**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 #16**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea:**

**Chapters 7-8: The Cost of Misplaced Passions (Part 1)**

In our last *shiur*, we completed our study of the complex prophecy of Chapters 5 and 6, in which God expresses His profound disappointment in the failure of the people to turn to Him when they realize how far they have strayed – a rebuke that is addressed to Yehuda as well as Ephraim. In this next prophetic unit, which again comprises two chapters, the sins of the people and their leadership are described in most vivid terms. While the rhetoric is lofty (see the numerous praises that ibn Kaspi lavishes on Hoshea in these chapters), the message is frightening and the accusations ring harshly. We will divide our study of this prophecy into three segments. Following the Masoretic division, the first segment will be the first twelve verses of Chapter 7.

These twelve verses are structured in a symmetrically elegant format. The prelude, which serves as a broad description of the state of the people, is expressed in three verses. Similarly, the postlude (as it were), which outlines the consequences of their sin and of their mindlessness, takes up three verses. The core of the rebuke occupies the middle six verses. As we will see, this middle section not only has its own thematic signature, but also utilizes its own lexical storehouse; we will identify the *leitworten* which help shape the oratory along the way.

THE TEXT

PART 1: The Failed Revival (verses 1-3)

*K’rof’i le-Yisrael, venigla ‘avon Ephraim ve-ra’ot Shomeron, ki fa’alu shaker*

*Veganav yavo, pashat gedud bachutz.*

When I would heal Israel, the corruption of Ephraim is revealed, and the wicked deeds of Samaria; for they deal falsely, the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid without.

The mainstream approach of the *Rishonim* to this opening verse is that God laments that whenever He tries to heal His people, their ongoing sins are revealed, making it, as it were, impossible for Him to forgive them. R. Eliezer of Beaugency, however, has a more biting insight. He notes that a proper doctor does not only heal the outside wound (i.e. the “symptoms”) but digs into the wound to remove the pus and attack the infection. In the same way, as God endeavors to heal His people:

“they hide with Me and make themselves out to be righteous and good people. But when I heal them, I reveal their hidden sins that they commit in their private rooms, and I expose them to all.”

He cleverly weaves the *nigla* (reveal) and *sheker* (deceit) into his understanding of the “providential reality” of the people.

When the accusation unfolds in the body of the rebuke, we will see how “secret” sins play a central role here.

The second half of the verse details their deception – that at night they burgle, but during the day, when there are passersby and these deceivers can safely be outside, they rob people on the road. This is but a tip of the destructive iceberg of their wanton behavior.

*Uval-yom’ru lilvavam kol-ra’atam zakharti*

*‘ata sevavum ma’aleihem neged panay hayu*

But they do not consider that I remember all their evil works.

Now their deeds encompass them; they are before My face.

Although some of the *Rishonim* read the two clauses here as parallel, I believe that the bridge *‘ata* (“now”) should be read as somewhat disjunctive. The people are accused of engaging in two self-deceptions here. First of all, they refuse to believe – or don’t want to be cognizant of – God’s eternal memory, such that a past sin isn’t really gone. Yet, even if that were the case, that God would just wipe the slate clean – their own dastardly deeds surround them. This has a deliberately equivocal meaning, generating what one sage called “delicious ambiguity” although there is nothing delicious about the import of the message. First of all, those “ancient” sins cannot be forgotten, because their results and consequences still surround the people. On the other side of this mirror of equivocality, they continue to sin and they are, even while God wants to cleanse them, surrounded by new sins that they have just committed.

*Be-ra’atam yesamchu melekh*

*Uve-khachasheihem sarim*

By their wickedness they make the king glad, and the princes by their treachery.

The “king” here is certainly not Hashem; the commentators are divided as to whether it refers to the Samarian kings generally or to one specific king. It is curious that the same disagreement arises regarding the “day of our king” in verse 5 – but the commentators do not follow an internally consistent line, as we will see below.

Ibn Kaspi proposes something of a synthesis:

“The intent is as a reference to all kings of Yisrael, but first and foremost was Yerovam, as is well known.” (He carries this dual read through to verse 5).

In other words, this rebuke might be read as a broad rejection of “Everything Ephraimite,” stemming from the institutionalization of “Yisrael” as a distinct hegemony. Ibn Kaspi then associates the “ministers” (*sarim*) with the advisors with whom Yerovam took counsel regarding his fear of the people going to Yerushalayim to worship (which would lead to an insurrection against him). They advised him to construct the “off-site” worship sites (*Melakhim* 1 12:28).

