and, as we, the Bible-reading audience well know, it will not help. The rot which infects Yisrael as well as their southern neighbors is the perception of weakness in their national security. Why else turn to a foreign power? The text, however, quietly informs us that the rot is deeper and more entrenched, and whatever malaise the leaders may have sensed was only superficial. To wit, they tried to cure the symptom without addressing the disease.

The image, which follows, of a punishing God as lion is frightening enough; when used in the obviously ironic context of punishing Yehuda, the lion of Yaakov’s blessing (*Bereishit* 49:9), it is all the more painful:

*Ki anokhi khashachal le-Ephraim vekhak’fir l’veit Yehuda*

*Ani ani etrof v’elekh, esa v’ein matzil*

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will rend and go away, I will carry off, and none shall rescue.

The second clause is evocative of these lines near the end of Shirat Moshe:

*Re’u ki ‘ata* ***ani ani*** *hu, v’ein elohim imadi,*

*Ani amit va’achaye, machatzi va’ani erpa,* ***v’ein*** *miyadi* ***matzil***

*Ki* ***esa*** *el shamayim yadi, v’amarti “Chai anokhi l’olam”*

"'See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. For I lift up my hand to heaven, and swear, As I live forever. (*Devarim* 32:39-40)

When all is said and done, *no one will be able to save* himself from God’s avenging hand, but He will deliver His people, and he will *raise His hand* to take an oath to the effect that He lives forever.

How painful to see the same terms used *against His people.* “*Ani, ani*, it is I,” says God, “Who will punish like a lion and no one (not Egypt nor Assyria) will be able to rescue.”

Now the prophet elegantly takes the wistful call of Chapter 2–that the straying wife say, (wouldst that she would) “I will return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now”–and turns it painfully inward.

*Elekh ashuva el-mekomi ad asher-ye’shmu uvikshu fanai*

*Batzar lahem yeshacharuneni*

I will return again to My place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face, and in their distress, they seek Me, saying …

Instead of a joyful reunion, raising the loving memories of youthful romance, God retreats, as it were, to His solitude, waiting for her to come back when she finally realizes the great distance.

Although the chapter ends in the middle of a *parasha* and, indeed, in the middle of a thought, we will pause here to give ourselves a week to ponder what the wife might possibly say at this point.

**For Further Study:**

(*Khaf ha’imut*) Avigdor Una. “The Biblical Verifying Khaf,” *Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World*, Vol. 22, no. 4 (1977) pp. 504–507.

1. See the *Rishonim* at *Yoel* Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Not to be confused with Ramat-Ephraim, the home town and burial place of Shmuel (*Shmuel* 1 7:17, ibid. 25:1) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Radak in the section just before the part we presented, where he reads the *kaf* as *kaf ha-imut*, which strengthens the truth of the statement; he directs the reader to *Bereishit* 25:33. See also “For Further Study.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Radak for an insightful observation about “assumed subjects” in Tanakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)