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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #05**

**The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles against the Nations** (continued)

In this *shiur*, we will study the overall pattern of the oracles and identify the underlying message of this pattern. In the following *shiurim*, we will study the substance of the first seven of these oracles and then we will, in the final *shiur* of this series, complete our study of this section, analyzing the final oracle in the section: the prophecy against Yisrael.

Each of the oracles follows a common pattern, as we have seen:

*Ko amar Hashem: “Al shelosha pishei* ***X*** *ve-al arba’a lo ashivenu; al* **Y…**”

Thus says God: “For the three sins of **X**, and for the fourth (or “for four”) I will not reverse it. For **Y…**”

In this *shiur*, we will take a panoramic view of the first 7 oracles, identifying the features common to all seven, those shared by two or more of them and those that are unique to a specific diatribe against one nation.

The nation is identified in the header and in the parentheses which follow; all cities in that nation which are targeted are listed. (I have used the 1917 JPS translation here, substituting several words for the archaic English used there). Keep in mind, as we pointed out earlier, the geographic “boxing” utilized by Amos.

**THE TEXT**

1. Against Aram (Damascus, Bikat Aven, Beit Eden)

**3** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Damascus, and for four I will not reverse it: because they have threshed Gilead with sledges of iron. **4** So will I send a fire into the house of Chaza’el, and it shall devour the palaces of Ben Hadad; **5** And I will break the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from Bikat Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beit Eden; and the people of Aram shall go into captivity unto Kir, *amar Hashem.*

1. Against Philistia (Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron)

**6** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Gaza, and for four I will not reverse it: because they carried away captive a whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom. **7** So will I send a fire on the wall of Gaza, and it will devour her palaces; **8** And I will cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod, and the one who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; and I will turn My hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines will perish, *amar Hashem Elokim.*

1. Against Phoenicia (Tyre)

**9** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Tyre, and for four I will not reverse it: because they delivered up a whole captivity to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brothers. **10** So will I send a fire on the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her palaces.

1. Against Edom (Teiman, Botzra)

**11** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Edom, and for four I will not reverse it: because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all of his compassion, and his anger perpetually tore at him, and he held onto his wrath forever. **12** So will I send a fire upon Teiman, and it shall devour the palaces of Botzra.

1. Against Ammon (Rabba)

**13** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of the children of Ammon, and for four I will not reverse it: because they ripped up the pregnant women of Gilead, in order to expand their border. **14** So will I kindle a fire in the wall of Rabba, and it shall devour her palaces, with shouting in the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind; **15** And their king shall go into captivity, he and his princes together, *amar Hashem.*

1. Against Moav (Keriyot)

**1** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Moav, and for four I will not reverse it: because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime. **2** So will I send a fire upon Moav, and it shall devour the palaces of Keriyot; and Moav will die with tumult, with shouting, and with the sound of the shofar; **3** And I will cut off the judge from their midst, and will slay all of their princes with him, *amar Hashem.*

1. Against Yehuda (Yerushalayim)

**4** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Yehuda, and for four I will not reverse it: because they have rejected the law of Hashem, and have not kept His laws, and their lies have caused them to err, [those lies] after which their fathers had walked. **5** So will I send a fire upon Yehuda, and it shall devour the palaces of Yerushalayim.

The general pattern is as follows:

1. Messenger formula (*Ko Amar Hashem*)
2. Numeric introduction (“for the three sins of X [I will overlook/ forgive] and for four [or “for a fourth”]) I will not reverse it”)
3. Fourth sin (either the “last straw” or the most egregious act)
   1. In some cases, this is presented in a prosaic colon (one phrase).
   2. In others, it is presented in a poetic bicolon or couplet (two phrases).
4. Punishment
   1. Always begins with *“Ve-shilachti esh”* (“I will send a fire”) against the palaces or the walls of the city. One nuanced variation is in the fifth oracle against Ammon, where the nearly synonymous “*Ve-hitzati esh”* (“I will ignite a fire”) is used.
   2. In the third, fourth and seventh oracles, this is the sum of the punishment, and the sense is that it represents the utter destruction of the ruling class and defenses of the capital.
   3. In the first, second, fifth and sixth oracles, the punishment is more detailed and explicitly ends with either exile (Aram, Ammon) or complete decimation of the people (Philistia, Moav).
5. Signature formula (“*amar Hashem*”)
   1. Does not appear in the third, fourth or seventh oracles.
   2. Has a nuanced variant in the second oracle: *“amar Ad-nai Y-H-V-H” (*read *“amar Hashem Elokim”*)

