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

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**Shiur #06: Early Prophecies (VI)**

**Betrothal (“*Erusin*”) = pure connection in "husband-wife" relations**

In *Hoshea*, and in *Yirmiyahu* following him, we find the concept of renewed purification in the wilderness, and renewed growth for *Knesset Yisrael* to occur in future generations.

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)

The ancient prophecy of *Hoshea* Chapter 2 seems to be the earliest prophetic source for this idea of purification during a period in the wilderness and the creation of a new "husband-wife" bond, devoid of the pollution of the *Ba'alim* and all that they entail:

And it shall be on that day, says the Lord, that you shall call Me ‘*Ishi’* and shall no more call Me ‘*Ba’ali.’* For I will remove the names of the *Ba’alim* out of her mouth, and they shall no more be mentioned by their name.  (*Hoshea* 2:18-19)

This amazing verse, a central one in the ancient prophecy, envisions pure love, with no element of sexuality.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition, it provides an explanation for the religio-political path taken by Achav, king of Israel. Achav did not view himself as having abandoned the service of God in order to serve Ba'al. Rather, he adopted the approach of those who called God by the name *Ba'al* – meaning "master"[[2]](#footnote-2) – and therefore saw nothing wrong with coopting the rituals of Ba'al-worship (which had been introduced by Izevel) into the service of the God of Israel. The great rift began with calling God "*Ba'al-li*" (my Master), and the great struggle waged by Eliyahu and his disciples concerned the merging and integrating of the foreign name and foreign ritual into the service of God.

This explains how Achav could keep at close hand Ovadyahu, "who feared the Lord greatly," and it also explains the crux of Eliyahu's challenge to the people: "How long will you waver between the two opinions?"[[3]](#footnote-3) Achav vacillated between two different ways of thinking – or, to put it more accurately, he tried to combine them: on one hand, he had with him "Ovadyahu who was over the household… who feared the Lord greatly";[[4]](#footnote-4) on the other hand, he had Izevel, with all her rituals surrounding Ba'al and Ashera.

Eliyahu declared an all-out war on this attempt to merge the service of Ba'al with the service of God, for "the Lord is God"[[5]](#footnote-5) – and none other. He is the One and Only, in the heavens and the earth; "there is none other than Him."[[6]](#footnote-6)

Izevel responded by killing the prophets of God. Ovadyahu managed to save a hundred of them and hid them in two caves, feeding them "bread and water."[[7]](#footnote-7) But Achav kept vacillating between Izevel and Ovadyahu. In *Sefer Melakhim*, this looks like a political stance prompted by economic considerations, with Sidon in the background. But from the ancient prophecy in Chapter 2 of *Hoshea*, we understand that this was also an attempt at theological syncretism,[[8]](#footnote-8) a sort of "religious unification" of these two contradictory belief systems.

It was this view that the ancient prophecy sought to counter, by declaring that only God could decide battle and only He could bring abundant blessing and fertility. God is the nation's “first husband"; it was He Who had always provided the “wife” with "grain, wine and corn" and Who had showered her with silver and gold.

Therefore, I shall take back My corn in its time, and My wine in its season, and will snatch away My wool and My flax given to cover her nakedness. (*Hoshea* 2:11)

When the nation started serving Ba'al, the blessings ceased, for God had taken back His "corn in its time,” His “wine in its season,” and His “flax given to cover her nakedness," and brought desolation upon the vine and the fig[[9]](#footnote-9) (*te’ena,* which had now become viewed as “*etna*” (ibid. 14) – payment of the harlotry of the Ba'al), to the extent of removing all the joy of Shabbat, the festivals, and the new moon (ibid. 13).

After the period of purification in the "wilderness,” God's blessing will be restored, and a renewed, pure connection will be forged between God and Israel, like the bond of *erusin* (betrothal). This bond will contain nothing of the idolatrous sexuality of Ba'al-worship, and will be based entirely on the attributes of righteousness, justice, and kindness, for these alone are the dowry that accompany a pure bond:

And I shall betroth you unto Me forever; I shall betroth you unto Me in righteousness, and in justice, and in lovingkindness, and in compassion. And I will betroth you unto Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord. (*Hoshea* 2:21-22).

