**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 #24:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea**

**Chapters 12:1-13:11: Justification of Poetic Justice**

**(Part 1 12:1-15)**

In our last *shiur* we completed our study of the twenty-six verses that make up Chapters 10 and 11 – a relatively long piece, by Hoshean standards. In that speech, Hoshea reported God’s promise to draw His people back to Him such that they would feel a sense of His immanence and would tremble with awe. As we noted, this promise evoked the vision that Hoshea had presented at the outset, of a Divinely-generated return to the “old romantic days” of the desert.

In this next passage – of identical length – Hoshea delivers his last fully developed rebuke.[[1]](#footnote-1) This rebuke seems to divide organically into two large sections, conveniently broken up with the chapters. This *shiur* and the next will focus on the first section, comprising all of Chapter 12.

As can be seen by the layout of the presentation of the text below, this first section is made up of several independent but correlated segments, punctuated by two hymnal interludes. In this *shiur*, we will study the texts, attending to the challenging words and unusual constructs which, as we have found, are more the rule than the exception in prophetic rhetoric. Next week’s *shiur* will be devoted to a broader view of this passage, utilizing the historic references as well as the structural nuances to discern Hoshea’s larger message – both for his original audience as well as for us, the eternal readers. In addition, we will review the sections and suggest the contribution of each section to the entire passage.

To the text...

**SEGMENT 1: GENERAL REBUKE**

*S’vavuni v’khachash Ephraim, u-v’mirma Beit Yisrael*

*Vi-Yehuda ‘od rad ‘im-E-l, v’im-kedoshim ne’eman.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Ephraim encompasses Me about with lies and the house of Yisrael with deceit;

And Yehuda is yet wayward towards God and towards the Holy One who is faithful.

Hoshea’s familiar pairing of Ephraim and Yisrael focuses the opening of this prophecy on the Northern kingdom, yet the second hemistich reorients our attention to Yehuda as well.

The image of God being “surrounded” (i.e., besieged or entrapped) is a most palpable (while theologically challenging) picture. That God is thus hemmed in by the deceit is all the more powerful when we consider that we do not hear of that type of “Divine impotence” (so to speak) when the people are accused of idolatry or immorality of other types.

A critical point in this verse is the meaning of the *vav* at the beginning of the Yehuda passage. Is it *vav hachibur*, conjunctive *vav*, which would then rope Yehuda into the pen of the accused? Such seems to be the approach of the translation used here, as well as several other English translations. This may be based on the translation of the Septuagint, which evidently had a different syntactical read of the verse, placing the pausal *etnachta* at Yehuda instead of at *Beit Yisrael* – thereby ending the first phrase with *u-v’mirmah Beit Yisrael vi-Yehuda*. In our treatment of the verse, we will follow the majority of translations and the consensus of our *Rishonim*, who instead read Yehuda as a counterpoint.

The word *rad* is seen as “ruling” and works in neat parallel with the upcoming *sarah* (v. 4), describing Yaakov’s power against the “godlike” person he encountered in *Bereishit* 32. In other words, *unlike* Yisrael and their deceptive ways, Yehuda maintains a rulership “with God” and remains loyal to God’s holiness (which may be a reference to the holy sites related to the *Mikdash*).

*Ephraim ro’eh ruach ve-rodeif kadim kol ha-yom kazav va-shod yarbeh*

*U-verit ‘im-Ashur yikhrotu v’shemen le-Mitzrayim yuval*

Ephraim strives after wind and follows after the east wind; All the day he multiplies lies and desolation; and they make a covenant with Assyria and oil is carried into Egypt.

There are two accusations here, seemingly distinct and unrelated. Whereas the first verse was clearly aimed at the deceit (presumably in commerce) that the merchants in the north engaged in, this one returns us to a different familiar theme of Hoshea’s. The nation has demonstrated disloyalty to God and their own history by seeking foreign aid from Egypt and Assyria, two nations with whom we have a brutal history of oppression.

