**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 #26:**

**The Prophecies of Hoshea**

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

**(Part 2 13:1-11)**

In our last *shiur* (#25), we reexamined the first half of this pericope. After having studied the fifteen verses which make up Chapter 12 in depth in *shiur* #24, we then assessed several literary considerations, including: the overall chiastic structure; the use of “Ephraim” to mark off the “prelude,” “interlude” (core), and “postlude” of the section; and the linguistic nuances of the core accusation against Shomeron’s merchants and those members of the elite who supported their exploitative practices.

We now turn to the second half of the speech, which makes up the first eleven verses of Chapter 13.

It is clear even from a cursory read of the passage that there are at least two distinct themes – perhaps indictments – happening here, if not more. The first two verses are devoted to the sin of idolatry, whereas the last two speak to something fundamentally errant in establishing a monarchy – in declaring a human to be a king and, therefore, savior. A closer look reveals an intricate and consistent pattern: these eleven verses contain four couplets, each bounded from the next by a monostich. We will point these out along the way, but broadly speaking, the pattern is as follows:

1-2: Indictment: Sin of idolatry

3: Sentence: immediate dispersion and dissolution of the people

4-5: Reminder of the nation’s long-lost loyalty to God

6: The nation’s fortune – the anticipated cause of their forgetting that fidelity

7-8: Sentence: God Himself violently attacking the people

9: Putting the blame where it belongs

10-11: Ridiculing the idea of human monarchy as ultimate salvation

Although this is not a classic chiasmus per se, it does bear some chiastic features, as can be seen from the layout of the verses above. This layout will be explained within the *shiur*. And now…to the text.

THE TEXT:

*Ke-daber Ephraim r’teit, nasa hu be-Yisrael*

*Va-ye’sham ba-Ba’al va-yamot*

When Ephraim spoke, there was trembling, He exalted himself in Yisrael; But when he became guilty through Ba’al, he died.

The first half of this verse is unclear, and – as is often the case – much of how we perceive its intent rests on the meaning of the vav which bridges the two halves of the verse.

The meaning of the second half of this verse is clear: it points to the people’s guilt in associating themselves with Ba’al worship. The first half, however, is ambiguous, and – as is often the case – our understanding of its intent rests in large part on the meaning of the vav that bridges the two halves of the verse. Does the opening clause speak to the same sin, or does it reflect an earlier, pure(r) state, which is then contrasted by the second clause?

The *Rishonim* seem to be in agreement that “Ephraim” here is a reference to Yerovam b. Nevat, the Ephraimite, first king of Yisrael. Bending this clause one way or the other may reflect a judgment on Yerovam’s career.

If we read *va-ye’sham* as “**and** they became guilty,” i.e., a *vav ha-chibur* (“conjunctive *vav*”), then we understand that at the genesis of his rule, when he was “exalted in Yisrael,” Yerovam was already straying from the role he was given. In that case, we would read *nasa* as a pejorative, perhaps as a subtle attack on human monarchy. This would fit well within the larger scope of the passage, as it concludes with the same sentiment, more clearly and unequivocally explicated. Working backwards, *r’teit* (a singular word in the canon, meaning “trembling”) may refer either to his words causing trembling among his own subjects or, perhaps, triggering “trembling on high.”

If, on the other hand, we read *va-ye’sham* as “**but** they became guilty,” i.e., a *vav hanigud* (“disjunctive *vav*”), then the implication is that at the outset, the kingdom was ruling justly and successfully; it was the later move to Ba’al worship that set it off course.

Keep in mind that the one explicit crime of which Yerovam is accused is the establishment of what amounts to *bamot* at Beit-El and Dan, both set up to be off-site *Mikdashim*. While this does stand in violation of *Devarim* 12, it was a calculated *political* gambit aimed at maintaining the loyalty of his subjects, away from Yerushalayim and Yehuda. We do not hear of Yerovam’s establishing idolatrous cult sites nor introducing foreign worship, per se. It is only with the passage of time, with the relatively frequent change of dynasties, that Ba’al-worship is “legitimized” and sponsored by the crown, most notably by Achav, scion of the third dynasty.

Again working backwards, *nasa* in this reading is either value-neutral or positive, speaking of the power of the northern crown and the allegiance of the northern tribes. *R’teit* would then be, as ibn Ezra and Radak note, the trembling of other nations who fear this new “breakaway” province.

