YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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**Shiur #05: Early Prophecies (V)**

**Hoshea’s "wife of harlotry" – real or metaphorical?**

The Rambam[[1]](#footnote-1) rejects out of hand the idea that Hoshea actually married a “wife of harlotry,” since "God is too elevated to have made His prophets into laughing stocks and objects of ridicule in the eyes of fools by commanding them to perform unseemly actions,[[2]](#footnote-2) not to mention the command to actually perform a transgression…". He therefore understands the entire unit as a metaphor conveyed in a prophetic vision, and concludes that only "those of weak intelligence" would think that all prophetic metaphors actually took place in physical reality.

The Rambam brings powerful proof from Yechezkel,[[3]](#footnote-3) who is brought in a "Divine vision" to Jerusalem, where he walks around in the Temple, digs in the wall, and passes through the hole in the wall from one chamber to another in order to observe the abominations being carried out there in secret, which caused the Divine Chariot to depart from the Temple and from Jerusalem. All of the prophet’s actions are part of a prophetic vision; his body is physically located in Babylon. According to the Rambam, we can draw conclusions regarding all metaphors in prophecy from this example.

In contrast, it seems from the language of the Gemara[[4]](#footnote-4) and from *midrashim* that *Chazal* follow a literal reading of the account.[[5]](#footnote-5) This controversy over the proper understanding of prophetic metaphors was broadened among the commentators who came after the Rambam,[[6]](#footnote-6) in accordance with their respective views concerning the role of human intelligence and morality in prophetic activity in general, and prophetic metaphors in particular.

Even according to the Rambam, it is clear that the prophetic metaphor does not remain in the realm of communication between God and the prophet. It is conveyed to the people as a metaphor, to shock them out of their apathy and to arouse thought, introspection, and repentance, and the prophecy is also recorded in writing. The question, then, is what will be more effective in shocking the public and arousing a significant public response: a metaphor about a "wife of harlotry" and her children, as a story that will be a central topic of discussion? Or the prophet actually marrying a "wife of harlotry" and physically living with her, bearing children with her, and having everyone gossiping about them: "Who knows whose children they are" (as per the depiction in the Gemara)?

If we adopt the Rambam's view, we must think about the element of dramatic effect. If a prophet comes and tells the people that God has commanded him, in a prophetic vision, to take a "wife of harlotry,” and he envisions their births and the meanings of their names, and all of this is told as a story (just as we read it in the *sefer*) – perhaps people like the Rambam will be shocked, but those are not the sort of people for whom we need to employ such tactics.

It therefore makes more sense to think of a prophetic dramatization:[[7]](#footnote-7) a performance before spectators in Shomron, in which the prophet's wife appears as "Gomer, daughter of Divlayim," a familiar and well-known "wife of harlotry". Presented in the form of a scandalous, provocative play amongst the high society of Shomron, the capital of the kingdom of Israel, the story could not be ignored.

Bold, audacious plays were common in the ancient world (as in our times). If everyone understood that the performance was a provocative prophetic message, then the prophecy could achieve its aim without subjecting the prophet and his message to derision and calumny, since the prophet and his wife (the actors in the prophetic performance) would go home afterwards and resume their regular lives.

One might argue that the prophetic drama would arouse controversy only for a short time, while a situation in which the prophet lived with a harlot for an extended period of time would create waves and cause loud, ongoing controversy. On the other hand, after a few years people would become accustomed to the situation. Some would be certain that this could not possibly be a true prophet, since God could surely not have given such a command. Others might believe that this was indeed his prophetic mission, but the impact would subside with time. Therefore, it seems logical to accept the view of the Rambam, with the addition of some dramatic effect – in other words, a spectacular, unusual prophetic drama that everyone would be talking about.

This interpretation, which is similar to the Rambam's understanding, sits well with the approach I have presented thus far.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was clear to everyone in Shomron in that generation that the characters symbolized by the prophet's wife and children were Izevel – the queen of harlotry – and the two sons and the daughter: Achazyahu ("Lo-Ami,” who seeks healing in the foreign temples of Ekron), Yehoram (whose blood is spilled in "Yizre'el"), and Atalia ("Lo Ruchama," who carries out a cruel massacre). A prophetic drama like this could well arouse lively public debate. The familiar characters all belong to the previous, unpopular regime, which had been eradicated in Yehu's revolution; the population of Shomron would identify with animosity towards them. The message of the prophet Hoshea ben Be'eri – that Shomron in his generation was descending once again to the level of a "wife of harlotry," and was about to be destroyed – would unquestionably have enormous, shocking impact and produce heated debate.