I’d like to suggest that Hoshea is actually tying these two sins together, identifying a single essential character fault in the national ethos. The people are deliberately blinding themselves to the essentialist truths of their own past, their special and exclusive relationship with God and the great power they have over their neighbors by virtue of the leadership role they were meant to play in the region. By promoting an unethical and internally oppressive society, driven by commercial exploitation of the common man, they have lost the claim to the moral high ground which was the key to that power. With that lost, as they chase vanities such as temporary financial windfalls (*double entendre*) – they perforce turn to their neighboring nations and offer to become vassals. This constitutes a more fundamental type of deceit – a misrepresentation of their own role in history. This, perhaps, is the deceit that God describes as surrounding Him and hemming Him in. Even those symbols of vassalage speak to the issue. Making a covenant (read: “treaty”) with Assyria, when they have broken their covenant with God, is a core of that deceit. And bringing oil to Egypt is a tragic reversal of roles. Oil is used for the *menora*, which is intended to demonstrate the light of God that Yisrael brings to the world – and now, unlit and unenlightening, it is sent to Egypt as a tribute so they will accept Yisrael’s vassalage.

**SEGMENT 2: THE *RIV (DISPUTE)***

One prefatory note: the dispute invokes several stories from the Yaakov narrative cycle. It is helpful to read *Bereishit* 25:21-26 and 32:25-33 in tandem with our passage.

*V’riv le-Hashem ‘im-Yehuda,*

*Ve-lifkod ‘al-Yaakov ki-drakhav k’ma’alalav yashiv lo.*

Hashem also has a controversy with Yehuda and will punish Yaakov according to his ways; according to his doings will He recompense him.

*Riv* is familiar; it means dispute but can be seen as a formal suit. We hear about *riv* on three occasions in *Bereishit*, first when the herders working for Lot and Avra(ha)m dispute land use (13:6-8). The next time is when Yitzchak and the *Pelishtim* dispute ownership and rights to a number of wells (26:18-22); *riv* then manifests in a more prominent and explicated dialogue form during the parting meeting between Yaakov and Lavan (31:36-43 – see For Further Study).[[3]](#footnote-3) Each of these cases is different. In the first, neither side had any rights and their dispute seemed to be about claiming open territory for temporary use. The second case involved a real dispute over property ownership, whereas the last one, between Yaakov and Lavan, was about who had the upper moral hand in their two-decades-long contractual relationship. In this last case, we see that claims and counter-claims were brought by each side.

Our *riv* seems to be a monaural version of the Yaakov-Lavan dispute type. The prophet doesn’t suffice with a claim, but backs it up (as we will see as the *riv* develops); yet, of course, there will be no words from the other side. How could there be?

The first preposition here – *‘im* – is ambiguous. Does it mean that God is disputing Yehuda,[[4]](#footnote-4) such that Yehuda’s behavior has now fallen and they also stand accused? Thus ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beaugency. Or does it mean that God is disputing (Yisrael) and He is joined by Yehuda, who continues to maintain loyalty to God? So Rashi and Radak. This ambiguity clearly has a profound impact on the rest of the disputation. Are we to read the charges of deceit as leveled against both kingdoms, or are we to see Yehuda as not only loyal to God but also sympathetic to the rebuke – almost an *amicus curiae*? We will address this in the next *shiur*.

*Ba-beten ‘akav et-achiv*

*U-v’ono sarah et-Elokim*

In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and by his strength he strove with a godlike being.

This dispute is presented in terms which defy historicity, conflating the **person** Yaakov and the **people** Yaakov. Hoshea uses this device – personalization – throughout the passage. Before addressing the specifics of the text, we ought to take note of the impressive way in which Hoshea invokes a *riv* within the context of retelling the national history from within the life of Yaakov, man of many *rivim*. Yaakov strove with his brother, wrestled an angel, and had an ongoing dispute (at the end, at least) with Lavan. He even had a “mini-*riv*” with Rachel, when she demanded that he give her children, and he had a dispute – which apparently never got settled – with Shimon and Levi in the aftermath of the massacre at Shekhem.

