YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

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

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #13: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the time of Chizkiyahu (2)**

**Hoshea ben Ela and the lead-up to Shomron’s destruction**

As noted in the previous *shiur*, the death of Tiglat-Pileser generated a wave of hope among the vanquished nations of the region and ushered in a new round of insurrection, including the rebellion of Hoshea ben Ela. A few years previously, Tiglat-Pileser had recorded, in a royal inscription, his exploits in “the land of the house of Omri” (i.e., the kingdom of Israel): “They brought down their king, Pekach, and I placed Hoshea over them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This inscription seems to show that the assassination of Pekach by Hoshea ben Ela was carried out with the support of the great Assyrian conqueror, and it is easy to understand why Tiglat-Pileser’s death freed Hoshea from the yoke of subservience and opened the door to an alliance with Egypt and the final rebellion.

Tiglat-Pileser’s successor, Shalmanesser V (726-722 B.C.E.), left no inscriptions and it is difficult to piece together the events of his reign. The Tanakh reflects clearly what happened in Shomron. Hoshea ben Ela sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and initiated a rebellion against Shalmanesser, who came to Shomron and laid siege to it for three years.

*Melakhim* II records that Shalmanesser’s campaign against Shomron started in the seventh year of Hoshea ben Ela (which was the fourth year of Chizkiyahu).[[2]](#footnote-2) The length of the siege on Shomron – three years – gives us some indication of Shalmanesser’s weakness at that time.[[3]](#footnote-3) Shalmanesser died during the siege, and it was Sargon who exiled Shomron. It is surprising that our written tradition preserves only a hint to this, in the “*keri*” (vocalized) form of a single word:

…Shalmanesser, king of Assyria, came up against Shomron and besieged it. And they took it (*va-yilkeduha*), at the end of three years… (*Melakhim* II 18:9-10)

Rather than *va-yilkedah* (“and he took it”), the word is read as *va-yilkeduha* (“and *they* took it”) – meaning the Assyrians in general took the city, because Shalmanesser himself had died.

We have no direct descriptions of the period of rebellion in Shomron and what society looked like in the final years of this capital of the kingdom of Israel, but reading the prophecies of Hoshea and Yeshayahu can help fill in the picture. These prophecies also reflect the first few years of the reign of Chizkiyahu as king of Yehuda.

**The prophet Hoshea’s description of the kingdom of Israel**

When I would heal Israel, then the iniquity of Efraim is uncovered, and the wickedness of Shomron, for they commit falsehood, and the thief enters, and the troop of robbers make a raid outside.

And let them not say to their heart; I remember all their wickedness; now their own doings have beset them about, they are before My face.

They make the king glad with their wickedness, and the princes with their lies….

Efraim mixes himself with the peoples; Efraim has become a cake not turned.

Strangers have devoured his strength and he does not know it; gray hairs are here and there upon him, and he does not know it.

And the pride of Israel testifies to his face, but they have not returned to the Lord their God, nor sought Him, for all this.

And Efraim has become like a silly dove, without understanding; they call unto Egypt; they go to Assyria. (*Hoshea* 7:1-3, 8-11)

Let us start by considering the last verse of the prophecy, which is easy to understand: "They call to Egypt; they go to Assyria." In other words, Efraim, the "dove," sought aid from Egypt, and this initiative ultimately led to the exile in Assyria. There is no period in the history of the kingdom of Efraim (Israel) to which this verse could apply in the literal sense, other than the rebellion of Hoshea ben Ela. On this basis, Malbim dates the entire chapter to the period of the fall of Israel into Assyrian hands. According to Malbim, the chapter describes internal disintegration of the kingdom, which preceded the external, physical destruction:

Afterwards, Hoshea ben Ela slew Pekach and ruled in his stead. “It was against him that Shalmanesser, king of Assyria, waged war, and Hoshea became his servant […] And the king of Assyria found conspiracy in Hoshea, for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt […] Therefore the king of Assyria shut him up and bound him in prison […] And he went up to Shomron and laid siege to it […] and carried Israel away to Assyria” (*Melakhim* II 17:3-6). The text reveals that the discovery by the king of Assyria of Hoshea's conspiracy was because of talebearers from amongst Israel, who were opposed to Hoshea and schemed against him to destroy him. It was they who made known to the king of Assyria that [Hoshea] was planning an insurrection against him, and it is this that the prophet addresses from this point until the end of the *sefer*. (Malbim on *Hoshea* 7:3)

Based on this assertion that the chapter belongs to the period of Hoshea ben Ela, the last king in Shomron, we can try to understand the prophet's metaphors. The opening verse of the chapter ("When I would heal Israel") makes sense as a reference to the assassination of Pekach and a last chance for Shomron to survive, in truncated form (and under Assyrian patronage), if it would focus on an effort to effect internal repair (as hinted to in *Hoshea* 6:1 and made explicit in Chapter 14). This initiative could be undertaken in parallel to the religious revolution initiated by Chizkiyahu in Yehuda. It would require a leader of stature, who would abandon the idea of rebelling against Assyria and instead concentrate on repairing the society in Israel. However, the prophet declares that God's examination of Shomron reveals the extent of its sins: falsehood and deceit prevail throughout the land, and there is no hint of *teshuva* or any movement towards repair. The idea that all the sins of Shomron have been erased and atoned through the blows dealt by Tiglat-Pileser, and that now, with Divine forgiveness, there will be a political turn for the better, has no basis: "Let them not say in their heart--I remember all their wickedness". All Israel’s wickedness and evildoing is still before God's eyes.