**The structure of Chapter 2 of *Hoshea*, and the structure of the ancient prophecy**

Our chapter is built in concentric form:

Consolation (1-3)

Rebuke > Punishment > Return to the wilderness (4-17)

Consolation (18-25)

This might seem rather strange, considering the message.[[9]](#footnote-9) Why start with consolation, and only afterwards voice the rebuke and imminent punishment, to be followed by more consolation?

However, we find a similar structure in other places, including at the beginning of *Yeshayahu* (Chapter 2) and at the beginning of *Yirmiyahu* (Chapter 2). In both instances, the prophecy opens with words of comfort before launching into Divine condemnation and anticipated retribution. The question is whether this is the original order of the prophecy, or whether it represents a redaction that chooses to present a positive future perspective before the severe crisis and hardship that will precede that reality.

It is easy to see[[10]](#footnote-10) that the verses of consolation at the beginning Chapter 2 of *Hoshea* correspond to the end of the prophecy, which offers comfort to "Yizre'el," "Ami," and "Ruchama" (2:23-25 > 2:1-3):

"And it shall be on that day:

I will respond,” says the Lord.

“I will respond to the heavens, and they shall respond to the earth;

And the earth shall respond to the corn, and the wine, and the oil;

and they shall respond to Yizre'el.

And I will sow her for Me in the land;

and I will have compassion upon 'Lo-Ruchama' [“she who did not receive compassion”];

and I will say to 'Lo-Ami' [“not My people”]: 'You are My people,'

and he shall say, 'You are my God.'"

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Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea,

which cannot be measured nor numbered;

and it shall be that instead of that which was said to them – 'You are 'Lo-Ami' [not My people],

it shall be said to them: '[You are] the children of the living God.'

And the children of Yehuda and the children of Israel shall be gathered together,

and they shall appoint themselves one head, and shall go up out of the land;

for great shall be the day of Yizre'el.

Say to your brethren: 'Ami' [My people];

and to your sisters, 'Ruchama [she who obtained compassion].'

Clearly, the latter unit is a continuation of the same message of consolation.

In a similar manner, Yeshayahu's prophecy of the End of Days (beginning of Chapter 2) can be read as a continuation of the prophecy of consolation at the end of Chapter 4. In other words, the vision of peace among the nations at the End of Days is a natural and logical continuation to the appearance of the Clouds of Glory with the *Sukka* in Mount Tzion:

Jerusalem – the remnant in Tzion > clouds of glory > *Sukka* > vision of the End of Days.

The same sort of reading can be applied to the opening prophecies in *Yirmiyahu* (following his appointment), viewing them as a wondrous conclusion to the great movement of repentance that is described in Chapter 4: "in truth, in justice, and in righteousness" > "I remember unto you the affection of your youth…" (4:1-2 > 2:1-3).

We therefore conclude that the fact that all of these prophecies start with what will effectively be the conclusion is a deliberate technique (whether on the part of the prophet himself, or of his disciples who committed the prophecy to writing) intended to inspire hope for the future. They are written in such a way that the end of the prophecy sends us back to reread the beginning, since the opening introduction is actually the conclusion.

**Chapter 2 precedes Chapter 1, according to a Talmudic discussion**

Let us therefore read the prophecy in Chapter 2 in its original order, starting with the rebuke:

Plead with your mother, plead;

for she is not My wife,

neither am I her husband;

and let her put away her harlotries from her face… (*Hoshea* 2:4)

and then, at the end of the chapter (which appears fragmented) we return to the words of consolation at the beginning of the chapter. This, it would seem, is how the generation of Hoshea remembered the prophecy from the time of Achav.

Support for this reading is to be found, surprisingly enough, in a *sugya* in *Masekhet* *Pesachim*:

“The word of the Lord that came unto Hoshea… [When the Lord first spoke with Hoshea, the Lord said to Hoshea: Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry, departing from the Lord]” (*Hoshea* 1:1-2):

Four prophets prophesied in the same era, and the oldest of them was Hosea…

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Hoshea: “Your children have sinned!”

Hoshea should have responded, “They are Your children; the children of Your beloved ones, the sons of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Show them mercy!”

Not only did he not say that, but he said to God: “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?

I will say to him: 'Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry....'

And after that I will say to him: 'Send her away from before you.’”