Here is a chart to help visualize the pattern and the internal variations:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Nation | 4th Sin | Form | Punishment | Result | Signed |
| 1 | Aram | War crimes (excessive destruction?) | Simple | Fire against palaces, shattering city defenses | Exile back to Kir | Yes |
| 2 | Philistia | Handing over refugees to Edom | Simple | Fire against palaces, destruction of leadership | Decimation of tribe | Yes – with *Ad-nai* added |
| 3 | Phoenicia | Handing refugees over to Edom | Bicolon | Fire against palaces | -- | No |
| 4 | Edom | Ruthless killing of “brother” (war crimes?) | Double Couplet | Fire against palaces | -- | No |
| 5 | Ammon | War crimes | Simple (extended) | Fire against palaces | War, king sent into exile | Yes |
| 6 | Moav | War crime | Simple | Fire against palaces | War, decimation of ruling class | Yes |
| 7 | Yehuda | Disobedience towards God | Double Couplet | Fire against palaces | -- | No |

**OBSERVATIONS**

With the exception of Yehuda, all of the crimes are related to behavior during war. Brutality during war is the accusation against Aram (unnecessarily threshing the land; what this may actually mean will be discussed in the next *shiur*) and Ammon (ripping open the stomachs of pregnant women among the conquered).Both Philistia and Tyre are accused of handing over exiles (refugees) to Edom. The simple reading of this is that people fleeing an attack of the Edomites ran to a border they assumed to be a sanctuary; instead, the “welcoming” nation handed them over to their pursuers. This picture is then completed in the accusation against Edom itself. War crimes predominate in these indictments.

Several salient points about these accusations deserve explication.

**THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE**

The first six nations are not bound by a covenant with God which dictates their behavior; the Noahide laws, even in their complete rabbinic formulation, don’t seem to encompass rules for war. Nevertheless, each of these nations stands to be destroyed for violating the ethical boundaries of conquest. In fact, it is not at all clear who the victims of their crimes are. To be sure, the pregnant women in the Gilead were likely members of the Transjordanian tribes of Reuven, Gad and Menashe; however, even this is not explicit in the text and may only be assumed. The refugees who fled to Peleshet and Phoenicia are not identified here, and we have no way of knowing if they were Jews or not. The mention of Edom’s everlasting hatred and his quelling of his natural fraternal compassion seems to point to this encounter as a latter-day replay of the Ya’akov-Esav enmity, but even this is not explicit in the text. Most assuredly, the accusation against Moav has nothing to do with Yisrael. In sum, these nations are being called to judgment by God for behavior He had never proscribed and which had no impact (necessarily) on His people.

We suggested earlier that these oracles were never meant for the ears of these nations and are instead a rhetorical tool to build up to the real indictment, against Yisrael.One might suggest that, this being the case, there is no need for these punishments to actually be meted out or even for these accusations to carry any weight. This is unlikely, however, as it would defeat the rhetorical purpose of these declarations. If the audience knows that any divine punishment against foreign nations isn’t “real,” then the bite of the speech is blunted.

This leads us to an interesting and highly impactful conclusion, one which is borne out by passages early on in *Bereishit*. The entire world, all people and each nation, are bound by a basic moral code that relies on what Rav Kook would call “natural morality” (*musar tivi*). This understanding of a universal ethic is similar to if not identical to Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which may be subsumed under the rubric of “Natural Law.”To wit, God holds all people accountable to a basic moral code, and they are punished for violating it. This is implicit in the punishment meted out to Kayin for killing Hevel as well as the entire Generation of the Flood.With the exception of the divine edict against eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, there are no direct commands given to anyone before the Flood. Any consequences before that presume a tacit understanding of right and wrong along with an acceptance of some culpability for violation.

God will punish these nations for brutality, war crimes, treachery and the like in spite of His never having proscribed these behaviors or warning them about what His response would be to their violating this tacit code.

**CRIME AND PUNISHMENT**

An interesting and possibly meaningful pattern can be seen on the chart. Four of the nations have crimes which are encapsulated in a single clause. Aram “threshed the Gilead with iron plows;” Philistia “carried away captive a whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom”; Ammon “ripped up the pregnant women of Gilead, in order to expand their border;” and Moav “burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime.”Nevertheless, these four are given the elaborate and lengthy form of punishment, being subjected to war, raucous conquest, decimation of part or all of the ruling class and exile. On the other hand, the remaining three nations’ sins are declared in a more complex and poetic form. Phoenicia “delivered up a whole captivity to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brothers”; Edom “pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all of his compassion, and his anger perpetually tore at him, and he held onto his wrath forever” and finally Yehuda “rejected the law of Hashem, and have not kept His laws, and their lies have caused them to err, [those lies] after which their fathers had walked.” It would seem that these three nations committed a greater affront to God with their behavior. Yet, all three of them receive the shortest and least detailed punishment, without the divine signature.

It would seem that this is all a part of Amos’s rhetorical scheme. The oracles are balanced; either a detailed presentation of the crime with a “simple” form of punishment or the opposite. Coursing under the uneven and varied individual prophecies is a rhythm, an essential balance, which speaks to the nature of divine justice in the world.

Significantly, the four oracles that present detailed punishments have nearly an identical amount of words, 35 words (except for Moav, which has 32); the others have 22 (except for Edom, which has 26).