“Knowing" (*yedi'a*)[[10]](#footnote-10) in the sense of physical intimacy will transform into a pure knowledge, because to “know” God means to follow "God's path, to perform righteousness and judgment,” as Avraham taught,[[11]](#footnote-11) and to love God means to "walk in His ways," as Moshe taught.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**The "wilderness" era and a "wilderness" ideology**

The great riddle in this ancient prophecy concerns the wilderness: To which “wilderness” will God lead Israel, and with what enticement?[[13]](#footnote-13) The prophecy states only that this will be a renewal and purification that will recall the Exodus from Egypt, and thus the nation will be able to regain the land and all its "vineyards,” without the sins of Akhan or those of Achav and Izevel. But where is the road to the "wilderness?” And what is the "allure?”

The prophecy leaves us in the dark, with no hint of an answer – whether because the reference was clear to the people of those generations, or the opposite, because the prophecy deliberately leaves the matter to be decided by history as it unfolds, such that the "wilderness" could be interpreted differently in different periods. Yechezkel, for example, defines certain sites of acute suffering for the Jews in exile as the "wilderness of the nations,"[[14]](#footnote-14) but the prophecy we are talking about doesn't have that meaning. It depicts the wilderness in terms of a positive, pure encounter,[[15]](#footnote-15) not in terms of suffering.

I believe we can find hints to the solution in *Sefer Melakhim*, in the narratives surrounding the rift between the prophets and the house of Achav. The prophetic campaign opens with the declaration:

Eliyahu the Tishbi, who was of the inhabitants of Gil’ad, said to Achav: As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand: there shall be no dew nor rain these years, but by My word (*Melakhim* I 17:1).

God acquiesces to Eliyahu's declaration of religious war, and sends him to hide. Presumably, Eliyahu makes his declaration in Shomron. Therefore, the hiding place must be one of the streams that flow through the Shomron and to the Jordan – or to the east of it:

Go from here, and head yourself eastward, and hide yourself in Nahal Kerit, that is before the Jordan (ibid. 3).

Following his success in bringing about the nation's change of heart at Mount Carmel, with Achav, and his failure with Izevel, the powerful queen, Eliyahu flees "for his life" (*el nafsho*)[[16]](#footnote-16) to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva and from there, via a wondrous journey, to Mount Chorev. Eliyahu, persecuted and despairing, travels precisely in the direction of Moshe's wilderness – the wilderness of the Exodus from Egypt.

So, is the “wilderness” in the ancient prophecy in *Hoshea* to be found in the region of the Jordan, or does it refer to the wilderness of Sinai-Chorev? The latter possibility seems to be implied by the plain meaning of the verse: “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.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

But Eliyahu doesn’t remain in Chorev; he brings his despair there and submits to God his “resignation”[[18]](#footnote-18) from the role he had taken on himself as leader of the revolution. From Chorev, he is sent to anoint “Elisha ben Shafat of Avel Mechola.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Mechola is located in the northern Jordan valley (according to the description of Gidon’s pursuit of the Midianite host all the way to the Jordan, in *Shoftim* 7:22).

After Eliyahu is taken up to heaven near the crossing of the Jordan (in the same place where Moshe died!) opposite Yericho, Elisha heals the waters of Yericho.[[20]](#footnote-20) After some time, we find him once again in Gilgal – “And Elisha came back to Gilgal, and there was a famine in the land, and the sons of the prophets were sitting before him...”[[21]](#footnote-21) – and he also sends Na’aman, head of the army of the king of Aram, to bathe in the Jordan.[[22]](#footnote-22) Indeed, the region of the Jordan is mentioned over and over in the stories of the prophets from that time. Although we also find Elisha (with the army of Israel) in the wilderness of Edom[[23]](#footnote-23) and he travels throughout all of Israel, including to Shunem and Mount Carmel, to Dotan[[24]](#footnote-24) and to Shomron, it seems clear that he had a permanent base near the Jordan:

And the sons of the prophets said to Elisha: Behold now, the place where we dwell before you is too small for us. Let us go, we pray you, to the Jordan, and each of us will take from there a beam, and let us make ourselves a place there, that we may dwell there… (*Melakhim* II 6:1-2).