This midrash seems altogether mysterious. How on earth did the Gemara arrive at the (Christian!) idea of exchanging Israel for another nation? And how could it place such words in the mouth of the prophet Hoshea? And on what basis does the midrash assert that Hoshea made some statement **before** God sent him to take a “wife of harlotry”?

However, if we read Chapter 2 as an ancient prophecy that preceded Hoshea’s time – a prophecy that he is quoting, and which begins with the words, “Plead with your mother, plead; for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband,” then it is quite clear where the idea of “exchanging them for another nation” comes from: it is exactly what a man does when he divorces his wife and marries someone else. Thus, the Gemara reads the beginning of *Hoshea* as follows:

When the Lord first spoke to Hoshea –

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Hoshea: “Your children have sinned!”

Hoshea responds by quoting what God told the prophets (in the days of Achav) to say about “your mother” [i.e., “she is not My wife, and I am not her Husband”]. When God sees that Hoshea is not praying for the people,

God said to Hoshea: “Take yourself a ‘wife of harlotry…”

 The dual introduction leaves room to fit in an entire chapter **before** the episode of the “wife of harlotry,” and this chapter is an ancient prophecy that Hoshea quotes from the teachings of the prophets who preceded him. In those ancient prophecies, the word of God came against the house of Achav, and it was God who gave the prophets these words to say concerning the kingdom of Achav and Izevel, the queen from Sidon who persecuted and executed the prophets: “For she is not My wife, and I am not her Husband….” But when Hoshea quotes this ancient prophecy, applying it to his own generation, and presents the kingdom of Israel in his own time as the “wife of harlotry,” like Izevel, he is drawing a far-reaching conclusion – as indeed the *sugya* in the Gemara views it.

Thus, God’s command to Hoshea to take a “wife of harlotry” may be interpreted as a strong response on God’s part to Hoshea’s idea of applying the ancient prophecy to his own generation. God, as it were, supports the idea of a “divorce.”

The *sugya* in the Gemara therefore offers a profound intuitive understanding, combining *peshat* with *derash*, that Chapter 2 precedes Chapter 1, and this is hinted to in the dual introduction:

When the Lord first spoke with Hoshea -

“And the Lord said to Hoshea…” (*Hoshea* 1:2)

According to the Gemara, it is Hoshea the prophet who chooses to apply the ancient prophecy to his own generation, instead of trying to plead for Divine mercy for them. *Chazal* hold the prophet responsible and criticize him sharply[[11]](#footnote-11) for invoking the idea of a “divorce,” especially in view of the fact that Christianity used prophetic expressions like this to argue that God did indeed choose to replace the sinful nation – with the Christian Church. This theology, which was only too familiar to *Chazal* in the environment of religious pressure and coercion that surrounded them,[[12]](#footnote-12) rested on many verses drawn from the prophets, and therefore the prophets bore indirect responsibility for the persecutions against the Jews in the time of the Gemara. The Sages detected in these verses some hints that already in the era of prophecy, God punished the prophets for not having exerted themselves as they should have to defend *Am Yisrael*, the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

**The ancient prophecy – a temporary distancing to the wilderness**

However, close study of Chapter 2 will easily refute the superficial (and Christian!) reading that suggests God thought to cast away the Israelite nation, as a “wife of harlotry” would be cast away. On the contrary, this harsh prophecy is delivered with the specific aim of countering such a thought, specifically on the basis of comparing the relations between God and Israel to the relations between husband and wife:

Plead with your mother, plead…

and let her put away her harlotries from her face…

Lest I strip her naked…

and make her as a wilderness…

And she shall run after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them…

then shall she say: “I will go and return to my first husband;

for then it was better with me than now.” …

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness,

and speak tenderly unto her.

And I will give her her vineyards from there

and the valley of Achor [= Achan] for a doorway of hope;

and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth,

and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. (*Hoshea* 2:4-17)

The essence and purpose of this ancient prophecy is the opening that it offers to repentance and repair, by means of a return to the wilderness, where Am Yisrael was purified from the gods of Egypt and where they will again be purified – this time from the harlotry of Ba’al.

This immediately raises an obvious and seemingly impossible problem: the Torah explicitly prohibits an adulterous woman from returning to her first husband.

Her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she is defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not cause the land to sin, which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance. (*Devarim* 24:4)

How, then, can there be a return for a “wife of harlotry”? Does the prohibition from *Sefer Devarim* not seem to support the idea of exchanging them for another nation?!

