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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #23**

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

As we near the close of our study of the first unit in the book, we've analyzed the final stage in Amos’s oracle against Israel: the punishments that will befall the nation, specifically in the military sphere. In the [last *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-22-prophecies-amos-oracles-against-nations-continued), we noted the absence of a named enemy in the impending defeat and suggested that this particular nuanced style is used in *Tanakh* particularly in response to societal corruption, injustice and oppression of the disenfranchised.

In this lecture, we will look at the structure and meaning of the sevenfold punishment, beginning with a broad overview of the mechanics.

CHIASMUS… OR A DIFFERENT TYPE OF LITERARY STRUCTURE?

We have become accustomed, through the hard work of the last two generations of scholars, to seek out and identify the literary skeleton or structure of a particular passage or set of passages when studying *Tanakh*. Indeed, for many of our teachers (and their students), the first issue to address when analyzing a biblical passage is the structure. Some of our most beloved and renowned teachers begin nearly every lecture by challenging us to find the "correct" structure of the passage at hand. Nailing down the structure allows us to understand the specifics, whether plotline, law, prophecy or paean, more easily.

One of the most common structures that we have been trained to look for is the chiasmus, named after the Greek letter X (*chi*), in which the first and last ideas speak to each other, as do the second and the penultimate, et cetera. In many cases, the axis of the passage provides the transition and the key line in the entire passage. A chiasmus may be as brief as a half-verse (such as 1 *Shemuel* 1:2b, where Chana-Penina-Penina-Chana are invoked, placing the child-bearing Penina at the focal point of the family structure) and may be as long as a number of chapters, such as *Shemot* 13-18.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is generally accepted that the point of a chiastic structure is to highlight the middle (such as Penina or the test of the manna). There is, however, a variant structure that can be identified throughout *Tanakh* which has chiastic elements, but which may more accurately be described as leaving subtle rhetorical components along the road, Hansel and Gretel style, gaining momentum towards the end of the passage. This all results in a resounding crescendo of ideas, in which the smaller pieces strewn along the way join to create a more powerful and impactful message. Before demonstrating this structure in *Amos* 2:14-16, we will present two well-known passages from the Torah, one narrative and one legal, as examples of this structure.

EXAMPLE #1: *MA'AMAD HAR SINAI*

The Convocation at Mount Sinai spans six chapters, *Shemot* 19-24. Some exclude chapters 21-23, while others maintain that *Ma'amad Har Sinai* stretches until the end of *Shemot*, perhaps until the end of *Vayikra*. Indeed, the beginning of *Bamidbar* and key sections in *Devarim* may be included as well. However, it is commonly recognized that the just as the sequence begins with God’s summoning Moshe to the top of the mountain, its conclusion is neatly bookended by Moshe's ascent into the fire atop the mountain at the end of Chapter 24.

Notably, there is a dispute among the Rishonim as to whether the events described in these chapters follow chronological sequence. Ramban maintains that they do, but Rashi and ibn Ezra follow the rabbinic dictum that “there is no chronological order in the Torah.” Thus, the first eleven verses of Chapter 24, including the construction of the altar and the subsequent declaration of *”Na'aseh ve-nishma”* take place before the people hear the Decalogue in Chapter 20. Regardless, even Ramban, who champions chronological accuracy, must account for the way in which components of the story are described. The usage of particular "key" words, the specific sequence of concurrent events, et al. are all part of a literary design intended to communicate a broader message. In any case, the reader must still account for the literary sequence as presented to us in our *textus receptus*.

The assumption of a chiasmus spanning *Shemot* 19-24 begins and ends with these bookends. These ascents, while sharing some salient qualities — Moshe’s going to the top of the mountain to commune with God and being given a message to present to the people — are actually more of a study in contrasts than commonalities. In the first event (19:1-6), God invites the people to enter the covenant; there is nothing frightening about the environment of the mountaintop (as described); Moshe's entry is immediate; and his stay is pointed and temporary. We are privy to the entire content of the divine message.

On the other hand, Moshe's ascent at the end of Chapter 24 is described as follows:

**12** And the Lord said to Moshe: “Come up to Me to the mountain and be there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, that you may teach them.” **13** And Moshe rose up, and Yehoshua his servant; and Moshe went up to the mountain of God. **14** And to the elders he said: “You wait here for us, until we come back to you; and, behold, Aharon and Chur are with you; whoever has a cause, let him come near unto them.” **15** And Moshe went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. **16** And the Lord’s glory rested atop Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day, He called to Moshe out of the midst of the cloud. **17** And the appearance of the Lord’s glory was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the Israelites. **18** And Moshe entered into the midst of the cloud and went up to the mountain; and Moshe was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

As described, the mountain is now a frightening place, with a consuming fire atop it. Moshe ascends and enters the fire for an unspecified amount of time (the Sin of the Golden Calf cuts it short at forty days and nights). We are not privy to the entire transmission given there.