Most of the *Rishonim* prefer the latter read, portraying a ship of state that was originally steered accurately but then went tragically astray after the local Ba’al worship. It would be tempting to see this as a pro-monarchic statement, at odds with the sentiment at the end of the pericope. Such is not necessarily the case. It may be an endemic reality of human leaders, especially dynastic, that with the passage of time and the multi-generational assumption of power, power perforce corrupts and kingdoms either become too soft or too brittle. This is, at a more subtle layer, the implication of our verse – which then becomes explicated in full force in the final couplet.

*Ve-ata yosifu la-chato va-ya’asu lahem maseikha mikaspam ki-tvunam ‘atzabim, ma’asei charashim kulo*

*Lahem heim omrim, zovchei adam, ‘agalim yishakun*

And now they sin more and more and have made for themselves molten images from 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.'

The general sense of this verse is clear. The first verse suggests that although the nation’s founding was justified and just, the leadership and the citizenry strayed after Ba’alism, which was the beginning of their undoing. Our verse continues this thread, following the downward spiral of Shomeron as they engaged more fully and more intensively in idolatry, forming their own idols *ki-tvunam* – the meaning of which we will address below. In classic prophetic fashion, Hoshea needles this foolhardy endeavor, noting that the idols, instead of taking a heavenly form (at least), rather look like their makers (*ki-tvunam*) and are their own formation *(‘atzabim*).

The word *ki-tvunam,* which some *Rishonim* read, following the Targum, as “form,” is read by Radak and ibn Kaspi as “according to their own perception.” They see the word as built on the root *b-y-n*, to understand; *tevunam* is then an abbreviated form of *tevunatam*, “their understanding.” This may reflect a larger prophetic agenda about the motivations driving idolatry, harking back to the original sin of “molten images” at the foot of Sinai. Instead of having God, through His prophets, define the mode of worship and its symbols (if any), the people use their own “reasoning” (culturally-influenced ideas) to decide how to worship and with which forms. (See also Irvine’s article, cited in For Further Study.)

The phrase *lahem heim omrim* is obscure: Who is speaking here, and to whom? What are they saying? Many *Rishonim* take the position that the “speakers” are the priests of Molekh, whose worship sneaks into the verse with the phrase *zov’chei adam*, presumably meaning “those who offer up people” (i.e., their own children). In their reading, the priests tell those who go to that extreme that they are worthy to kiss the calf (at the worship sites). This is, as I’ve intimated, a difficult read; Molekh worship has not been mentioned until now in *Hoshea*, nor in the works of his contemporaries, and we have no reason to think that it was popular during this era.

Radak has a different take. He understands *lahem heim omrim* as “on their behalf, they (the priests of the cult) say."[[1]](#footnote-1) He reads *zovchei adam* as referring to people (*adam*) who choose to come and offer; the priests tell them they **must** first kiss the calf in order to make their worship complete and accepted [sic].

This is a most fitting end to the first couplet, showing idolatry in its most degrading fashion – either with the heinous crime of child sacrifice (and only those who do so “merit” the “kiss of the calves”) or, more mildly but no less ridiculous, having the “kiss of the calves” be the *sine qua non* act of worship.

*Lakhen yih’yu ka-anan-boker, ve’kha-tal mashkim holeikh*

*K’motz y’so’eir mi-goren, u-kh’ashan mei-aruba*

Therefore they shall be as the morning cloud, And as the dew that passes away early;

As the chaff that is driven with the wind out of the threshing-floor and as the smoke out of the window.

This monostich includes four images of dispersion that may be seen as two poetic pairs, one natural and the other man-made.

The morning clouds can be seen as either bringing the dew or as drawing it up. In either case, it is a natural event that happens without man’s interference and is presented, in *Bereishit* 2:5, as the one event that takes place on earth before the creation of Man.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hoshea, the only Biblical author to use the phrase *‘anan boker*, used it once earlier (6:4) in describing the fleeting and unanchored acts of kindness of the people. He used *tal* as the parallel in that context as well.

Once people play a role in the world, they also create things which are fleeting and which, although fundamentally part of something substantial, are no more than “dust in the wind.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The process of making bread, so frequently associated with human endeavors as contradistinctive from God’s works,[[4]](#footnote-4) involves winnowing the chaff from the kernel and, at the other end of the process, baking the bread. The chaff is carried away by the wind, as is the smoke from the furnace.

Although neatly broken into two halves, the monostich also cleverly ties together the two clauses with the use of *aruba* instead of the more common *chalon*. The word *aruba*, meaning “window,” is repeatedly used as “the windows of heaven,”[[5]](#footnote-5) which are the source of rain – connecting the last word with the first image set of dew-clouds.