Here we find ourselves at a major crossroads in language and biblical philosophy.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Torah** – Nowhere in *Sefer Devarim*, nor indeed in the Torah in general, do we find a “husband-wife” image used to describe God’s relationship with Bnei Yisrael. Instead, we find “My son, My first born, Israel”[[14]](#footnote-14) and “You are children unto the Lord your God”[[15]](#footnote-15) – and children can always come back to their father’s home. The possibility of returning to God and to the land is always open; there was never a “marriage,” hence, there is no “divorcing” of a sinful, adulterous “wife.” The fact that this image appears nowhere in the Torah indicates the Torah’s extreme caution[[16]](#footnote-16) with regard to principles of faith.

**Prophets** - In the books of the Prophets, the “husband-wife” image is ubiquitous – and therefore the prophets also propose different ways of addressing the great question: How can repentance and redemption be possible?

We find four different answers to this critical question among the prophets, unlike the solution proposed by the Torah (“you are children…”), and none of them runs afoul of the “husband-wife” image:

1. There was never a formal “divorce.” God brought punishment on the Jewish People, but never gave them a “bill of divorce”:

So says the Lord: Where is the bill of your mother’s divorce, with which I sent her away?... Behold, it was for your sins that you were sold, and for your transgressions that your mother was sent away. (*Yeshayahu* 50:1)

1. There always was, and always will be, a “faithful remnant” that honors the covenant and maintains the pure bond between God and *Knesset Yisrael* (as God tells Eliyahu on Mount Chorev, and as we find in *Hoshea* and *Amos*, *Yeshayahu*, and *Tzefania*):

Yet will I leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that did not bow to Ba’al, and every mouth that did not kiss him. (*Melakhim* I 19:18)

For I shall no more have compassion upon the house of Israel… But I will have compassion upon the house of Yehuda… (*Hoshea* 1:6-7)

…except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Yaakov, says the Lord. For behold, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all the nations, as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet not the least grain shall fall upon the earth… On that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen… and I will build it as in the days of old. (*Amos* 9:8-11)

On that day the growth of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land excellent and comely for the remnant of Israel. And it shall be that he that is left in Tzion, and he that remains in Jerusalem, shall be called holy – every one that is written for life in Jerusalem. (*Yeshayahu* 4:2-4)

And if there be yet a tenth in it… so the holy seed shall be the stock thereof. (*Yeshayahu* 6:13)

So will I do… that I may not destroy all: I will bring forth a seed out of Yaakov, and out of Yehuda an inheritor… and My elect shall inherit it, and My servants shall dwell there. (*Yeshayahu* 65:8-9)

And I will leave in the midst of you an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies, neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth… (*Tzefania* 3:12-13)

1. After a temporary period of purification – like the period of the wilderness after the Exodus – a new, pure generation will arise:[[17]](#footnote-17)

Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly unto her… and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt… And I shall betroth you unto Me forever… (*Hoshea* 2:16-22)

For the children of Israel shall sit solitary many days without king, and without prince, and without sacrifice, and without pillar, and without *ephod* or *terafim*. Afterwards they will return… and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and shall come trembling to the Lord and to His goodness in the end of days. (*Hoshea* 3:4-5)

Thus says the Lord: I remember unto you the affection of your youth, the love of your espousals; how you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel is the Lord’s hallowed portion, His first-fruits of the increase… (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2-3)

Saying: If a man casts away his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man's, may he return unto her again? Will not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; would you yet return to Me? says the LORD… Did you not just now cry unto Me: “My Father, You are the friend of my youth. Will He bear a grudge forever? Will He keep it to the end?” …” (*Yirmiyahu* 3:1-5)

…for since backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had cast her away and given her a bill of divorce, that yet treacherous Yehuda, her sister, did not fear; but she also went and played the harlot… Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: return, backsliding Israel, says the Lord… for I am merciful, says the Lord, I will not bear grudge forever.” (*Yirmiyahu* 3:8,12)

Thus says the Lord: the people that were left of the sword have found grace in the wilderness, even Israel, when I go to cause him to rest… Return, O virgin of Israel, return to these, your cities. (*Yirmiyahu* 31:2-21)

1. God will bring back *Knesset Yisrael* and purify them anew, with a strong arm and an outpouring of wrath – not because of their own merit, but rather for the sake of His great Name, as at the time of the Exodus:[[18]](#footnote-18)

Therefore, say to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: I do this not for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy Name, which you have profaned among the nations which you came to.