The word *akav*, well known as it gives birth to our patriarch’s name, means “ambushed”; yet it does not appear as a verb in the birth narrative, but rather as the object that unborn Yaakov held in his hand. It is Esav, in his dispute with Yaakov (voiced to Yitzhak), who invokes the verb:

*Hakhi kara shemo Yaakov, va-ya’akveini zeh fa’amayim…*

Thus was his name called “Yaakov,” as he ambushed me twice…(*Bereishit* 27:36)

Hoshea cleverly identifies a third, earlier ambush, as it were, going back to pre-natal Yaakov. By doing so, he imprints the image of Yaakov as a natural-born striver; his conflictive nature becomes more pronounced and underscored with his readiness to challenge an attacker in the middle of the night – one who proves to be a “godly creature.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Va-yasar el-malakh va-yukhal, bakha va-yit’chanen-lo*

*Beit-El yimtza’enu ve-sham yedaber ‘imanu*

So he strove with an angel, and prevailed; he wept, and made supplication before him; At Beth-el he would find him, And there he would speak with us.

The *va-yukhal* is a direct response to the wording in *Bereishit*:

*Vayar’ ki lo* ***yakhol*** *lo*

He saw that he could not best him. (32:26)

In *Bereishit*, the undefined subject seems to be the attacker (angel) – he wanted to overpower Yaakov but **could not**; here, in a clever twist, Hoshea uses the verb to describe Yaakov, in that he **was** able (to hold his own, if not to defeat his adversary).

We do not hear of either party crying in the *Bereishit* narrative, but it is the attacking angel who begs Yaakov to let him go; Hoshea, then, deftly switches the subject in mid-phrase – something we would not know without knowing the original story.

“He” found “him” at Beit-El – Who found whom? Did the angel find Yaakov at Beit-El? Is this a reference to the famous *sulam* vision when Yaakov was on his way out of the Land (*Bereishit* 28:10 ff)? If so, the presentation is decidedly out of order, since the wrestling match took place at Yaakov’s return, decades later. If, instead, it is a reference to Yaakov’s return to Beit-El *after* the encounter with the angel, that was a non-angelic (direct) revelation (see *Bereishit* 35:6-15). This, however, poses no difficulty if we understand, as do most *Rishonim*, that an angelic encounter is a “mediated” Divine revelation.

We are left with one difficulty. The last word – *‘imanu* – seems to imply multiple divine audiences for Yaakov at Beit-El. This is, mildly put, quite a challenge within the context of Tanakh.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency reads the plural here as the royal plural, akin to “Let **us** make Man in **our** image” (*Bereishit* 1:26). In other words, Yaakov spoke with God at Beit-El. Ibn Kaspi adopts this position as well.

Besides this exegetical difficulty inherent in of the use of the plural, however, where do we ever find that Yaakov spoke to God at Beit-El?

Rashi and R. Yosef Kara suggest that the *imanu* is Yaakov and the angel – and that the speaker is God. In other words, God, at Yaakov’s return to Beit-El, confirmed the angel’s renaming of Yaakov to Yisrael.

Ibn Ezra and Radak propose an ingenious solution. Since Amos, Hoshea’s contemporary and colleague, presented (at least) some of his prophecies at Beit El (see *Amos* 7:10-17), Hoshea is stating that God spoke with “us” – Amos and Hoshea – there. What is particularly successful about this proposal is that it solidifies the personalization strategy of this oratory. The **man** Yaakov and the **people** Yaakov interact with God at Beit-El, continually engaged in striving. Just as father Yaakov had the innate ability to hold his own and become fully Yisrael, so too the people have that potential.

**SEGMENT #3 - INTERLUDE A**

*Va-Hashem Elokei ha-Tzevakot*

*Hashem zikhro*

But Hashem, the God of hosts, Hashem is the name by which He is remembered

In our study of Amos, we noted two brief hymns, in the middle of rebukes, which served to highlight God’s august power and transcendence against the pettiness of the people’s vain visions. This short powerful line serves the same purpose; the people do not believe that they are worthy, as it were, to stand tall on their own. Either that, or they are loathe to embrace their own strength. As an interjected point of power, so to speak, this short line stresses God’s eternity and power; the eternity speaks also to the supra-temporal inter-connectedness of Yaakov (man to people), and the power speaks to the inner potential that the nation ought to be actualizing.