It would seem that groups of “sons of the prophets” had removed themselves from the sinful society in the days of Achav and Izevel – first because they were persecuted and in mortal danger, and later because they sought a lifestyle that was pure and free of the lusts of Shomron, the wine and the harlotry that had saturated the successful, flourishing society during Achav’s reign.[[25]](#footnote-25) Some of these groups set themselves up in the Jordan region, and even when Elisha undertook his visits throughout Israel, he would always return to the Jordan, to the sons of the prophets, who were his faithful followers.

Later in the narrative in *Sefer Melakhim*, we find major support for this interpretation of the “wilderness” – i.e., the “wilderness” lifestyle of the sons of the prophets (some of whom settled near the Jordan) – to which God would “entice” Israel in order to purify the nation of the defilement of the harlotry of Shomron, so they would be able to return and receive the land in purity.

The mysterious character named Yehonadav ben Rekhav, and his role in the eradication of Ba’al from Israel in Yehu’s revolution,[[26]](#footnote-26) is another key to solving the riddle:

And [Yehu] departed from there, and he found Yehonadav ben Rekhav coming towards him, and he greeted him and he said to him, “Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?” And Yehonadav said, “It is.” “If it be, give [me] your hand.”… And he said to him, “Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord.”… (Ibid. 10:15-16)

These two men clearly know each other well, and share a similar outlook. Both are zealous for God – i.e., they are followers of Eliyahu and Elisha in their struggle to eradicate Ba’al from Israel and to purify the service of the One God. They have a short, clear code of communication, like a secret watchword among co-conspirators. However, there is a huge difference between them: Yehu has been anointed and entrusted with the mission of carrying out a revolution in Shomron[[27]](#footnote-27) and establishing a new, stable royal house in place of the house of Achav; Yehonadav ben Rekhav, in contrast, has separated himself from the sinful society around him, decreeing upon himself and his children a “wilderness” existence, though the text gives no indication of when exactly this separation began.

The prophet Yirmiyahu[[28]](#footnote-28) reveals the secret of Yonadav ben Rekhav to us in a detailed chapter devoted to “the house of the Rekhavim.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Yirmiyahu is sent to offer them wine, in a dignified ceremony, in an exalted setting – but the children of the Rekhavim refuse to drink:

But they said: We shall drink no wine, for Yonadav ben Rekhav, our father, commanded us, saying: You shall drink no wine, neither you nor your sons, forever. Neither shall you build a house, nor sow seed, nor plant a vineyard, nor have [anything], for you shall dwell in tents all your days, in order that you may live many days upon the land wherein you sojourn. And we have obeyed Yehonadav ben Rekhav, our father, in all that he commanded us, and have not drink wine all our days – neither we, nor our wives, our sons or our daughters. Nor have we built houses to dwell in, nor have we vineyards, fields, or seed. But we have dwelled in tents and have obeyed and done according to all that Yonadav our father commanded us. (*Yirmiyahu* 35:6-10)

This scene offers a clear picture of the nazirite “wilderness,” with its “allure” of a natural lifestyle, devoid of the lusts surrounding wine and material development in general. This is the world of Yonadav ben Rekhav, Yehu’s partner in the great revolution to rid Israel of the Ba’al. It is also clear that this lifestyle is zealously maintained by his descendants for many generations, until Yirmiyahu holds them up as an example before the people of Yehuda and Jerusalem: the people are not observing God’s commands,[[30]](#footnote-30) while the Rekhavim, even when they are forced to flee to Jerusalem for fear of the Kasdim,[[31]](#footnote-31) and even when the prophet Yirmiyahu brings them to a grand chamber in God’s house and commands them to drink wine – they refuse, because they will not violate the will of Yonadav, their ancestor.

The ancient prophecy extolling the “purity of the wilderness” matches perfectly the generation of Achav and the revolution of the prophets. The lifestyle of the prophets (which started with their flight from Izevel’s regime) is the “wilderness” of the prophecy. A great many narratives in Tanakh, located in the region of the Jordan, describe the wanderings of prophets and their disciples, and even flight in times of crisis to the wilderness of the Exodus from Egypt.