I would like to suggest that in spite of the grandeur of the revelation, the spectacular phenomena of the smoking mountain, the lightning and thunder, the sounds of the shofar and the power of the law-book, the true crowning moment of the entire Sinai experience is Moshe's entering the fiery cloud atop the mountain to receive "the tablets of stone, and the law and the commandment" directly from God. The people put it this way: "For today we have seen that God speaks with man yet he lives" (*Devarim* 5:24). Although this verse seems, contextually, to refer to the revelation to the people, the wording "*ki yedabber Elohim et ha-adam"* seems to point to the specific conversation between Moshe and God, not the declaration.

The preceding chapters lead us to this glorious crescendo. Moshe first ascends the mountain, several times, in Chapter 19. The fire and smoke are introduced later there. The laws that are to be given to the people are first presented in Chapter 20 and then explored in Chapters 21-23. At the end of Chapter 23, God's special agent (*malakhi)* is introduced, with a warning to obey him as he will lead the people into the land. There is a wide range of opinions as to the identity of this *malakh*; Ralbag and Bekhor Shor (and, in their footsteps, Shadal) interpret it as a reference to Moshe himself. We will take this approach, although it isn't critical for the presentation of this structural analysis.[[2]](#footnote-2) Moshe, until this point, has acted as emissary (*shaliach*) for both God and the people; as lawgiver (*mechokek*); as divinely appointed leader and defender. In Chapter 24, Moshe steps in and, for the first time, takes on a ceremonial role as officiant (*kohen*), bringing offerings on the altar. (Indeed, the week of preparation approximates the days of consecration that we read about in *Vayikra* 8.) The mountain has been "built up" to become a smoking, fiery, cacophonous locus of Divine Presence. Moshe has been elevated to *shaliach*, *mechokek*, *malakh* and *kohen*. The people have been initiated into the covenant and have experienced a direct revelation, hearing God's words from His mouth, as it were.

All of these pieces come together in the closing of Chapter 24:

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| *Mechokek* | “Come up to Me to the mountain and be there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, that you may teach them.” |
| *Shaliach* | “You wait here for us, until we come back to you; and, behold, Aharon and Chur are with you; whoever has a cause, let him come near unto them.” |
| *Kohen* | And the Lord’s glory rested atop Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day, He called to Moshe out of the midst of the cloud. |
| *Malakh* | And Moshe entered into the midst of the cloud and went up to the mountain; and Moshe was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. |

There are far more details which help substantiate this structural analysis. For our purposes, we have sufficiently pointed out the various components of the narrative which come together to create a powerful crescendo in the final verses. For lack of a better phrase, we will refer to this structure as "the interwoven crescendo.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

EXAMPLE #2: FROM “HOLY PEOPLE” TO “BEFORE THE LORD”

Moshe Rabbeinu’s presentation of the laws (both new as well as reformulated) in *Devarim* Chapters 5-26 seems to follow the *schema* of the Decalogue, which is presented at the beginning of this part of his farewell speech. The focus of the rest of Chapter 5 through Chapter 11 is the beginning of the Decalogue: relationship with God and distancing from idolatry. Chapter 12 explicates the respect for God's Name. Not only must the Israelites avoid using God's Name "in vain,” they must show unique reverence and attachment to "the place that God chooses to rest His Name.” Subsequent to further admonitions regarding idolatry (Chapter 13), a novel idea is introduced (Chapter 14): “You are the Lord your God's children (*banim).”* This demands sanctified behavior. The major focus of this sanctity rests in avoiding eating certain animals from the land, sea and air. This passage begins and ends with the admonition “You are a holy people (*am kadosh*) to the Lord your God" (vv. 2, 21). After a series of laws in Chapter 15, relating to tithes, cancelling debts, caring for the poor and proper treatment of Hebrew slaves, we are returned to "the place that God chooses" and are taught about the offering of firstborn animals and then the thrice-yearly pilgrimage to "the place that God chooses to rest His Name" (15:19-16:17). What is the rationale behind the inclusion of these laws in this sequence? (I am analyzing the sequence up to this point only; the next passage, 16:18-18:22, which begins with the appointment of judges, is clearly a shift in focus to various governmental institutions — the court, the monarch, the priests and the prophet — expanding on “Honor your father and your mother.”)