And I will sanctify My great Name… For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

And I will give you a new heart, and will put a new spirit within you... (*Yechezkel* 36:22-26)

The very fact that attention is given to the question of how the "couple" can be reunited following the wife's harlotry, along with a study of the four responses given by the prophets, shows the seriousness attached to the "husband-wife" image in God's relationship with *Knesset Yisrael* and the depth attributed to it. If this were a mere metaphor, there would be no need for the four different answers, which attempt to address the question at the most fundamental level. It would be enough simply to say that the image is used merely as a metaphor – as the Rambam rules,[[19]](#footnote-19) for example, concerning the bodily descriptions attributed to God in the Torah.

Quoting the verses from *Devarim* in Yishayahu's prophecy,[[20]](#footnote-20) and its reversal in the words of Yirmiyahu,[[21]](#footnote-21) along with an explicit solution to the problem already proposed by Hoshea – "You shall sit solitary for Me many days; you shall not play the harlot, and you shall not be any man's wife, nor will I be yours…"[[22]](#footnote-22) – all of this shows the seriousness attached to the question of the possibility of repentance in view of the "husband-wife" image, taking into consideration both the prohibition of an adulterous wife returning to her first husband[[23]](#footnote-23) and how shocking the thought of a "bill of divorce" was in in this context. The words and style of the prophets attest to the earth-shattering impact[[24]](#footnote-24) of questions concerning the continued existence of the nation, in times of crisis and catastrophe.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. In the chapters concerning prophecy in *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibn Tibon translates the Rambam’s words here as "acts of insanity". [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chapters 8-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Pesachim* 87a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Below, I will propose a way of explaining the *sugya* in the Gemara (*Pesachim* 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Such as Ramban (in his commentary on *Bereishit* 18:1), who rejects out of hand the Rambam's interpretation of encounters with angels in the stories of the forefathers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As proposed by Yechezkel Kaufman, *Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisraelit*, vol. III, pp. 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See previous *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This example is cited already in the *Midrash* *Sifrei* (on *Bamidbar* 25:1) in a list of *parshiyot* that are "juxtaposed to one another, but as distant from each other as east from west." For more on concentric structures in units and narratives in Tanakh, see Y. Grossman, *Galui u-Mutzpan*, pp. 247-264. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kaufman offers a similar explanation; ibid., p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In the same way that Yeshayahu is criticized for saying, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" and is punished via his own lips (*Yevamot* 49b). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Christian Byzantine regime exerted very powerful pressure against Judaism during the period of the Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The conceptual crossroads first appeared in the prophets' struggle against Izevel of Sidon after she gained control of Shomron. A century later, this had developed into a reality of historical change in the wake of the exiles carried out by the Assyrian Empire: for the first time, there was a concept of exile in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Shemot* 4:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Devarim* 14:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Another example: In the Torah (*Bereishit* 1:2,21), "*tehom*" (“the deep”) contains only water, the "great *taninim* (sea monsters) are created by God, the snake confronts human beings, and there are no narratives describing the Creator fighting with sea-monsters, the *Livyatan*, and the like. In contrast, images of this sort, which are common in ancient mythologies, are mentioned by the prophets (*Yeshayahu* 27:1, 51:9), in *Tehillim* (74:13-14; 89:10-11), and in God's response to *Iyov* (40 and 41) (albeit with a different meaning: the annihilation of the wicked from the world). The Torah makes no use of such images. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The prohibition of returning to the "first husband" applies only to the "wife" who sinned – i.e., to the generation(s) that were defiled. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The comparison of the future redemption to the Exodus appears in *Hoshea* and *Yeshayahu*, *Mikha*, and *Yirmiyahu*, but "with a strong arm… and with an outpouring of wrath" against Israel appears only in *Yechezkel* (20:33,34), who speaks from “among the captives" (1:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 1:9-12; *Guide of the Perplexed* part I, chapters 1,4,26-27, 35, 45-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 50:1 – "Where is your mother's bill of divorce…" [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 3:1, 3:8 – "I had cast her away and given her a bill of divorce…" [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Hoshea* 3:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For discussion of the degree to which the passages in *Sefer Devarim* were familiar and had impact, see my book, *Yeshayahu – ke-Tzipporim Afot*, pp. 50-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The destruction and exile of Shomron led many – even in Yehuda – to think that God had (heaven forfend) violated His covenant with His people and "forsaken the land" (*Yechezkel* 8:12). It was this that allowed them to entertain the possibility of serving idols and to mingle into the broader environment, as encouraged by Achaz and Menashe. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)