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# Haftarat Bemidbar: The Imagined Return to the Land of Israel in Hoshea Chapter 2<sup>1</sup>

## *Nechamah Mi-Tokh Pur'anut*

We are used to dividing prophecies into two categories: *Nevu'at Nechamah* (usually translated as “prophecies of consolation,” but more accurately rendered as “prophecies of restoration”) and *Nevu'at Pur'anut* (prophecies of destruction). How, then, to categorize the second chapter of *Hoshea*? On the one hand, it describes an exile of Jews from the Land of Israel to the desert, where God threatens to afflict them with thirst and exposure. On the other hand, it ends with the promise of a “betrothal” between God and Israel (2:21–23).

The truth is that the categories themselves are problematic, and do not accurately describe many prophecies. *Hoshea* chapter 2 focuses on the concept of “salubrious destruction.” It foretells an exile and subsequent period of privation, meant to cleanse the Jewish people of materialism and idolatry, which will be followed by a renewed and triumphant entry into the Land of Israel.

It incorporates two central themes from the book of *Hoshea*:

The sojourning of Israel in the land has not produced a positive relationship with God. Israel has been disloyal to God in two ways: by worshipping idols, viewing them as Israel’s benefactors, and by forming political alliances of vassalage to foreign powers, viewing *them* as Israel’s benefactors.

God gives second chances: *teshuvah* (meaning “return to God,” as in 14:2, not “repentance”) is always an option.

## The Departure from the Land: Verses 1–2

א וְהָיָה מִסְפַּר בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִמְדוּ וְלֹא יִסְפְּרוּ וְהָיָה בְּמִקְוֵם אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמְרוּ לָהֶם לֹא־עַמִּי אַתֶּם  
יֹאמְרוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי חַיִּים  
ב וְנִקְבְּצוּ בְנֵי־יְהוּדָה וּבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִחַדּוּ וְשָׂמוּ לָהֶם רֹאשׁ אֶחָד וְעָלוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ כִּי גָדוֹל יוֹם זִרְעָאֵל:

(1) The number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted, and instead of it being said of them “You are not My people,” it shall be said of them “Children of the Living God.” (2) The Children of Judah and the Children of Israel will gather together and appoint over themselves one leader, and go up from the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.

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<sup>1</sup>. For a fuller discussion of this chapter, including the relevant historical and archaeological background, see my article “The Function of the City of Jezreel and the Symbolism of Jezreel in Hosea 1–2” to appear in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 122 (Spring 2012).

These verses imply a wholesale rejection of the period of the Kingdom of Israel. It evokes imagery of the period of the Patriarchs (the promise of descendants as numerous as the sand on the sea), the period of the Judges (a single leader called a “*rosh*,” as in *Shoftim* 11:7–11) and the period of the United Monarchy (the union of Judah and Israel). While idealizing these earlier periods, the prophecy vitiates the present: it prophesies a departure of the united Israelites from the Land of Israel, and a destruction of the Israelite military headquarters at Jezreel.<sup>2</sup>

### The Sojourn in the Desert: Verses 3–15

Once in the desert, the Israelites are told to call “their mother” to account (v. 4). The “mother” is a symbol for the nation of Israel as a whole, who is rejected by God for her “harlotries.” The “harlotry” of Israel is defined in verse 7 as her crediting her “lovers” for the provision of food, drink, and clothing. It is not idolatry *per se* that renders Israel guilty. It is the simple act of crediting *any* power other than God with providing Israel’s basic needs.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, Israel credits idols with providing her basic needs (as in vv. 10 and 15), while at other times, Israel gives this credit to foreign political powers (*Hoshea* 5:13 and 12:2). Both idolatry and crediting foreign polities with Israel’s survival are acts of “harlotry” according to Hoshea.

In the desert, God acts to strip Israel of her food, drink, and clothing – since Israel has not recognized that God provides these, she won’t have them at all (v. 11). God will “uncover Israel’s nakedness” (v. 12), terminate all her rejoicing (v. 13), and destroy her vines and fig trees (v. 15). This privation of Israel has both instrumental goals and a principled cause. By starving Israel, stripping her of her clothing, and denying her celebrations, God forces Israel to re-think her commitment to idols as well as to foreign polities. Moreover, Israel has no right to receive benefits while refusing to acknowledge God as giver of these benefits. Stripped bare of all material goods, alone in the desert, Israel has no one to turn to, except for God.

### The Renewed Courting: Verses 16–20

But God does not simply wait for Israel to seek Him out. He actively courts Israel in the desert. The words “*ve-dibbarti al libbah*” in verse 16 refer to courting, as in *Bereishit* 34:3. The courting is coupled in verse 17 with a promise of renewed benefit, a benefit made possible by the sojourn in the desert:

יֵד וְנִתְתִּי לָהּ אֶת־כְּרָמֶיהָ מִשָּׁם וְאֶת־עֵמֶק עַכּוֹר לְפֶתַח תְּקוּהָ וְעִנְתָּה שָׁמָּה כִּי־מִי נַעֲרִיהָ וְכִי־וּם עָלוּתָהּ מֵאֶרֶץ־  
מִצְרַיִם:

I will give her vineyards from there, and Emek Achor (“the valley of destruction”) will become Petach Tikvah (“the gateway of hope”), and there she will sing<sup>4</sup> like in her youth, and like on the day of her coming up from the land of Egypt.