The people will not only be scattered, but will be irretrievable and will, ultimately, disappear from the stage of human history. This is precisely what happened to Shomeron in the aftermath of the Assyrian conquest, although it took several generations for the prophecy to be fully realized.

*Ve-anokhi Hashem Elokekha mei’eretz Mitzrayim*

*Vei-elohim zulati lo teida’, u-moshia’ ayin bilti*

Yet I am Hashem your God from the land of Egypt; And you will know no God but Me and beside Me there is no savior.

As we saw in the first half of the pericope (*shiur* #25), the Exodus narrative is invoked as a contrast to the current reality that the prophet is addressing. In the previous chapter (v. 10), it was used as a reminder of the early intimacy between God and His people, which He intends to restore. In our case, it is invoked as a reminder of the essential *kinyan* (acquisition) that God has made with this nation – and that the fundamental principle of that *kinyan* is exclusive loyalty to their Master. The role of the Exodus in each case is clear. In the previous chapter, the prophet was rebuking the people for having abandoned their early ways and mores, specifically as regards commerce. Here, the indictment is against idolatry and the Exodus serves as a constant reminder of how treacherous that act of disloyalty is.

The end note of *u-moshia’ ayin bilti* speaks to two related errors. The first regards treaties with foreign powers that the people assume will come to their aid, will be strong enough to help, and will be committed to save. This is mainly directed against the leadership. The second component, directed at everyone, is against idolatry: none of those gods have the power to do any of that – *u-moshia’ ayin bilti.*

*Ani ye'da’tikha ba-midbar*

*Be-eretz tal’uvot*

I did know you in the wilderness

In the land of great drought.

This verse completes the “Exodus couplet”; as so often in texts reflective of that great event, the “leaving” and the “journeying” are joined into one continuum.

The mention of the desert’s parched land is a focused lead-in to the next verse.

*K’mar’itam va-yisba’u, sav’u va-yaram libam*

*‘al-kein shekheichuni*

When they were fed and they became full, they were filled, and their heart was exalted;

Therefore they forgot Me.

The opening word is better rendered “grazed”; the people here are compared to a flock, which grazes. Since the journey-portion of the previous couplet was set in a parched land, the grazing in a place of plenty perforce refers to their life in the Land. This approximates the description in *Devarim* 32:13-15. Moshe foresaw this progression from material success to spiritual malaise to forgetting God altogether, and it plays a central role in his farewell speech even before his masterful poem in Chapter 32.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This verse certainly stands alone, as the previous couplet was a snippet of an Exodus narrative and the following couplet is an integrated, frightening description of their punishment.

*Va’ehi lahem k’mo-shachal*

*K’nameir ‘al-derekh ashur*

Therefore am I have become as a lion to them

As a leopard will I watch by the way;

*Ef’g’sheim k’dov shakul, v’ekra’ s’gor libam*

*Ve-okhleim sham k’lavi, chayat hasadeh t’vak’eim*

I will meet them as a bear that is bereaved of her whelps and will rend the enclosure of their heart;

I will devour them there like a lion - like a wild animal would tear them apart.

We will analyze this couplet as one. The lion (*shachal/lavi*) forms the envelope (or *inclusio*), with the prophet describing God as the classic predator, ready to rip up His prey. The middle of the couplet identifies two other terrifying animals – the leopard and the bear – who, with the lion, are all part of the Biblical landscape.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Besides the clear heartbreaking image of God poised as a murderous animal, ready to pounce on His people, the particular phrase *v’ekra’ s’gor libam* is opaque; solving its meaning may help give some deeper understanding to the entire couplet.

Rashi reads the phrase in its grisly literal meaning – “like a bear who grabs on to the torso with its claws and rips until the heart.”

R. Eliezer of Beaugency, however, sees *s’gor libam* as “their hearts which are closed off from listening to Me,” implying that He will tear away that layer of insensitivity that makes obedience to God and heeding His word unlikely. R. Yosef Kara and Radak seem to take this position, with nuanced differences in their interpretations. Rashi also offers a secondary approach which approximates that taken by these commentators.

If we read the couplet according to Rashi’s first take, the message of this passage is purely punitive, with no hope or intent of rehabilitation. It reflects deep Divine anger, bordering on rage, towards His people.

If, on the other hand, we follow Rashi’s alternative approach, adopted by R. Yosef Kara, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and Radak, then we see this “attack” in a different light. The fattened people who have forgotten God will have their wealth stripped from them so that their true hearts can be revealed again, restoring the relationship as it was and should be.

