**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**

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In memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #01:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea: Introduction**

A SHORT PREFACE TO THE STUDY OF PROPHETIC ORATORY

Each prophetic collection is unique. This singularity manifests itself in contextual setting, rhetorical style, nature and identity of the audience as well as whatever glimpses of personality of the prophet himself we are afforded. Above all of these, the individualistic bent of a prophetic work is found in its underlying message.

For example, there is little question that Malakhi’s purpose, the evil he is sent to correct, is the attitude that the people in Judea have towards their newly rebuilt Temple. It is clear that Chaggai is dispatched to encourage that selfsame rebuilding; and Zekharya’s message is **apparently** meant to temper Chaggai’s nationalistic tone with universalist and ethical purification, **along with** the military triumph envisioned by Chaggai. We could continue and survey each of the prophetic books as well as the mission and message of the pre-literary prophets such as Shemuel (proper relationship between monarch and prophet), Eliyahu (singular devotion to Hashem) and Elisha (contra Ba’al) — but we may suffice by reminding ourselves of Amos’s constant drumbeat of rebuke against judicial corruption and the abuse of the poor. In *Amos*, the stain of idolatry and the sanctuaries at Beit El and Dan, the pilgrimages to Gilgal and the paths to Be’er Sheva serve more as a background and setting for Amos’s oratory than constitute the message itself. That message is best summarized in his famous line (5:24): “Let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Thus, before beginning our study of *Hoshea*, we have to prepare to delve into a text without yet knowing what that text intends to argue; to listen to words of suasion without the awareness of what we are being asked to accept or to change. It can be a bit frustrating, especially if we approach the prophet with preconceived notions about what he is saying (or, as is common today, what we **want** him to be saying). Still, therein lies the beauty, the splendor and, if you will, the magic of diving into a book of *Tanakh*. We will try to organically, yet methodically, lift the velvet veil of prophetic poetry to discover the hardened steel of the Divine message.

When studying the **transcription** of orally presented prophecies, we have to keep the watchword of the Sages in mind: “A prophecy that has multi-generational import was recorded; a prophecy that does not (i.e. only has a message for the prime audience) was not recorded.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We have to first address that which is accessible to us — the **written** text, addressed to all generations, including ours. Using as many textual clues, structural patterns, allusions, *leitworten* and so forth, we will assay the simple and straightforward meaning — *peshat —* as it emerges from the literary form. Having established the most likely meaning of words and phrases, contextual clues etc., we will then do our best to recover the original message. In other words, how the prophet’s present and direct audience would have understood his message, how they might have reacted to it and which images and memories it was likely to evoke for them. We will then return to our own experience as readers and sift through the orator’s arsenal of **literary** devices to discern the multi-generational message which, ultimately, becomes our privilege, our challenge and our burden.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF *HOSHEA*

Four Judean prophets prophesize during the middle to end of the 8th century BCE: Hoshea, Amos, Yeshayahu and Mikha.[[2]](#footnote-2) Before beginning our study of *Hoshea*, we ought to note the points of intersection as well as separation among them.

The opening verse of *Hoshea* provides the only biographical detail about our prophet. Unlike Amos, whose livelihood and lack of professional training as a prophet is highlighted in his confrontation at Beit El (*Amos* 7:10-17), we aren’t told where Hoshea comes from or what he does for a living. According to *Chazal*, the former implies that he is a Jerusalemite;[[3]](#footnote-3) the latter may indicate that he is a member of the prophetic guild and is not engaged in any other means of making a living.

Yeshayahu’s collection is introduced as follows:

The vision of Yeshayahu the son of Amotz, which he saw concerning Judea and Jerusalem, in the days of Uziyahu, Yotam, Achaz and Yechizkiyahu, kings of Judea.

*Mikha*’s opening verse reads:

The word of the Lord that came to Mikha the Morashti in the days of Yotam, Achaz and Yechizkiya, kings of Judea, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

To round out the picture, here is the introduction to *Amos*:

The words of Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uziya, king of Judea, and in the days of Yerovam the son of Yoash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

Finally, we have *Hoshea*:

The word of the Lord that came to Hoshea the son of Be’eri, in the days of Uzziya, Yotam, Achaz and Chizkiya, kings of Judea, and in the days of Yerovam the son of Yoash, king of Israel.

All four of them are reckoned in reference to the reigns of Judean kings; Hoshea and Amos alone are also considered in reference to Yerovam ben Yoash, king of Israel.

Two of them have their hometowns identified; the other two are introduced with a patronym and Amos stands alone as having his livelihood noted.