Hoshea intentionally references both the story of Achan in *Yehoshua* chapter 7 and *Shirat Ha-Yam* in *Shemot* chapter 15. The story of Achan tells how in Israel’s first foray into conquest and land-ownership (in the conquest of Jericho), the property of Jericho was considered Divine property, forbidden to Israel. The lure of property proved too much for Achan, who was stoned at the “Valley of Destruction.” In the future entry of Israel into the land, Hoshea envisions how Achan’s refusal to acknowledge God’s ownership of the conquest will be replaced by a new version of *Shirat Ha-Yam*, in which Israel will credit God with her deliverance and recognize His sovereignty and munificence.

<sup>2</sup>. I understand “*ve-alu min ha-aretz*” as a departure from the Land of Israel, following the Ibn Ezra and the simplest possible reading of the words. The phrase “*yom Yizre’el*” can only mean “the day of the destruction of Jezreel,” like other Biblical phrases containing “*yom*” followed by the name of a place, as in *Yeshayahu* 9:3 and *Tehillim* 137:7.

<sup>3</sup>. The two *peirushim* cited in the Radak on 2:7 emphasize this point.

<sup>4</sup>. See Ibn Ezra.

Israel's recognition of God results in a new relationship between Israel and God, from which idols are excluded (vv. 18–19). Not only are idols eliminated, but so too are the foreign polities with whom Israel previously maintained “protection treaties.” In the place of these treaties, God will provide His own treaty (v. 20), which will protect Israel against attacks by wild animals. God will *not* provide Israel with military force to overcome foreign invasions. On the contrary, He will eliminate “the bow, the sword, and war.” Israel will no longer need foreign protection, nor will it engage in military adventures to accumulate wealth.

### **The New Betrothal: Verses 21–22**

Out of this recognition of God, a new form of betrothal emerges in verses 21–22. This betrothal between God and Israel is not based on specific benefits which God provides to Israel, but on a steadfast relationship.

כא וארשתיך לי לעולם וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים:  
כב וארשתיך לי באמונה וידעת אתה:

(21) I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and justice, with covenantal kindness, and with love. (22) I will betroth you to Me faithfully; You shall know God.

The betrothal itself leads, in a somewhat circular fashion, to strengthening Israel's recognition of God. The words “you shall know God” imply a recognition of God as sovereign Master, as in Yeshayahu's messianic prophecy (11:9) and in *Shemot* 14:18. The betrothal involves God renewing His covenant with Israel, and Israel accepting God as its Sovereign.

### **Conclusion: The Re-entry and *Bikkurim***

But this betrothal does not conclude the prophecy. The prophecy began with the departure of the Israelites from the Land of Israel, and it must conclude with an explicit discussion of their future tenure in the land. This discussion appears in verses 23–25. In these verses, God promises to provide all of the necessary conditions for agricultural plenty in the Land of Israel. But besides these, God also promises “to plant Israel in the land.” In verse 25, this promise is coupled with the renewed relationship of God and people.

וזרעתי לי בארץ ורחמתי את-לא רחמה ואמרתי ללא-עמי עמי-אתה והוא יאמר א-ל-הי:

I will plant her for me in the land, and I will love Lo-ruchamah, and I will say to Lo-ami, “You are My people,” and he will say “My God.”

In this conclusion, the stability of Israel in the land is coupled with a relationship with God that is not only stable, but also loving and committed. It reverses the rejection of Israel implied in the names “Lo-ami” and “Lo-ruchamah” (in *Hoshea* 1:6–9), and replaces these with a relationship of genuine love of God for Israel, expressed by means of the land.

These verses provide a counterpoint to the harsh treatment Israel endured at God's hand in verses 4–15. God did not exile Israel from the land and punish her in the desert out of eternal rejection, but rather, in order to reach a state in which the gift of the land could be appreciated. God loves Israel and expresses this love by means of the land.

The land is a central vehicle for expressing the relationship between God and Israel, but it is only an effective one if Israel recognizes God as giver of the land and its fruits. Therefore, the whole process of exiling and impoverishing Israel was needed in order to re-create a situation in which God could express His love and Israel can recognize it.

The imagery in this prophecy is strongly correlated to the imagery in *Parashat Bikkurim* (*Devarim* 26:1–11). The succession of verbs in *Devarim* 26:1–5 implies that immediately upon entry

into the Land of Israel, the Israelites are to take the *bikkurim*, march directly to “the place God will choose,” and declare their indebtedness to God by means of the *Arami oved avi* declaration: “My father was a wandering Aramean...God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, I have brought the first fruits of the land that You have given me, God.”

*Parashat Bikkurim* describes how recognition of God as “Land-Giver” is a central aspect not just of the Israelites’ sojourn in the land, but of their very entry into the land. Of course, such an idealized entry into the land never occurred in history: both the descriptions in *Yehoshua* and that in *Shoftim* describe the Israelites as preoccupied with military problems. But *Hoshea* chapter 2 describes how such an idealized entry will occur, someday, in the historical, or meta-historical, future. Someday, Israel will recognize that the land is a means for God to express His love, and that their primary focus in dwelling in the land is to acknowledge Him. Perhaps because of its connection to *Parashat Bikkurim*, this *haftarah* is always read a week or two before *Chag Ha-Bikkurim*.

*Hoshea* chapter 2 is neither a prophecy of unconditional restoration, nor a prophecy of irreversible destruction. It is a sobering prophecy, describing an impending exile, and a subsequent re-entry into the land, once Israel has learned its lesson. And this lesson is the take-home point of the *haftarah*: The Land of Israel and its fruits are a Divine gift, which Israel must continually acknowledge.