In verse 3, the prophet focuses his rebuke more precisely. Without yet mentioning the source of the evil, he directs his criticism towards those who, in their wickedness, try to keep the king and his ministers happy. This is a familiar image of political, social, and moral corruption, which leads to the complete blindness of the final rebellion. Instead of internal repair, the kingdom was treated to another version of Pekach’s delusions (Egyptian support against Assyria), with a deepening of internal corruption: “Efraim mixes himself with the peoples; Efraim has become a cake not turned” – a cake that is not turned over in the oven (of those times), such that it becomes burned on one side, while remaining unbaked on the other.

In verses 4-6, the prophet describes the kingdom in its entirety as a bakery that is consumed with flames:

They are all adulterers, as an oven heated by the baker, who ceases to stir from the kneading of the dough until it be leavened.

On the day of our king, the princes make him sick with the heat of wine; he stretches out his hand with scorners.

For they have made ready their heart like an oven, while they lie in wait; their baker sleeps all the night; in the morning it burns as a flaming fire. (*Hoshea* 7:4-6)

The prophet paints for us a strange picture of a bakery whose ovens are warmed and ready to receive the loaves, while the baker is idle; instead of kneading the dough “until it is leavened,” he is busy hosting a party for adulterous drunkards inside the bakery. After they have drunk, the baker and his company sleep; when they awaken in the morning, they discover the entire bakery going up in flames.

The message that Hoshea is conveying by means of this metaphor seems almost obvious. The prophet himself devotes only a single verse to it (7):

They are all hot as an oven, and devour their judges; all their kings have fallen; there is none among them that calls to Me.

The bakery is Shomron in its final days. The metaphor is an accurate reflection of the state of the kingdom: the leaders and officers are immersed in adultery, revelry, and debauchery, forgetting to watch over the goods baking in the oven – the cake that has become singed on one side, while the other side remains unbaked. Watching over the oven is considered an elementary skill and discipline required of everyone in his own home. Leaving an oven unwatched brings catastrophe upon the whole house. Everyone understands this, and yet the rulers of Shomron permit themselves to neglect their responsibility, leading to the destruction of their house. The disaster that happens in the bakery has its origins in neglect and blindness; it could have been avoided.

As noted, the verse “they call to Egypt; they go to Assyria” helps us date the prophecy to the period immediately after the death of Tiglat-Pileser. Hoshea ben Ela dares to try (or is persuaded to try) to establish a new regional alliance with Egypt against Assyria, as though he is a powerful king with extensive influence, but he is surrounded by a company of flatterers who exercise tyranny over the people, join in the king’s decadence, and do nothing to stop the fire. The prophet sums up God’s message to the kings of Israel in this generation as follows:

They have set up kings, but not from Me; they have made princes, and I knew it not… (*Hoshea* 8:4)

And he sums up the king’s final imprisonment:

I give you a king in My anger, and take him away in My wrath. (*Hoshea* 8:11)

**The drunkenness of Efraim in Yeshayahu’s prophecy (Chapter 28)**

The inebriated, foundering Shomron is also graphically portrayed in one of the few prophecies in which Yeshayahu speaks about the kingdom of Israel. This prophecy is a warning to “the scoffers, the ballad-mongers of this people which is in Jerusalem”[[4]](#footnote-4) who have followed the example set by Efraim. The description of Efraim here (perhaps already in retrospect, and with a view to learning a lesson) is a perfect match and complement to Hoshea’s description:

Woe to the crown of pride of the drunkards of Efraim, and to the fading flower of his glorious beauty, which is at the head of the fat valley of them that are smitten down with wine.

Behold, the Lord has a mighty and strong one, like a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction, as a storm of mighty waters overflowing, that casts down to the earth with violence.

The crown of pride of the drunkards of Efraim shall be trodden underfoot;

And the fading flower of his glorious beauty, which is at the head of the fat valley, shall be as the first-ripe fig before the summer, which when one looks upon it, while it is yet in his hand he eats it up.

On that day, the Lord of hosts shall be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, for **the remnant of His people**,

And for a spirit of judgment for him that sits in judgment, and for strength to them that turn back the battle at the gate.

But these, too, reel with wine, and stagger with strong drink; the Kohen and the prophet reel with strong drink; they are confused because of wine, they stagger because of strong drink, they reel in vision, they totter in judgment.

For all tables are full of filthy vomit, and no place is clean.