*Shichet’kha Yisra’el ki-vi v’ezrekha*

You have destroyed yourself, Yisrael, you have no helper but Me[[8]](#footnote-8)

As noted in the footnote, this verse is difficult and bears a number of translations and meanings. We will survey the *Rishonim* and see how they decipher it.

Regarding the opening line, Rashi, R. Yosef Kara and Rashbam maintain that it should be read as “you have destroyed yourself”; ibn Kaspi agrees and invokes *Devarim* 32:5 as support. Ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and Radak seem to read it as “**it** has destroyed you” – the unidentified subject being their sinfulness or specifically the idolatry mentioned earlier.

It is the last three words which are most confounding.

Rashi understands *ki vi* as meaning “you rebelled **against Me** – but I was there *b’ezrekha*, to help you.”

R. Yosef Kara’s take is close to that – “you have rebelled against the One who helps you”

Ibn Ezra renders: “I **was** the One who helped you” – but when you rebelled, I abandoned you and you were destroyed.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency has an interesting take (as usual). “You should have trusted in Me, *b’ezrekha* – that I would be your King; but I wasn’t and you rejected Me from ruling over you.”

Radak adds a helpful grammatic note: the two consecutive *bet* prefixes – *bi, b’ezrekha* – are like two consecutive occurrences of *kaf*, where only one is needed. In other words, read the verse as if it said *ki vi ‘ezrekha* – “I was your helper” – which does make the verse a bit easier to read. Abravanel echoes this approach.

The confusion of the verse is visible in the range of approaches taken by just this small sampling of the traditional commentators.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*Ehi malk’kha eipho, ve-yoshi’akha b’khol-‘arekha*

*V’shoftekha asher amarta, t’na-li melekh ve-sarim*

Where then is your king,[[10]](#footnote-10) that he may save you in all your cities? Where are your rulers for whom you asked, saying, "Give me a king and princes"?

Rashi, following Targum (and reflected in the translation offered here), sees the opening word as a case of metathesis, to be read as *ayeh* – “where.” This is a rhetorical question: “Where is your king, who you thought would save you from these animals etc.?” This fits the rest of the verse, which ridicules the nation’s trust in human and fallible leaders. R. Eliezer of Beaugency and ibn Kaspi take the same approach. Ibn Ezra mentions it but rejects it, maintaining that *ehi* ought to be read simply as “I will be.” He seems to follow Dunash’s interpretation: “When I am present, saving you from your troubles, where will your king be…?” R. Yosef Kara (who quotes Dunash) and Radak take a similar approach.

Either way, the intent of the text is the same: those human kings that the people placed over themselves are seen here as representing a futile attempt to replace God, as it were, and a rejection of God as king (see *Shmuel* 1 8).

*Eten-lekha melekh b’api, ve-ekach b’evrati*

I will give you a king in My anger and will take him away in My wrath.

The couplet concludes, as does the pericope, with a warning about the fate of human monarchy when it is intended to take the place of God. His anger is kindled, as it were, at the rejection, and He will, as easily as He granted that king, take him away – and all of the sovereignty, autonomy, and security that go along with it – driven by the same Divine wrath. The image is powerful: God is angry from the moment of His rejection until He acts on it, removing the king from his throne, the people from their land, and His presence from their midst.

In the next *shiur*, we will briefly assess this unit and then take a broader look at the entire pericope of 12:1-13:11

**For Further Study:**

Irvine, Stuart A. "

Irvine, Stuart A. "A Note on the Translation and Meaning of Hosea 13:9." *Vetus Testamentum* 65,2 (2015) 223-229.

1. Radak comes closest, from among the *Rishonim*, to the translation used above. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is, of course, according to the second creation story. *Bereishit* 1 presents a different relationship between Man and his environment and, as such, his place in the sequence of creation is at the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. With a tip of the hat to Kerry Livgren. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Tanchuma *Tazria* at 13:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Bereishit* 7:11 and 8:2, *Yeshayahu* 24:18, and *Malakhi* 3:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *inter alii Devarim* 8:7-18 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although such animals long disappeared from Eretz Yisrael, when the Land was forested – until the Roman era – such animals were common. See *Melakhim* 2 2:24 and 17:25; see also *Melakhim* 1 13:24. The leopard is nearly always mentioned in parallel with the lion – see *Yeshayahu* 11:6 and *Yirmiyahu* 5:6. The one place where the leopard is invoked independently is in the context of his spots at *Yirmiyahu* 13:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The meaning of this phrase is obscure and this translation is just one of a number of possibilities, none of which is overly compelling. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See ibn Kaspi’s alternative take on the phrase as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This phrase is also ambiguous and, again, the translation here is one of several that are proposed. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)