

Bellows Family

MATAN AL HAPEREK

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The book of Trei-Asar comprises the prophecies of twelve prophets from different periods, starting from the end of the days of the kingdom of Israel until the days of the return to Zion. The Talmud tells us that these prophecies were collected into one book for practical purposes – so that they would not get lost because they are short. The book of Trei-Asar opens with the prophecies of Hoshea ben Be'eri who, we can tell from his writings, lived during the kingdom of Israel in the period close to its destruction (8th century BCE). Hoshea's prophecies are mostly given to this kingdom, which is called "Ephraim" in his prophecies.

The first unit in the book of Hoshea includes perakim 1-3, and deals with the prophet's marriage and its symbolic meaning as regards the relationship of God and Israel. These perakim are a mixture of prophecies of doom and harsh rebuke with words of consolation and visions of redemption. The unit comprises six sections, which are arranged in a chiasitic structure:

- In the first section (perek 1) Hoshea is commanded to marry a wife of harlotry.
- In the second section (perek 2:1-3) there is a description of a vision of redemption, and a positive explanation for the names of Hoshea's children.
- The third section (perek 2:4-15) includes a prophecy of doom and rebuke of the unfaithful nation.
- The fourth section (2:16-22) describes the process of repair and ends with the renewal of the covenant between God and his nation.
- In the fifth section (2:23-25) there is a description of a vision of redemption, and a positive explanation for the names of Hoshea's children.
- In the sixth section (perek 3) Hoshea is commanded an additional commandment ("go again") to love the adulteress woman.

Hoshea 1-3

We will follow the sections in order, while comparing them to the parallel sections.

1.

The first section:

“Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry” (2)


In the opening section (1:1-9) Hoshea receives a difficult and surprising commandment, to marry a wife of harlotry. In this as in other similar cases of surprising commandments to the prophets, the commentators were divided as to how to understand the commandment. See the Ibn Ezra and the Midrash, and see how each of them interprets the commandment:

Ibn Ezra: Heaven forbid that God would command to take a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry... And it seems to me that this prophet saw visions of prophecy in a dream that God said to him: *“Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry”* and he went and he took himself a known woman and she became pregnant and gave birth, and *all* of this was in a vision of prophecy.

Pesachim 87b: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Hoshea, ‘Your children have sinned,’ to which he should have replied: ‘They are Your children, they are the children of Your favored ones they are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; extend Your mercy to them.’ Not enough that he did not say thus, but he said to Him: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! The whole world is Yours; exchange them for a different nation.’ Said the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘What shall I do with this old man? I will order him: *“Go and marry a harlot and beget children of harlotry”*; and then I will order him: *“Send her away from your presence.”* If he will be able to send [her] away, so will I too send Israel away.’

2.

In the middle of the third section (2:4-15) is a harsh prophecy of doom which is connected to the wife of harlotry who appears in the first section. The prophet calls on the sons to stand up to their unfaithful mother in the “divorce trial” (*“contend”*, in Hebrew *riv*). The background to this prophecy is the people’s worship of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain, who was worshipped in the kingdom of Israel from the time of Achav and Izevel. It was believed that worshipping Baal would bring fertility and blessings on the land. Examine the claim against the nation in the “trial”. What is the main expression of the nation’s harlotry? How is the punishment (11-14) measure for measure for their sins? Pay attention to the roots of the verbs to take and to give (*lakach* and *natan*) which are connected to the sin and its punishment.

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Hoshea 1-3

3.

The fourth section:

“Therefore, behold I will allure her and lead her into the desert, and I will speak comfortingly to her heart.” (16) – in this pasuk we see the beginning of the process of repair and a renewed closeness between Israel and God, with the pinnacle of the renewal being the covenant of betrothal.

a | Why does the process of repair begin in the desert? Read the description of the days in the desert in Yirmiyahu (2:1-2) and pay attention to the characterization of the desert as a place which is arid and desolate, as contrasted with the fertility and abundance which are attributed to Baal. Note the change which takes place in the role of the desert in the prophecy (pesukim 5 and 16).

b | *“And it shall come to pass on that day, says the Lord, you shall call [Me] Ishi (my husband), and you shall no longer call Me Baali (my master).”* Examine pasuk 19 and think about what the negative aspects of the term Baali are, and why it will be changed in the future to Ishi.