Perhaps there were other groups that headed southward, like Eliyahu, as suggested by the religious inscriptions discovered at Kuntillet Ajrud (Churvat Teiman)[[32]](#footnote-32) in the Sinai, south of Kadesh Barne’a. These inscriptions mention God’s Name and Shomron, and they are dated to the period of the house of Yehu.[[33]](#footnote-33)

***Hoshea* 2 vs. *Hoshea* 4 – Two “wives” and two eras**

The basic parallel between Chapters 1 and 3 of *Hoshea* is clear: there are two wives, signifying two periods in the life of the kingdom of Israel. The first is the “wife of harlotry” of Achav, who is invoked with a view to casting guilt on the later period. The second “wife” signifies the kingdom of Israel during the period of Yarovam ben Yoash – which is also the period of the prophet Hoshea ben Be’eri. This latter period is described using the images, colors and concepts drawn from the early “wife of harlotry” – Izevel and her children.

In Chapter 3, the period of Yarovam ben Yoash makes an appearance devoid of disguise:

Go, love a woman beloved of a friend, and an adulteress, just as the Lord loves *Bnei Yisrael* though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins. (*Hoshea* 3:1)

Here the prophet is not talking specifically about worship of Ba’al, but rather idolatry in general. Most importantly, for our discussion, there is no special mention – nor indeed even a hint – of the responsibility borne by the royal house that rules in Shomron. Rather, the prophet is referring to the sins of Israelite society in general.

A similar reading should be applied to Chapter 4, paralleling Chapter 2, and here we encounter another novel idea. Most scholars of *Hoshea* read the first three chapters as a closed unit,[[34]](#footnote-34) with Chapter 4 as a unit on its own. However, the complete structure of the introduction to *Hoshea* actually has four parts:

Chapter 1: The “wife of harlotry” and her children

Chapter 2: Ancient prophecy regarding the house of Achav and Izevel

Chapter 3: Another adulterous wife

Chapter 4: The sins of Israelite society in the days of Yarovam ben Yoash

Just as Chapter 2 explains the “wife of harlotry” in Chapter 1 by invoking the ancient prophecy from the time of Achav and Izevel, so Chapter 4 explains and details the sins of the adulterous wife of Chapter 3.

Even a superficial reading of Chapter 4 shows that it is describing the sins of Israelite society in general, and especially those of the aristocracy, but not necessarily the royal house. This is an exact reflection of the generation of Yarovam ben Yoash:[[35]](#footnote-35)

Hear the word of the Lord, O *Bnei Yisrael*: for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, for there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God, in the land. Swearing and lying, and killing, and stealing, and adultery; they break all bounds, and blood touches blood. (Ibid. 4:1-2)

There is no figure of morality in sight: the prophet is entirely alone; *kohanim* and prophets have contributed to the downfall and have forgotten God’s Torah,[[36]](#footnote-36) and an atmosphere of festivities of wine and harlotry has come to characterize an Israelite society giddy with the victories of Yarovam ben Yoash:

Harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the heart. My people ask counsel of their branch, and their staff declares to them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to err, and they have gone astray from under their God. They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and offer upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and terebinths, for its shadow is good; therefore your daughters commit harlotry, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery. (Ibid. 11-13)

The text is very precise in its terminology: the introductory term, “*Bnei Yisrael*,” parallels the “inhabitants of the land” and appears three times in Chapter 3, as the audience to whom the prophecy is addressed, and as an explanation of the second “adulteress,” the prophet’s generation – the subject is the society, not the regime.

In contrast, Chapter 1 mentions (twice) the “house of Israel” and the “house of Yehu” – in other words, it is focused on the “kingdoms of the house of Israel,” under the leadership of the “house of Yehu,” which spilled much blood in Yehu’s revolution against the house of Achav and Izevel but are themselves no better and no more worthy than that former “wife of harlotry.”

Moreover, for the abominations of Izevel, the “wife of harlotry,” there was a solution that did not involve total destruction. The regime of the house of Achav had sinned, persecuted the prophets, and led Shomron astray to idolatry, and therefore the ancient prophecy came to ignite a revolution in a spirit of “wilderness” purity. The prophecies were fulfilled, and this wicked regime fell and was replaced. All this happened in the revolution of Yehu.