This table compares and contrasts the introductions to these four prophets who “prophesized in that period”:[[4]](#footnote-4)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Yeshayahu** | **Hoshea** | **Amos** | **Mikha** |
| **Patronym** | Amotz | Be’eri | -- | -- |
| **Hometown** | -- | -- | Tekoa (Judea) | Moreshet (Judea) |
| **Audience** | Yehuda/Jerusalem | -- | Israel | Samaria **and** Jerusalem |
| **Livelihood** | -- | -- | Herdsman | -- |
| **Judean Kings** | Uziya, Yotam, Achaz, Chizkiyahu | Uziya, Yotam, Achaz, Chizkiyahu | Uziya | Yotam, Achaz, Chizkiyahu |
| **Israelite Kings** | -- | Yerovam ben Yoash | Yerovam ben Yoash | -- |
| **Other** | -- | -- | “Two years before the earthquake” | -- |

Mikha begins his prophetic career after the others, as he does not prophesize during the reign of Uziya. Amos’s career, on the other hand, ends earlier than everyone else’s, as his prophetic agency does not outlive Uziya. Mikha and Amos, as such, are the only two of these four whose careers could not have overlapped.

Which of them is the earliest? This question is compounded by a larger consideration. What is the logic behind the ordering of the twelve “small” prophetic books which make up the collection known as *Trei Asar*? *Chazal* tell us that the reason they are anthologized into one collection is due to each book’s brevity, as “*aidei de-zutar mirkhas*,” “due to its being small, it would get lost.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In that same Talmudic discussion, the topic at hand is not the internal organization of the *Trei Asar*, but rather the broader ordering of the prophetic books which is (according to the rabbis) *Yirmeyahu, Yechezkel, Yeshayahu* and *Trei Asar.*[[6]](#footnote-6) They explain as follows:

Yeshayahu precedes Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel; let *Yeshayahu* precede? Since *Melakhim* ends with the destruction [of the Temple], and *Yirmeyahu* deals entirely with the destruction, and *Yechezkel* begins with the destruction but ends with consolation and *Yeshayahu* entirely with consolation [as most of his prophecies refer to the redemption], we juxtapose destruction to destruction and consolation to consolation.

In other words, unlike the earlier books of “prophets” (*Yehoshua-Melakhim*, the “historiography”), the sequence here is thematically driven rather than chronological. However, the Gemara asks about the placement of *Trei Asar* at the end of the collection, based on **chronological** considerations:

But consider that Hoshea preceded, as it is written, “*Techilat dibber Hashem be-Hoshea,”* “The beginning of the Lord’s speaking to Hoshea”(*Hoshea* 1:2). Now did God speak first with Hoshea, and not with any other prophet before him? Weren’t there many prophets between Moshe and Hoshea? And Rabbi Yochanan says: He was the first of four prophets who prophesized in that period, and they were: Hoshea and Yeshayahu, Amos and Mikha. *Hoshea* should precede [the books of those prophets].

[The Gemara answers]: Since his prophecy is written together with Chaggai, Zekharya and Malakhi, and Chaggai, Zekharya and Malakhi were the last of the prophets, he is counted with them…

The Gemara here interprets *Hoshea* 1:2 as meaning that Hoshea was the first of his colleagues to receive prophecy, which would then argue for placing *Trei Asar* (or at least *Hoshea* as a standalone book, were it not for the consideration of “*aidei de-zutar mirkhas”*) at the beginning of the literary prophets. We will revisit this interpretation.

Our position, as outlined in the last few *shiurim* in our Amos series, is that Amos precedes Hoshea; in any case, the placement of *Mikha* as sixth in *Trei Asar* is proof positive that the organizational logic behind the ordering of *Trei Asar* is not chronological. If so, why is *Hoshea* placed first?

THE BOOK(S) OF *HOSHEA —* CHAPTERS 1-3 AND 4-14

The first three chapters comprise an independent unit. It is distinct in numerous ways from the remaining eleven chapters. I would like to argue that it is this opening unit that is so vital to the beginning of the collection and that justifies placing *Hoshea* first in *Trei Asar*.

A quick survey of the history of *nevi’im* and the changing roles of the *navi* will be instructive here.

The first person called a *navi* is Avraham (*Bereishit* 20:7) and the most likely meaning there is “holy man,” i.e. a man whose relationship with God is closer than others.

The next *navi*, although he is never explicitly identified as such, is Moshe. As *av la-nevi’im*, he embodies that Abrahamic quality, along with political, military and religious leadership, as well as what we might term “charismatic” leadership through the use of miracles. (This is aside from perhaps his most significant function, as lawgiver).