To the content: Rashi explains that the king approves of the people’s evil. R. Yosef Kara takes this further and suggests that the king and his ministers are given some of the spoils of the people’s thievery, such that they rejoice. Ibn Ezra (2nd commentary) concurs. Radak reads this verse as exclusively referring to Yerovam and to his moment of coronation (approximately two centuries in the past); the “treachery” (*kachash*) is understood to refer to the establishment of the two golden calves in Dan and Beit El and their implicit betrayal of Hashem. Radak then offers another suggestion, more in line with the other *Rishonim*, that it refers to the kings of Yisrael in general; he seems to adopt the position of R. Yosef Kara and ibn Ezra, that the king and his advisors share in the spoils. R. Eliezer of Beaugency proposes something a bit more heinous. He says that the king and his advisors scoff at the poor who are oppressed as a result of the sins of these people. In other words, the thieves bring merriment to the royal house – more a matter of entertainment than financial gain.

PART 2: The Adulterous Bakers of Passion (verses 4-9)

Even though the word *ni’uf* (adultery) is only used once in this section, it seems to inform the entire piece. A consistent exegetical puzzle here is whether it refers to actual sexual congress with other men’s wives, or to “adultery” in the sense (used frequently by the literary prophets) of straying from loyalty to God.

*Kulam mena’afim k’mo tanur bo’era me’ofeh*

*Yishbot me’ir milush batzek ad-chumtzato*

They are all adulterers; they are like a heated oven, whose baker ceases to stir the fire, from the kneading of the dough until it is leavened.

Does the *kulam* (all) here refer to the aforementioned king and his ministers, or is it an indictment of the people at large? Either way, the text must be filtered through the rest of the passage. If it is only the royal house which stands accused, then why aren’t they the explicit address of the prophet’s words, as we see elsewhere in prophetic oratory (e.g. Amos 7)? On the other hand, if we take the more likely approach of reading this as an accusation against the general population – then who are the victims here? Do we picture an utterly lawless society, where all are sinning and no one is the identifiable “victim”? This is not an untenable position; the direct victim of such an awful reality is the covenant (and, by implication, God), and the ultimate loser in the whole picture is the society itself. Yet the secretive nature of the sinning, as depicted in the multi-faceted parables used here, implies that there are innocents who suffer and that the diatribe is at least partly aimed at that violation. To mention “ambush,” as below in verse 6, is a nearly explicit admission of non-cooperative victims; not everyone is a co-conspirator.

The model used here and throughout the core rebuke is a heated oven. The words *tanur* (oven), *bo’er* (heated), and *ofeh* (baking) serve as *leitworten*; the first appears thrice and the latter two appear twice each, paired together each time.

The *Rishonim* point out that the *heh* at the end of *bo’era* is enclitic, as *tanur* is a masculine noun. (R. Isaiah of Trani dissents and sees *tanur* as a M/F noun, like *ruach* [see *Melakhim* 1 19:11].)

To the image: Just as the baker stokes the flames of the oven, these people stoke their lust until it reaches the appropriate heat for “baking,” at which time they carry out their desires.

The second clause is enigmatic and nearly every commentator blazes his own path.

Rashi sees *me’ir* not as “from the city” but as “the one that bestirs” – i.e. the evil inclination. The sinners keep their evil inclination at bay during the night, the same amount of time it takes dough to rise, until they can act on their passions in the morning. R. Yosef Kara takes a roughly similar tack. Radak records in his father’s name the same idea – that the *me’ir* is the *yetzer* which drives them – but takes the imagery in a different direction. Just as the baker’s fires may cool for a while until the dough has risen, these people’s lust may be stilled for a while but then it roars back and impels them to their fellow’s wives.

Ibn Ezra (2nd commentary) reads the phrase as a rhetorical question: Could the oven be heated if the baker were to leave the city? In the same way, these folks must be deliberately stoking their inner fires.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency has a different interpretive strategy. His take on being “away from the city” is meaningless in the context of the oven and is only used here to describe the adulterers, who wait for the cuckolded men to leave the city so they can then enter their homes (and so forth…).

Ibn Kaspi describes what must have been the common Provencal custom of bakers, using it to explain the parable on multiple layers:

As is known, that the baker arises at midnight and wakes up the sleeping houses and announces that they should start kneading (their dough), and he immediately goes to set up the fire and wood in the oven to heat up the oven to a great degree so that by morning it will be a roaring fire, and then he returns to the homes to collect (the dough). Included in this parable are numerous perspectives about adultery. There is no need to explain, as we all know about this deed.

As noted above, ibn Kaspi is singularly impressed by the complexity of this image and he expresses his admiration for the prophet several times.