But when Israelite society as a whole became an “adulteress,” a change of regime would no longer be an effective solution. It was not the royal house that was leading or encouraging the harlotry that had spread throughout this comfortable, prosperous, corruption-infested society. A much more serious fall was necessary: the “bow of Israel” would be broken in the “valley of Yizre’el”[[37]](#footnote-37) and there would be many days “without king and without prince” and with no Israelite worship.[[38]](#footnote-38)

For Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer; now shall the Lord feed them like a lamb in a wide place. (*Hoshea* 4:16)

1. The inherently sexual nature of the pagan worship is what made Ba’al and Ashera the “abominations of Canaan” (*Vayikra* 18:3, 22-25). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Tanakh usually uses the name “*Ba’al*” or “*Adon*” (master), but we also find: “O Lord our God, other lords besides You have had dominion over us (*be’alunu*), nevertheless only with regard to You do we make mention of Your Name” (*Yeshayahu* 26:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Melakhim* I 18:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Devarim* 4:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Melakhim* I 18:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Y. Kaufman (*Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit*, vol. III, pp. 95-97) strongly rejects this idea, but the emphasis on “you shall … no more call **Me** ‘*Ba’ali*’” in *Hoshea* 2:18-19 outweighs all his arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Like the first-ripe fig, before the summer” – a fruit whose goodness and sweetness can be consumed in its entirety, with no peel or pit to be cast away – “which, when one looks upon it, while it is still in his hand he eats it up” (*Yeshayahu* 28:4). It is therefore especially tempting, and the name “Gomer bat Divlayim” (*devela* = dried fig) would seem to allude to this image. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Yedi’a* (knowing) represents a powerful connection and bond, especially when used in the sense of physical intimacy – “And Adam knew (*yada*) his wife, Chava” (*Bereishit* 4:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Bereishit* 18:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The love of God as instruction, as well as following His ways, is mentioned in many places in *Sefer Devarim* (6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 26:17; 28:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly unto her” (*Hoshea* 2:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Yechezkel* 20:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As in, “… the kindness of your youth, the love of your espousals” (*Yirmiyahu* 2:1-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Melakhim* I 19:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Hoshea* 2:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The journey from inside Eretz Yisrael to Chorev is the inverse of Moshe’s orientation. Eliyahu expresses zealousness for God, and despair that he remains alone, and God sends him to anoint Elisha ben Shafat as a prophet in his stead (*Melakhim* I 19:14-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Melakhim* I 19:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Melakhim* II 2:18-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. 4:38. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. 5:10-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. 6:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In a similar manner to the sects that went to live in the Judean Desert during the Second Temple Period, whose remains were discovered at Qumran. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. 10:15-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. 9:1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Yirmiyahu is similar to Hoshea and is his continuation – in terms of his close ties to Rachel, Efrayim, Shilo, and the remnants of the kingdom of Israel; in his connection to the “wilderness” (9:1); and also – as we saw in the previous *shiur* – in the “husband-wife” imagery that he uses to describe the bond between God and Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Yirmiyahu* 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. 13-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See the article by Prof. Ze’ev Mashal, chief excavator of the site, in *Kadmoniot* 36 (5737), pp. 119-124, and *Sefer Sinai* part II (Tel Aviv, 5747), pp. 661-667. The inscriptions found at the site indicate religious faith in God along with “His Ashera” – a combination that recalls the cabal reigning in Shomron and represents exactly what the prophets were opposed to. However, it may be that the rulers of Shomron, who went to Eilat (in cooperation with Uziyahu, king of Yehuda), seized control of one of the sites to which disciples of the prophets had fled, and redesigned it to reflect their own beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The inscriptions are clearly related to Shomron, by explicit mention and by the form of the script and abbreviation of names; the jars found at the site date to the 8th century B.C.E. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Even though it does not occur to them to set the entire unit much earlier in time, as Kaufman does (see the previous *shiurim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This accords with the view of *Chazal*, who deduce from a hint in *Amos* the personal qualities of Yarovam ben Yoash himself: “That he did not accept slanderous accounts about Amos” (*Pesachim* 87b) and did not take action against him in light of the charges by the *kohen* of Beit El (*Amos* 7:10-17). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Hoshea* 4:4-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Hoshea* 1:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. 3:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)