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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #14: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the time of Chizkiyahu (3)**

**The war: “As Shalman [Shalmanesser] spoiled Beit-Arbel” (*Hoshea* 10:14)**

Hoshea describes the military downfall of the kingdom of Israel in three different places:

I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Yizre’el (*Hoshea* 1:5);

For you have been a snare on Mitzpa, and a net spread upon Tavor (Ibid. 5:1);

And all your fortresses shall be spoiled, as Shalman spoiled Beit-Arbel on the day of battle; the mother was dashed in pieces with her children [the kingdom together with its soldiers]” (Ibid. 10:14).

It is no coincidence that all three quotes refer to the valleys of the Lower Galilee region – a critical link between Shomron and the Galilee that was also part of the international trade route from Assyria to Egypt.

Yeshayahu described Tiglat-Pileser’s first two campaigns into the kingdom of Israel (in the time of Achaz/Pekach):

For the former has lightly afflicted the land of Zevulun and the land of Naftali, but the latter has dealt a heavier blow by way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in the district of the nations. (*Yeshayahu* 8:23)

Tiglat-Pileser, the great conqueror, had left Shomron as a small vassal kingdom under the rule of Hoshea ben Ela. After his death, Hoshea was drawn into a final rebellion with Egyptian support. He attempted (apparently) to renew the connection between Shomron and the Galilee and to build fortifications protecting the road from Yizre’el to Tavor. Shalmanesser, however, broke through the Israelite fortifications and went up against Shomron.

The description of these events in *Sefer Melakhim* is rather brief, mentioning only the prolonged siege on Shomron “for three years” and the exile of the king.[[1]](#footnote-1) Hoshea elaborates further, describing the despoiling and destruction (apparently during the siege) of Beit El and the Israelite temple (with the calf), which had stood as a symbol since the time of Yarovam ben Nevat:

Their silver and their gold they have made for themselves into idols, that they may be cut off. Your calf, O Shomron, is cut off; My anger is kindled against them… the calf of Shomron shall be broken in slivers. (*Hoshea* 8:4-6)

Their heart is divided; now they shall bear their guilt; He will break down their altars, He will spoil their pillars. Surely now they will say, ‘We have no king, for we did not fear the Lord, and the king – what can he do for us? … He, too, shall be carried into Assyria… (Ibid. 10:2-6)

Thus, Shalmanesser set the final siege on Shomron, bringing it to its knees and leading to its expulsion.

**Destruction of Shomron – why and how?**

From the prophetic perspective, it is less important exactly *what* happened; more important is the message about *why* it happened:

When they set themselves shepherds [kings], they became full; they were filled [with pride] and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten Me. *(Hoshea* 13:6)

It is your destruction, O Israel, that you are against Me, against your help.

Ho; where is your king, that he may save you in all your [collapsing] cities? And your judges [where are your leaders], of whom you said, “Give me a king, and princes”? (Ibid. 9-10)

The iniquity of Efraim is bound up; his sin is sealed. (Ibid. 12)

Shomron shall bear her guilt, for she has rebelled against her God... (Ibid. 14:1)

Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride [any more] upon [Egyptian] horses, neither will we call any more the work of our hands [the golden calves] our gods, for in You the fatherless shall find mercy. (Ibid. 4)

Nevertheless, we ask: what happened during the three-year siege of Shomron?

*Hoshea* offers the following description:

Therefore I have become for them like a lion; like a leopard by the way I will watch (*ashur* – an allusion to the Assyrian army).

I will meet them [on the battlefield] as a bear that is bereaved of her pups, the wild beast shall tear [the bodies of the corpses]. (13:7-8)

I give you a king in My anger [i.e., Hoshea ben Ela, installed by Assyria], and take him away in My wrath [after he rebelled with Egyptian support]. (13:11)

[The Assyrian army, arriving from the east] will come [like] an east wind, the wind of the Lord, coming up from the wilderness, and his spring shall become dry, and his fountain shall be dried up [they will seize all the sources of water]; he shall spoil the treasure of all precious vessels [in Shomron]. (13:15)

[The defenders of Shomron] shall fall by the sword, their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women shall be ripped up. (14:1)

The kings of Aram, Chazael and Ben-Hadad, had meted out the same treatment to women and children[[2]](#footnote-2) but had not been able to conquer Shomron.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Assyrian empire succeeded.