Later *nevi’im* of the preliterary era typically fulfilled one of these jobs. Yehoshua is purely a military leader; Shemuel is a religious/ political leader and Eliyahu and Elisha are charismatics. (I am eliding those prophets — some anonymous — who are sent with a single message, such as the *ish ha-Elokim* in *I Melakhim* 13 and Yehu son of Chanani in *I Melakhim* 16.).

None of these, however, are chiefly orators, certainly not before typically antagonistic crowds. Even though Eliyahu has to face an initially unsympathetic gathering on Mt. Carmel (*I Melakhim* 18), he isn’t doing so as an **orator**, but rather as a charismatic who would demonstrate the singular divinity of God and the emptiness of the Ba’al cult through the miracle of heavenly fire.

Just after the passing of Elisha, God inaugurates a new form of prophecy and a new kind of prophet. For the first time, a single person, neither supported by political power (e.g. Moshe, Shemuel) nor aided by the ability to effect miracles (e.g. Eliyahu, Elisha), would stand up against a hostile crowd and attempt to move the people to examine their ways and return to God solely through the power of words. This is the beginning of “persuasive prophecy.” Although we are accustomed to thinking of prophets in this light, we have to set aside what we know (as I argued above) and see this phenomenon for **what it was at the time**— an unprecedented vehicle for the communication of the Divine word.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Book of *Hoshea* opens with a most unusual directive:

Go, take for yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry; for the land has committed great harlotry, departing from the Lord.

The text, which we will analyze in detail next week, goes on to describe Hoshea’s taking a prostitute as a wife, having three children with her and naming them awful names of rejection and punishment. This chapter is all of nine verses.

Chapter 2 is a beautiful, romantic description of a rekindling of the relationship between God and His people, who will realize the emptiness of the Ba’al cult and will return to God. We will study this chapter in detail in *Shiurim* #3 and 4. This is followed by yet another odd command:

And the Lord said to me: “Go again, love a woman beloved of her friend and an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods, and love cakes of raisins.” (3:1)

Amos takes this other woman as a wife and the next two verses describe this odd pairing, concluding with the promise that:

For the Israelites shall sit solitary many days without king, and without prince, and without sacrifice, and without pillar, and without ephod or teraphim; afterward shall the Israelites return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come trembling to the Lord and to His goodness in the end of days. (3:4-5)

Thus concludes the first section of *Hoshea*; the next chapter begins with a more familiar prophetic trope:

*Shimu devar Hashem Beit Yisrael*

Hear the word of the Lord, House of Israel

These two Divine commands, which appear unseemly and border on the sordid, understandably caused a good deal of consternation for commentators throughout the ages. In the next *shiur*, we will discuss the approaches taken by the Rishonim and why a significant number of them deviate from the Midrashic tradition presented here:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Hoshea: Your sons [the Jewish people] have sinned.

Hoshea should have said: But they are Your sons; they are the sons of Your beloved ones, the sons of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov. Extend Your mercy over them. Not only did he fail to say that, but [instead] he said before Him: Master of the Universe, the entire world is Yours; exchange them for another nation.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: What shall I do to this elder [who does not know how to defend Israel]? I will say to him: Go and take a harlot and bear for yourself children of harlotry. And after that I will say to him: Send her away from before you. If he is able to send her away, I will also send away the Jewish people, as it is stated: “The Lord said to Hoshea: Go, take for yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry.” And then it is written: “So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Divlayim” (1:3) …

After two sons and one daughter had been born to him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hoshea: Shouldn’t you have learned from your master Moshe, who, once I spoke with him, separated from his wife? You too, separate yourself from your wife.

He said to him: Master of the Universe, I have sons from her, and I am unable to dismiss her or to divorce her.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, rebuked him and said to him: You, whose wife is a harlot and whose children are children of harlotry, so you do not even know if they are yours or if they are children of other men [despite this, you are still attached to them and will not forsake them]. So too, I am still attached to the Jewish people, who are My sons, the sons of My faithful who withstood ordeals, the sons of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov. They are so special that they are one of the four acquisitions that I acquired in My world…And you, Hoshea, said that I should replace them with another nation?

Once Hoshea realized that he had sinned, he got up to request that God have compassion upon him [for having spoken ill of the Jewish people].

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: Before you request compassion upon yourself, first request compassion upon the Jewish people, since I have already decreed upon them three harsh decrees on your account [in response to your condemnation of them].

Hoshea stood and requested compassion upon the Jewish people and nullified the decree.