Amos presents two “long” diatribes, with pointed and terse accusations and detailed, painful punishments. He then presents two “short” oracles, with more developed indictments of a heinous nature but concluding with a single, common punishment: sending fire against X to consume its palaces. He then returns with two more long oracles, with exile and war as the punishments; and he concludes with another short prophetic declaration, concluding with foretelling the burning of Yerushalayim and its palaces, without even signing off with *amar Hashem*.

An audience accustomed to prophetic stylings and numeric patterns would have every reason to believe that the oracles had come to a conclusion. The prophet consistently invokes “three…and four/ a fourth,” alluding to a complete cycle of seven. After these seven prophecies of doom, the Samarian crowd listening to Amos would have reason to breathe a sigh of relief and even, perhaps, to feel some mean-spirited joy. Hearing about the downfall of neighboring enemies is cause enough for celebration, but concluding with a prophecy against Yehuda and accusing the Southern Kingdom of infidelity against God’s law must have served as a source of vindication for the Samarian aristocracy and throne.

I am not suggesting that the prophet deliberately uses the “three/ four” sequence to mislead his listeners; but once that rhetorical pattern is invoked, it can be used to misdirect them. The element of surprise carries the potential to turn dismay into horror and perhaps to shock his audience into a realization of their overwhelmingly sinful ways.

Truth to tell, the Ephraimite crowd should anticipate some oracle against their leadership and crown. Amos’s “anthem” – “God roars from Tziyon, and from Yerushalayim He sends forth His voice; the pastures of the shepherds will mourn, and the top of the Carmel will wither” is, as we suggested earlier, his regular preface to his prophetic warnings. Nonetheless, given the pattern, they may feel some relief when his seventh prophecy is against Yehuda. Even when he begins an eighth oracle against them, they could have assumed, given the rhythms of his oracular scheme, a short indictment with a pointed and direct, singular punishment.When his prophecy extends beyond anything they have heard yet, the surprise undoubtedly turns to shock and shame. Perhaps this is his plan; whether it comes to fruition is unclear. In this case, we are not privy to the people’s reactions to his prophecy.

This analysis rests on an assumption that we have not yet addressed about where Amos speaks and to whom. We know that his prophecy is given in the north and that, at one point, he has direct interaction with Amatzya, the priest officiating at the royal sanctuary at Beit El. We will address this overarching question, along with broader topics about the book as a whole, in appendices after we complete our study of the text.

**POETIC JUSTICE**

The notion of poetic justice, oft-times called “*midda ke-neged midda*” (lit. “measure for measure”) is common in the canon. God’s covering the nakedness of Adam and Chava after they hide from him in shame due to their nudity may be the first example of this phenomenon. It is consistently used to describe divine punishment and reward, but is often seen in human activity which is then interpreted as serving the divine purpose. When Tamar uses the phrase “Recognize this now” (*Haker na*) in telegraphing to Yehuda that he is the one who has impregnated her, it evokes the same “*Haker na”* that the brothers, presumably led by Yehuda, used to fool their father into thinking that Yosef was dead (cf. *Bereishit Rabba* 85:25).

This series of oracles is apparently informed by the same spirit of “justice in kind.” The first six nations indicted all stand guilty of one or another type of war crime. This is, to be sure, not the only type of transgression which prophets inveigh against; it is, on the contrary, atypical. Mistreatment of the poor and disenfranchised, perversion of justice and sexual immorality are usually the crimes for which “the nations” are called on the carpet. For instance, in *Vayikra* 18, the Canaanite nations are to be expelled from the Land due to their sexual immorality. The city of Nineveh, a microcosm of the antediluvian world, is guilty of *chamas*, of thievery and brutal coercion in financial dealings. According to *Yechezkel* 16:49, Sedom was destroyed because of its unwillingness to support its indigent citizens. Yet, Amos’s oracles all focus on crimes committed within the context of war.

The punishments meted out vary, as charted out above. Yet they also share one characteristic: the destruction of the defenses of the capital city.In the case of Aram, Damascus’s bolt, protecting the city from invaders, will be broken – i.e. the walls will be breached. The leaders of Philistia will be killed as will their remnant; neither plague nor famine is invoked, so we may conclude that this plays out due to military occupation. The walls of Tyre (Phoenicia) and Botzra (Edom) will be burned down. The punishment awaiting Ammon is war, and Moav will be devastated to the sound of a shofar, a clear allusion to war.It yet remains for us to evaluate the correlation between Yehuda’s crime and the punishment to be meted out to it, but the overall spirit of these oracles is, without question, one of poetic justice: *midda ke-neged midda*.

**For further study:**

**Poetic Justice**: Tosefta *Sota* Chapters 3-4; BT *Sota* 8b-9b

#### War Crimes: Nili Wazana,“‘War Crimes’ in Amos’s Oracles Against The Nations (Amos 1:3-2:3)” in: *Literature as Politics, Politics as Literature: Essays on the Ancient Near East in Honor of Peter B. Machinist,* eds*.* D. S. Vanderhooft and A. Winitzer (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 479-501.