To whom shall one teach knowledge? And whom shall one cause to understand the message? Those that are weaned from milk; those that are drawn from the breasts.

For it is precept by precept, precept by precept, line by line, line by line; here a little, there a little.

For with stammering lips and with a strange tongue shall it be spoken to this people,

To whom it was said, ‘This is the rest, give rest to the weary, and this is the refreshing’, yet they would not hear.

And so the word of the Lord is for them precept by precept, precept by precept, line by line, line by line, here a little, there a little, that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. (*Yeshayahu* 28:1-13)

The great question regarding this prophecy is: Who is “the remnant of His people?” Is Yeshayahu still referring to the remnant of Shomron, before its destruction and the exile of its population, or is he already talking about Jerusalem, which has failed to learn the lessons of Shomron?

Yeshayahu starts off by describing the drunkenness and arrogance of the kingdom of Efraim prior to its destruction. The kingdom sits “at the head of the fat valley” in both the geographical sense (the mountains of Shomron overlook vast valleys planted with olive trees that drip with oil) and in terms of consciousness (its leaders are immersed in sensual indulgence and arrogance). The destruction of Shomron is described as “a storm of mighty waters overflowing,” as “a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction” that cannot be stopped and that will rage until Shomron is trampled under the feet of her conquerors.

The people (or their leaders) scoff at the prophet: “To whom shall one teach knowledge? And whom shall one cause to understand the message? Those that are weaned from milk; those that are drawn from the breasts.” The prophet’s words are suited to little children, not to a splendid, adult society. His words are “precept by precept, line by line” – the way one teaches young children to read, using simple words that do not connect to form a proper sentence. Thus Yeshayahu describes the disdain of the haughty leadership. But the prophet views these very leaders as themselves behaving like little children, devoid of understanding and responsibility, such that God’s words appear to them as meaningless phrases that foretell destruction: “and be broken, and snared, and taken.” The banquet of imperious drunkards, the blindness and lack of responsibility of the rulers of Efraim, serve to connect Hoshea’s metaphor of the sleeping baker in the burning bakery with Yeshayahu’s metaphor of little children jeering at the prophet-teacher.

**The struggle against worship of the calves**

**The prophet vs. Yaakov?**

An important aspect of the problems in Shomron is expressed by Hoshea’s references to the story of Yaakov from *Sefer Bereishit*.[[5]](#footnote-5) At first glance, it is difficult to understand why Hoshea chooses to contend with Yaakov’s story – until we enter the world of the devotees of Beit-El and the temple of the calf, which served as “the king’s sanctuary and a royal house”[[6]](#footnote-6) from the time of Yarovam ben Nevat until the time of Yarovam ben Yoash.

These devotees used the story of Yaakov as proof of the holiness of Beit El, from the time of the forefathers, and its superiority to Jerusalem, the seat of the house of David. The polemic against “Yaakov” is actually conducted against those who invoke his name falsely, grasping the “molten calf”[[7]](#footnote-7) and recounting the story of Yaakov’s dream in Beit-El, against the Torah’s teachings.

At the center of the religious confrontation between “Beit El” and “Jerusalem” stands the question: What is the binding foundation of our faith? Is it the tradition of the forefathers, or the Exodus from Egypt and the Torah of Moshe?

The Lord has a controversy [also] with Yehuda, but [now] will punish Yaakov according to his ways; according to his actions He will repay him.

In the womb he took his brother [Esav] by the heel, and by his strength he strove with a heavenly being.

So he strove with an angel, and prevailed; [the angel] wept, and made supplication to him; at Beit-El He would find him [Yaakov], and there He would speak with us. (*Hoshea* 12:3-5)

Therefore, they offer sacrifices in Beit El. But God never spoke with Yaakov about a split between Yehuda and Israel; He spoke to him concerning all of his offspring:

But the Lord God of hosts – the Lord is His Name.

Therefore, [Efraim] turn back to your God [and not to the stories of Yaakov], keep mercy and justice, and wait for your God continually…

And Yaakov fled into the field of Aram, and Israel served for a wife (Rachel), and for a wife (Leah) he kept sheep.

And by a prophet (Moshe) the Lord brought Israel up out of Egypt, and by a prophet he (the nation) was kept [from sin]…

And now they sin more and more, and have made them molten images of their silver, according to their own understanding, even idols, all of them the work of the craftsmen, of them they say: They that sacrifice men kiss calves [i.e., sin]…

Yet I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt, and you know no God but Me, and beside Me there is no savior. (*Hoshea* 12:6 – 13:4)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. A. Demsky, *Madrikh bi-Mekorot Chitzoniim le-Toldot Yisrael bi-Yemei ha-Mikra* (5742), p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Melakhim* II 18:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A Melmet, *Milchamot Yisrael ve-Ashur, Historia Tzevait shel Eretz Yisrael*, Tel Aviv 5733, p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Yeshayahu* 28:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hoshea* 11, and Chapter 12 – 13:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Amos* 7:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Shemot* 32:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)