Before moving to the next verse, it should be noted that the Targum connects the phrase *milush habatzek ‘ad chumtzato* as a direct allusion to the Exodus. To wit, the people forgot the miracles that God wrought to redeem them from Egypt. This is a marvelous Midrashic insight, but as Rashi notes, it cannot be reconciled within the straightforward meaning of the text.

*Yom malkeinu hechelu sarim chamat miyayin*

*Mashakh yado et-lotzetzim.*

On the day of our king, the princes became sick with the heat of wine;

he stretched out his hand with mockers.

The “day of our king” is assumed to be coronation day – a day when the king should be taking counsel regarding domestic and foreign affairs and seeing to justice. Instead, he and his advisors are celebrating, drinking, and either consorting with *lotzetzim* or else themselves becoming “mockers,” irresponsibly ignoring their responsibilities towards the people. This is the approach taken by Radak, but it jibes with most of the other commentators.

The commentators, by and large, understand *hechelu* as meaning “made them sick” – i.e., the wine made the princes (and the king) sick. Ibn Ezra notes that *hechelu* is causative, and the king is the object: the princes (deliberately) made the king sick with their wine. See, however, R. Yosef Kara and R. Isaiah of Trani, who read *hechelu* as “began”; in other words, the princes were the ones who began (instigated?) the celebratory mode of rule, as opposed to the appropriate sobriety of responsibility.

Most read *chamat* as the construct form of *cheimet* – a wineskin (see *Bereishit* 21:14-15). In that case, the *mem* of *miyayin* represents an elision: *chemet (malei) miyayin* – a wineskin filled with wine (ibn Ezra). Ibn Kaspi, however, reads *chamat* as “poison,” as in *Devarim* 32:33, indicating that the king and his advisors all get sick as they drink unfermented wine.

If *chamat* is a form of “heat,” then that becomes another *leitwort* here, as it is used two verses later. This is not surprising and further bolsters the sense of this section as being about “heat” – the “burning” “heat” of the “oven” for the dough to be “baked.”

*Ki-keirvu ka-tanur libam b’orbam*

*Kol-halayla yashein ofeihem boker hu vo’er k’eish lehava*

For like an oven their hearts burn with intrigue;

all night the baker sleeps, and in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.

The imagery continues, likening the hearts of these adulterers to an oven that they stoke during the night. The picture, as described by ibn Kaspi (above) and others, is of a baker who starts the fire in the oven at night and lets it intensify until morning, while his customers (who use the oven to bake their own bread) let their own dough rise at home. In the same way, these people stoke their fires all night. These are not fires of lust but rather of “intrigue” or, perhaps rendered more carefully, “ambush.” All night, they plot how to carry out their lust-driven sins.

*Kulam yeichamu ka-tanur ve-akh’lu et-shofteihem*

*Kol-malkheihem nafalu ein-korei vahem eilai*

All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their judges.

All their kings have fallen; none of them calls upon Me.

Until this point, the focus has been on a group of men who conspire to commit adultery. From the context, it seems that they are somehow connected to the royal house but extend beyond it, perhaps part of the aristocracy. The monarch and his ministers were either seen as indirect beneficiaries of their thievery (and it is unclear how that relates to the *ni’uf*) or as being perversely delighted with the lawlessness itself. As we will see, they seem to be taking advantage of the poorer segment of society.

Our verse introduces a new set of players – the *shoftim* who, we hope, attempt to stand in the breach and endeavor to correct the scofflaws and keep them from realizing the fruits of their intrigues. Most of the *Rishonim* assume that “devouring the judges” is to be taken literally – these would-be adulterers kill the civic and religious leaders who stand in their way. Radak takes a different approach:

…for because of their evil deeds, they devour and destroy their judges, who cannot administer justice in the city; on account of the many evildoers, they cannot fulfill their justice. They also flatter (favor) the wicked and do not reprove them, as they see that they (the sinners) have power and they (the judges) are held accountable because they don’t recuse themselves from all judgments; rather, they judge the ones that they are able to and overlook the ones that they cannot. This is similar to what Yeshayahu said: “They do not judge (on behalf of) the orphan, and the claim of the widow does not come before them” (*Yeshayahu* 1:23).

The second clause is interpreted in two ways – either as the kings falling to foreign nations or (per Radak) the kings falling to each other (for example, Ba’asha’s coup against the house of Yerovam, a repeating feature of the Israelite kingdom). The language of the prophecy militates in favor of the latter read, as it seems to be describing a known event that should have inspired calling to God but failed to do so. If we follow the majority of the commentators, however, in reading it as describing kings falling to foreign nations, it must be understood as “their kings **will** fall…yet they will not call out to Me.” R. Yosef Kara adds a brief comment which shapes this verse a bit differently. As opposed to reading that “they fall to foreign kings and *then* do not call out to Me,” he reads, “they fall to foreign kings *because* they did not call out to Me.” This makes the prophetic-futuristic nature of the phrase more impactful on its immediate audience and an easier read for us.