4.

The fifth section:

The renewed betrothal brings a process of harmony between God, the land and the people (23-25). Here again, in a way similar to the second section (2:1-2), the names of the children of Hoshea here are explained in a positive way. Compare the two sections and pay attention to the different nature of redemption in each of them. Pay special attention to the explanation of the name “Yizre’el” in each of the sections, and the reversal of the description of doom to a description of redemption both in the first and second sections (1:4-5; 2:1-2) and in the parallel sections, sections four and five (2:11-12; 2:23-25).

5.

The sixth section:

This unit concludes with an additional commandment for Hoshea – to take an adulterous wife (3:1-5). How is this commandment different than the commandment in the first section? Pay attention to the focus of the relationship of Hoshea and his wife in both sections, to the repetition of the verb to love (*ahav*) here, and to the process of repair in both the parable and its explanation. Use the **Radak** to help you understand:

And now he added in this parable the love of God to Israel, as a man loves his beloved wife, which is a great love...and even so they turned to other gods...they removed

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Hoshea 1-3

the yoke of the Torah from upon them and loved the pleasures of the world and desired the drinking of wine...and I said to her after you have been adulterous to me your punishment will be that you will sit as a widow for many days...that you will be called by my name and not by another man's and you will not play the harlot with others or be the wife of any other man than me, but even I will not come to you.

APPENDIX – “And I will remove the names of the baalim from her mouth” Hoshea's prophecy and the worship of Baal

The translation of the name Baal in the Caananite language is “master”. Even 3500 years ago the name Baal became the accepted name for the god Hadad, the god of rainstorms in Canaan. In the period of the kingdoms, especially in the times of Achav king of Israel, the worship of Baal spread throughout Israel, probably under the influence of his wife Izevel who was the daughter of Etbaal king of Tzidon. Eliyahu the prophet's main efforts during his time were against the worship of Baal, and the pinnacle of these activities was his confrontation with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. Yehu ben Nimshi, who ousted the house of Achav from rule, was determined to remove Baal worship from Israel. However, we find that even one hundred years later the prophets of Israel were still protesting the integration of Baal worship with the worship of God.

From the prophecies of Hoshea, who lived in the 8th century BCE, toward the end of Yehu's dynasty, we learn that Baal worship was prevalent in his time and included the building of temples and altars on mountains, making idols and images (especially idols of calves which were the symbol of Baal), giving sacrifices, participating in fertility rites and divination using various objects: *“My people takes counsel of his piece of wood, and his rod declares to him... They sacrifice upon the mountaintops and burn incense upon the hills... and now, they continue to sin, and they have made for themselves a molten image from their silver...kiss the calves.”* (4:12-13, 13:1). The worship of Baal is the background to a few of Hoshea's prophecies in perakim 1-3. The references to acts of harlotry in perakim 1-2 seem to be directed at the pagan fertility rites, which included acts of harlotry in the temples of Baal by the “Kedeshot”(sacred prostitutes) which were meant to bring rain to fertilize the earth. This explains the punishment in the book of Hoshea – instead of bringing rain Hoshea sees a vision of a dry and thirsty desert: *“Lest I strip her naked and leave her as [on] the day she was born; and I make her like a desert, and I set her like an arid land, and cause her to die of thirst.”* The worship of Baal by the sacred prostitutes is no more than an act of adultery whose punishment is death. Instead of the expected fertility – the opposite will occur: *“And I will lay waste her vine[s] and her fig tree[s], [concerning] which she said, “They are my hire, which my lovers have given me,” and*

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I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them.” The nation, who has attributed the fertility which it received from God to the worship of Baal – will be punished with a lack of fertility, and with the devastation of the land and its produce. In the continuation of his prophecy, Hoshea sees the return of Israel to God and the abandonment of Baal. One day the children of Israel will only call out to God, and will believe only in him and they will not integrate their faith with a belief in Baal: *“And it shall come to pass on that day, says the Lord, you shall call [Me] Ishi, and you shall no longer call Me Baali. And I will remove the names of the baalim from her mouth, and they shall no longer be mentioned by their name.”*



From Wikipedia

► Bronze figurine, 14th-12th centuries, found in Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit).

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