God responded and began to bless them, as it is stated: “Yet the number of the Israelites shall be as the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor numbered. And it will be that instead of that which was said to them: You are not My people; it shall be said to them: You are the children of the living God. And the Judeans and the Israelites shall be gathered together” (*Hoshea* 2:1-2). “And I will sow her to Me in the land; and I will have compassion upon her that had not received compassion; and I will say to them that were not My people: You are My people” (*Hoshea* 2:25). (BT *Pesachim* 87a-b)

The first thing to note is the following: at no point do the rabbis attempt to paint Hoshea’s actions as metaphorical or the text as purely a vision. Hoshea **really** marries (at least one) harlot, **has children with her** and develops an attachment for his new family that he is unwilling to sever, even when asked to do so by God.

As this homily presents with such vivid imagery, the prophet begins as a *kateigor* (prosecutor) against the people he is meant to inspire. Before he can be sent to them with God’s message, he has to become a *saneigor* (defender), able and willing to plead their case. However, this is odd, considering that the prophet does not plead their case to God — he pleads God’s case to them!

I would like to suggest an added dimension to the relationship between God-prophet-people that has to be explored here. Although the prophet must have an innate sense of caring for his flock which must be evident with every harsh message he brings, he must also be able to properly represent his dispatcher (or Dispatcher) as completely as possible. Clearly, no human can come close. That notwithstanding, this new kind of prophet, unarmed with political power and bereft of the charisma of miracles, has to be able to internalize, so to speak, how God is “feeling” about His people: the sense of betrayal, yet the longing for a rapprochement; the abhorrence at the treachery, yet the instinctive kinship and paternal love. All of these confusing feelings pull at the prophet’s heartstrings as he contemplates the possibility of sending away his whoring wife and the children they created together — this is what God “feels.” Even though we understand (certainly those of us who inhabit a post-Maimonidean world) that such talk is at best anthropopathic and borders on theological insolence, nonetheless this description of God’s “feelings” is absolutely accurate from the perspective of what He wants His people to sense. They are the betraying wife, the “*yaldei zenunim* (children of harlotry)” that are as dear to Him as ever.

Whether or not Hoshea is chronologically the first of the literary prophets (and I strongly believe that he follows Amos, who truly blazes the trail), his story has to be told before this era can be recounted. As I pointed out above, we first **read** the text for comprehension; then we **listen** to the text with the assumed ears of the original audience; then we go back and **reread** the text as a literary work, from the vantage point of millennia of study and commentary.

When we first open up *Hoshea* as a written text, the first thing that we read is this surprising and counterintuitive command, faithfully (!) fulfilled. The prophet is told that his life and his relationship approximate God’s relationship with His people. This is followed by an uplifting and dramatic vision of a return to the early romance of the relationship — and then, another bizarre command mirroring the first. This sets up our *navi* as a properly suited spokesman for God; as he can understand God’s disappointment and eternal hope, he can identify with God’s frustration mixed with His abiding belief in the underlying rock-solid foundation of the relationship which will, one day, be reconciled.

As a person who can identify with God, he is ready to bring His message, alone and without any of the trappings that prophecy had carried until now, and allow his words, just his words, to be his tools of persuasion.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will begin our study of the text of *Hoshea* and will focus on the nine verses which comprise Chapter 1. We will devote some time to the approach taken by a number of medieval commentators which is at odds with the Midrash cited above and which reads the entire scene of Hoshea’s marriages to be, shall we say, “imaginary” and not to have occurred in any real sense. We will discuss this phenomenon and adduce two additional examples where classic commentators deviate, for one reason or another, from the mainstream interpretive approach in the Talmudic and Midrashic oeuvre.

1. BT *Megilla* 14a; see also *Midrash Zuta* 3:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are other prophets who may operate during the same period but who are not explicitly associated with any royal chronology. Yoel, the author of the last six chapters of *Zekharya*, Yona and Nachum all fall into this group. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. BT *Megilla* 15a; Radak quotes this at the end of his short introduction to *Hoshea*, implying that he holds that Hoshea is a Jerusalemite. This seems to be at odds with the rabbinic tradition (e.g. *Bereishit Rabba* 82:11, based on *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 5:6) he cites there that Be’eri, Hoshea’s father, was a leader from the tribe of Reuven who was exiled by the Assyrians. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BT *Bava Batra* 14b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note that our printed *Tanakh* does not follow this order and is likely based on the Tiberian Masora as reflected in the Aleppo Codex. Rambam’s omission of this alternate tradition, with which he was certainly familiar (from the Codex), is surprising. See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 7:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The argument might be made that this harks back to the patriarchal period where Avraham operates in a similar fashion and under comparable circumstances. This is far truer on the Midrashic plane, however, and is broadly absent from the text of *Bereishit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)