*Ve-ata bei’Elokekha tashuv*

*Chesed u-mishpat sh’mor ve-kaveh el-Elokekha tamid*

Therefore you should turn to your God; Keep mercy and justice and continually wait for your God.

The reasonable conclusion of the idea behind the brief hymn is just that – the people ought to return to God and reconnect with their essential *raison d’etre*. A further piece of rhetorical genius here is Hoshea’s weaving Avraham (compare our verse with *Bereishit* 18:18-19) into the Yaakov story.

**SEGMENT #4: THE CORE ACCUSATION: BALANCES OF DECEIT**

*Kna’an be-yado moz’nei mirma*

*La-ashok aheiv*

As for the trafficker, the balances of deceit are in his hand; he loves to oppress.

Nearly all *Rishonim* – as well as most translations – render *Kana’an* as “merchant,” rather than as a proper noun. I would like to propose that Hoshea here intends the Canaanites. The heart and soul of this rebuke is Yisrael’s abandonment of their charter, that they don’t embrace their own strength. They should have seen themselves as standard-bearers for their neighbors and ultimately for all of humanity. Instead, they have embraced the ways of the Canaanites, who were deceitful merchants (the reason *kn’aani* in Tanakh also takes on the meaning “merchant” – e.g., *Yeshaya* 23:8; see ibn Kaspi ad loc and at our verse).

*Va-yomer Ephraim, akh ‘asharti, matzati on li*

*Kol-yegiyai lo yimtz’u-li ‘avon asher-cheit*

And Ephraim said: 'Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; In all my labors they shall find in me no iniquity that were sin.'

Ephraim here is described as the archetypical “self-made man,” who not only generated his own wealth but cannot be found guilty for the methods by which he acquired it. Does this mean that he believes himself to be guiltless – or that he couldn’t be caught? Either way, the jig is up. Whether the prophetic finger here turns on an illuminating bulb for the people to see their own waywardness or whether it shines a spotlight at their guilty eyes, the sins of commercial deceit cannot be kept from God.

**SEGMENT #5 - INTERLUDE B**

*Ve-anokhi Hashem Elokekha mei’eretz Mitzrayim*

*‘od oshivkha va-ohalim ki-y’mei mo’ed*

But I am Hashem your God from the land of Egypt; I will yet again cause you to dwell in tents as in the days of the appointed season.

This second interlude is unlike the first. In this brief piece, the prophet recalls the origins of the national bond with God and of God’s promise to restore the old romance, as detailed in Chapter 2. The reference to *ki-y’mei mo’ed* can be understood in multiple ways and perhaps the equivocality of the phrase deliberately lends to that. It may allude to the *Mishkan*, the *Ohel Mo’ed*; it may refer to those special holidays when there is a heightened sense of communion with God (see *Vayikra* 23). It may also refer to the stand at Sinai, that appointed place of the covenant (see *Shemot* 3:12). In what may be a clever play on words, the *mo’ed* is then tied to *‘edut* – as these meetings (the *Mishkan*, festivals, Sinai) provide ultimate testimony to God’s selection of Am Yisrael.

*Ve-dibarti ‘al-hanevi’im ve-anokhi chazon hirbeiti*

*U've-yad ha-nevi’im adameh*

I have also spoken to the prophets and I have increased visions; and by the ministry of the prophets I have used similitudes.

As we see in *Devarim* 18:15-22, ongoing prophetic agency is an extension of Moshe’s role; as such, this verse leads the previous one to its contemporary reality (to Hoshea’s audience) and, again, binds past to present in a meta-chronological spiral of history.