*Ephraim ba’amim hu yitboleil*

*Ephraim haya uga b’li hafukha*

Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples; Ephraim is a cake not turned.

The first clause is clear especially within the context of–the prophecy of the kings being captured by other nations. The second, however, is not as clear. A “cake not turned” implies that one side may be singed while the other is still raw – in which case Ephraim has not been properly led, its “bakers” not seeing to their welfare. Others read it as an indication of the lust with which other nations will devour them: they won’t wait for them to become properly prepared but will pounce on Ephraim immediately.

*Akhlu zarim kocho ve-hu lo yada’*

*Gam-seiva zarka bo ve-hu lo yada’*

Aliens devour his strength, and he knows it not; gray hairs are sprinkled upon him, and he knows it not.

This continues the picture of deportment and exile; the epistrophe *ve-hu lo yada’* serves to underscore the intentional and willing ignorance of Ephraim to their inevitable plight. Even though they have grey hairs and should have the wisdom of experience, they still “don’t know.”

PART 3: Poetic Justice (verses 10-12)

*V’anah g’on-Yisrael befanav*

*Ve-lo-shavu el-Hashem Elokeihem ve-lo vikshuhu bekhol-zot*

The pride of Yisrael witnesses[[1]](#footnote-1) against him; yet they do not return to Hashem their God, nor seek him, for all this.

Most read the opening word as meaning “afflict,” from the root *‘ayin-nun-yod*. The pride of Yisrael is afflicted before them – and nonetheless they (have not) (will not) return to God nor seek Him out. The great hopes expressed in the middle of the previous prophecy – “come let us return…” (6:1) – are dashed here, even on the stormy seas of exile and oppression.

*Va-yehi Ephraim k’yona fotah ein leiv*

*Mitzrayim kara’u Ashur halakhu*

Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria.

Nonetheless, Ephraim, like a foolish dove (see below) turns to Egypt and/or Assyria for relief from their (Syrian?) enemies. The hopelessness and foolishness of this attempt are fairly clear: Egypt has a history of enmity towards Yisrael (dating back to the enslavement); the brief détente enjoyed during Shlomo’s era, with his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter (*Melakhim* 1 3:1), was rocked in the next generation with the invasion of Shishak (ibid. 14:25-26; *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2 12:2-9).

The “silliness” of the dove is explained by R. Yosef Kara as follows:

There is not bird as foolish as the dove; all other birds, if their young are taken from them, do not return to their nests; but the dove takes no heed to this, returning to her nest.

Ibn Kaspi has yet another take:

It seems to me that the foolishness of the dove intended here is because doves constantly leave their cotes to “graze” in gardens and fields and they are free from the cote-owners. Yet they return to the cote, of their own volition, until they are taken and slaughtered. In addition, many trappers lay in wait for them near the dovecote, for they know that they will return there, which is enormous foolishness. This is exactly how our nation acted with regard to Egypt and Assyria.

(See also R. Eliezer and ibn Ezra, who take a different approach to explaining the silliness of the dove.)

*Ka’asher yeileikhu efros aleihem rishti k’of ha-shamayim orideim*

*Ay’sireim kesheima’ la’adatam*

As they go, I will spread over them My net; I will bring them down like birds of the air; I will chastise them for their wicked deeds.

Continuing with the image of the trapped bird, the net God spreads to catch His people will stretch however far they go for their worthless assistance. The word *ay’sireim* is understood by ibn Kaspi, following Menachem, as meaning “I will tie them down” (from *asar*) – continuing the image of the net. Dunash (predictably) disagreed with Menachem[[2]](#footnote-2) and read the word as “I will afflict them” – from *yaser* – and this approach is adopted by most of the *Rishonim*.

**For Further Study:**

Shalom Paul *The Image of the Oven and the Cake in Hosea 7:4-10* Vetus Testamentum 18 (1968) 114-120

Angel Saenz-Badillos: *Early Hebraists in Spain: Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat* in “Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I, 2 (2000), pp. 96-109

1. So OJPS; but see our comments as to the meaning of the opening word [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Menachem b. Saruk and Dunash b. Labrat were the two “star” grammarians in ibn Shaprut’s academy in 10th c. Spain. Their disputes are well documented in much of the literature of the medieval *pashtanim*. See For Further Study. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)