**The destruction of Shomron and expulsion of its population in Sargon’s inscription**

One of the inscriptions of Sargon (Shalmanesser’s successor) describes the rebellion, the siege, the conquest of Shomron, and the expulsion of its inhabitants as though it had all happened under his reign:

The Shomronites reached an agreement with another of the enemy kings so as no longer to bear the yoke of my mastership, and so as no longer to pay me tribute, and they launched hostilities. I fought against them: the 27,280 men who were in [Shomron], along with their chariots, and the gods in whom they put their trust, all became my spoils; I took 200 [a different version says 50] chariots for the royal guard, and the rest I installed in the land of Assyria. I resettled the city of Shomron and made it larger than it had been. I brought into its midst people from lands that I conquered. I set my official as governor over them. I counted them among the people of Assyria.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A marked, decisive change then occurred in the ethnic composition of the population in part of the territory of the former kingdom of Israel, especially in strategic areas and in the capital, Shomron. This change is discernible in archaeological findings such as in Megiddo and in Shomron. For the first time since *Bnei Yisrael* had entered and settled the land, Tiglat-Pileser and Sargon exiled an Israelite population to other parts of their empire. The number of deportees was huge – the 27,280 appearing in Sargon’s inscription far exceeds the number of exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon 124 years later (the exile of Yehoyakhin numbered ten thousand[[5]](#footnote-5)) – though it was not everyone. Despite the great destruction that befell the kingdom of Israel, an Israelite population remained in the conquered territory. Nevertheless, the kings of Assyria brought about drastic and unprecedented demographic change, introducing populations into *Eretz Yisrael* from other lands they had conquered: Mesopotamia, Syria, and some Arab tribes.

According to the narrative in *Sefer Melakhim*, the exiles were led out of Shomron and settled “in Chlach, and in Chavor on the river Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Chavor river is in northern Mesopotamia (eastern Turkey of today), Chlach is to the north of Ninveh (northern Iraq), and Mede is in northwestern Iran – areas that were the destination of Sargon’s campaigns in the years to come, 716-713 B.C.E. Deportations to the cities of Shomron also continued throughout the following years, during the reigns of Esarhaddon and his son, Ashurbanipal.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The deportees who were brought to the cities of Shomron “from Babylon and from Kutah”[[8]](#footnote-8) are referred to in Tanakh as “Shomronites” (*Shomronim*), while Chazal refer to them as “Kuttites” (*Kutim*). These populations viewed the worship that was practiced in the kingdom of Israel as “the law of the gods of the land” – in other words, the ritual required to appease the “local gods.” They learned about Israelite religious practice from an exiled *kohen* who was returned to Beit El, and integrated portions of these Israelite teachings with the pagan rituals they had brought with them:

They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, in the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they act in keeping with their former ways: they do not fear the Lord, neither do they follow their statutes, or their ordinances, or the law or the commandment which the Lord commanded the children of Yaakov, whom He named Yisrael. (*Melakhim* II 17:33-34)

Thus, the Israelite remnant still in the land faced the threat of assimilation, and their faith was also at risk. But there was also hope.

**Love wins over all**

The moment that the sins of Shomron and Beit El were out of sight (at least from the perspective of Hoshea’s prophecy, like Yirmiyahu at the time of the siege on Jerusalem), the simple people of Efraim came back into focus. The prophet again expresses God’s great love, like a father who “teaches” his children, “taking them upon His arms”[[9]](#footnote-9) –

For Israel is a child, and I love him; and out of Egypt I called My son. …

I drew them with cords of man, with bands of love… (*Hoshea* 11:1-4)

Although the prevailing conception (since ancient times) has been that the “ten tribes” in their entirety were exiled and lost, the Assyrians actually exiled only Shomron; most inhabitants of the villages remained, all at once becoming subjects of the Assyrian “satrapy,” and the prophet says about them:

How can I give you up, Efraim? …

How shall I make you as Adma, set you as Tzevo’im [cities of Sedom and Amora]?

My heart is turned within Me; My compassions are aroused together.