**SEGMENT 6: THE SECONDARY *RIV* – IDOLATRY**

*‘Im-Gil’ad aven akh-shav hayu, ba-Gilgal shvarim zibeichu*

*Gam mizb’chotam ke-galim ‘al talmei sadai*

If Gilead is given to iniquity becoming altogether vanity, in Gilgal they sacrifice bullocks; Indeed, their altars will be as heaps upon the furrows of the field.

Hoshea turns his focus, temporarily, away from Shomeron and towards the Jordan valley – on both sides. He ridicules the worship at Gilgal (a common trope among 8th-century prophets) and the worship in Gil’ad (we sense based on context that the *aven* is also idolatrous). This component of the disputation can be seen as a deliberate “shadow” attack, presented to highlight the severity of the deceptive practices of Hoshea’s immediate audience; even the cult practices at Gilgal pale next to the abusive and exploitative behavior of the merchants of Shomeron.

**SEGMENT 7: MODEL OF DIVINE POETIC JUSTICE – AND ITS APPLICATION**

*Va-yivrach Yaakov s’deh Aram*

*Va-ya’avod Yisrael b’isha, u-v’isha shamar*

And Yaakov fled into the field of Aram, and Yisrael labored for a wife, and for a wife he kept (sheep).

*U-v’navi he’elah Hashem et-Yisrael mi-Mitzrayim*

*U-v’navi nishmar*

And with a prophet Hashem brought Yisrael up out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he kept.

Coming full circle, the prophet returns to Yaakov, the man. This time, it is not the equation of the man with the nation; rather, it is part of a more powerful example of Divine poetic justice – what *Chazal* refer to as *mida keneged mida*.[[6]](#footnote-6) This principle[[7]](#footnote-7) of Providence operates throughout Tanakh, both explicitly as well as implicitly[[8]](#footnote-8).

Yaakov labored for 7 years in order to “pay” for the rights to marry Rachel and he guarded (waited,= *or* herded and watched the sheep?) for that selfsame wife (or was each one for a different wife?). Therefore, it is only just (in the Divine sense) that God should “guard” His people when they left Egypt. Jacob’s labor on behalf of his wife – or, as it turns out, his wives – is rewarded generations later when God redeems his children from Egypt. As was the case with Yaakov (acting on behalf of Lavan), it was God’s agent who watched them; the flock were watched by the owner’s agent, and God’s flock was led out by His agent. Note the poetic flair, that *isha* is the focus of Yaakov’s years and *navi* is the focus of Yisrael’s exodus.

*Hikh’is Ephraim tamrurim*

*V’damav ‘alav yitosh v’cherpato yashiv lo adonav.*

Ephraim has provoked most bitterly; Therefore, his blood will be cast upon him and his Lord will return his reproach unto him.

The conclusion brings us back to the opening verse. Ephraim is angering God bitterly; just as God “feels encircled/entrapped” by Ephraim’s deceit, so too God experiences (so to speak) bitterness. Once the prophet has established the severity – even against the backdrop of idolatry – of Ephraim’s sins, and then reminded his audience of the Divine manner of punishment, the short but brutal sentence is passed. He has embittered God and he bears the guilt of his own sins (“his blood is cast upon him”), and God will pay him Divine recompense in kind.

In the next *shiur*, we will take a broader view of this passage and note how the sections interact and build upon each other.

For Further Study:

Mabee, Charles. "Jacob and Laban." Vetus Testamentum, 1980,30,2 (1980) 192-207.

1. The short passage from *Hoshea* 13:12-14:1 operates as a “set-up” for the famous concluding prophecy (14:2-10) of return and restoration – for those who heed it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Christian Bibles, this verse is the final verse of Chapter 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is curious that this is one feature shared by all three of the *Avot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As is the usage in *Bereishit* 26:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Both we, the eternal readers, and Yaakov himself only later learn that this “man” was an angel. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See m. *Sota* 1:7-9 and, in fuller detail, Tosefta *Sota* 3-4 – two full chapters of Tosefta devoted to the concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. resting somewhere between “you made your bed, now you sleep in it” and “he was hoisted by his own petard” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an example of explicitly-confessed poetic justice, see *Shoftim* 1:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)