I will not [further] execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not return to destroy Efraim; for I am God and not a man [who would typically persist even without cause]. In your midst [Efraim, the remnant in the land, I dwell] – the Holy One; I shall not come into the city [again to destroy]. (Ibid. 8-9)

Indeed, the mountains of Efraim and Menashe, as well as the Galilee, experienced no more such fighting under the rule of Assyria and Babylonia. The desolation brought upon Yehuda (as well as Moav, Edom, and Philistia) by the Babylonians, in suppressing the uprisings, was not paralleled in the portions of Efraim and the north.

The moment that the evil politics and foreign worship disappeared, the tribes of Efraim and Menashe, as well as Zevulun and Asher, Shimon, and Naftali, who remained in the land, were free to renew ties with Jerusalem – and this is indeed what happened at the “Pesach of Chizkiyahu”[[10]](#footnote-10) and during Yoshiyahu’s purification.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There is a great deal of similarity between Yirmiyahu and Hoshea, especially in the prophecies of love and the consolation to Rachel and to Efraim, and of course when Yirmiyahu is sent “in the days of King Yoshiyahu” to the remnant of the tribes of the north.[[12]](#footnote-12) The eighty pilgrims who came to the Temple “from Shekhem, from Shilo, and from Shomron”[[13]](#footnote-13) testify to his success.

**The call to *teshuva* for the remnant in the land**

Hoshea addresses his final – and surprising – message to those remaining in the land:

Return, O Israel, unto the Lord your God, for you have stumbled [Shomron is desolate] in your iniquity.

Take with you words and return to the Lord; say to Him: “Forgive all iniquity and accept good [deeds]; and we shall render the offering of our lips like bullocks [in confession and repentance]… (*Hoshea* 14:2-4)

There is no longer a “temple,” nor a kingdom; no politics, no sacrifices. The prophet notes this specifically as a repair for the sins of the kingdom (Assyria and Egypt) and for the “temples” built for the calves:

“…for [only] in You shall the fatherless [generation] find mercy.” (v. 4)

Already now, following the destruction of Shomron, some 800 years prior to “Yavneh and its sages,” Hoshea’s prophecy not only prioritizes lovingkindness over sacrifice,[[14]](#footnote-14) but goes so far as to propose “words” – prayer and confession – in exchange for sacrifices, in the absence of the Temple.

Then God returns a loving response to the repentance and return of Israel:

I will heal their backsliding [for which they have repented]; I will love them without limits, for My anger is turned away from him…

Efraim [shall say]: “What do I have to do any more with idols?”

As for Me, I respond [remembering them for good] and look upon him [*ashurenu*];

I am a leafy cypress tree [not like the trees that were worshipped, or used to make idols]; your fruit is found from Me. (*Hoshea* 14:5-9)

What is the background to this verse?

Even after Yehu put an end to Ba’al-worship in Shomron, there remained a great many pagan influences in addition to the golden calves: “and there remained the *ashera* in Shomron.”[[15]](#footnote-15) There are even inscriptions which juxtapose God’s Name (the Tetragrammaton) with “*ashera*” in connection with Shomron.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Hoshea – the only one of the prophets associated with Divine rebuke, rhetoric, and metaphor whose style and language reflect the northern part of Israel – concludes with a wondrous verse:

Who is wise? Let him understand these things. Who is prudent? Let him know them. For straight are the ways of the Lord; the just walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them. (14:10)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Melakhim* II 17:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Melakhim* II 8:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot Historiot mei-Ashur u-Bavel*, Jerusalem 5764, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Melakhim* II 24:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. 18:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on the origins of the new settlers in Shomron, see N. Neeman, “*Shinuyei Ukhlusin be-Eretz Yisrael be-Ikvot ha-Haglayot ha-Ashuriot,*” *Katedra* 54 (1989), pp. 43-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Melakhim* II 17:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Hoshea* 11:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Divrei Ha-yamim* II Chapter 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 34:6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Yirimiyahu* 3:6-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Yirmiyahu* 41:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Hoshea* 5:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Melakhim* II 13:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Churvat Teiman (Kuntillet Ajrud), excavated by Zeev Meshel in 1975-6 (see Wikipedia). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)