I would like to suggest that the status of *am kadosh* is ultimately realized in (deliberately) echoing the description of Shabbat in the Decalogue, to have an entire extended family celebrate before God in a manner that takes the disenfranchised into account and ensures that they, too, may participate in the public joyous communion with the Divine. This is the essence of the way that pilgrimage is described:

**13** You shall keep the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days, after you have gathered in from your threshing-floor and from your winepress. **14** And you shall rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, that are within your gates. **15** Seven days shall you keep a feast to the Lord your God in the place which the Lord will choose; because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce, and in all the work of your hands, and you shalt be exceedingly happy. **16** Three times a year shall all your males appear before the Lord your God in the place which He will choose; on the Feast of Matzot, and on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the Lord empty. **17** Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God, which He has given you.

Now, if we look back at the intervening laws that bridge the gap from the introduction of the concept of the “holy people” to this lofty gathering “before the Lord,” we can discern the various components which are gleaned from the laws of tithes, cancellation of debts, supporting the poor, the Hebrew slave and the firstborn animal. They are gathered together into the powerful crescendo as the families gather to be seen in the place that God chooses to rest His Name.

(I recommend following these next three paragraphs with *Tanakh* in hand, beginning at *Devarim* 14:22).

The first transitional passage discusses tithes "year by year." Annual cycles are introduced here, with celebrating and eating in the place that God chooses. This celebration, however, is done by individuals and families on their own schedule, though the Levite may not be excluded. In the second passage, we encounter a triennial cycle, a tithe to be given to the poor rather than taken to God’s chosen place. Next we move to a septennial cycle: the remission (*shemitta*) of debts in the seventh year, once again expressing caring for the less fortunate. This leads to the next paragraph, which pre-empts the inevitable concerns of the money-lender and pushes him to lend, nonetheless, even though that debt may never be collected.

It is in the next passage that a discrete — and discreet — component makes its appearance. Freeing the Hebrew slave at the seventh year of service is nothing new, as we learn of this in *Shemot* (21:2). However, as opposed to the presentation there, where the slave who wishes to remain past his six years declares that he "I love my master, my wife and my children,” here “he loves you and your household, for it is good for him with you." This is a remarkable statement: a Hebrew slave, typically from an economically (and, perhaps, socially) distinct and "lower" class is made to feel so welcome within his master’s household that he feels good there, loves the household and doesn't want to leave! This is an astounding statement about the master’s house and family and is, I believe, at the heart of the development we are following here. To raise children to respect and to welcome those less fortunate into the home and make them feel like family is a remarkable feat which should not be taken lightly.

Next, the text discusses the firstborn animal, which is to be offered to God if unblemished; if not, “You are to eat it in your gates, the pure and the impure together.” Communal eating and sharing of gifts typifies the holy community which even sanctifies, in this manner, food which is technically mundane.

The cycles of time (annual, triennial, septennial and triannual [three times a year]) are the dimension through which we celebrate, caring for the disenfranchised and training the family to embrace those less fortunate, both at home and ultimately “before the Lord.” These elements are the prerequisites for and components of the celebration, each family at home and every family throughout the nation in the presence of God. This is the interwoven crescendo.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE INTERWOVEN CRESCENDO

The text (Amos 2:14-16) reads:

1. Flight will fail the swift (*Ve*-*avad manos mi-kal*)
2. And the strong will not exert his strength (*Ve-chazak lo ye'ametz kocho*)
3. Neither will the mighty deliver himself (*Ve-gibbor lo yemalet nafsho*)
4. Neither will he stand that handles the bow (*Ve-tofes ha-keshet lo ya'amod*)
5. And he that is swift of foot will not deliver himself (*Ve-kal be-raglav lo yemalet*)
6. Neither will he that rides the horse deliver himself (*Ve-rokhev ha-sus lo yemalet nafsho*)
7. And he that is courageous among the mighty will flee away naked in that day (*Ve-amitz libbo ba-gibborim arom yanus ba-yom ha-hu*)

At first glance, it would seem that the septad of *Amos* 2:14-16 is structured chiastically. The first and seventh punishments alone lack the key word *lo,* and these two alone include the root *nun-vav-samekh*, to flee. In the first stage the nominal form *manos* is used, which means "ability to flee" (or "speed"). In the final line, the verbal form *yanus* ("will flee") is used. The irony stretching across the "envelope structure" is clear: whereas the one who normally flees will lose his ability to do so in the face of the enemy, the one who normally stands, fighting courageously and facing the adversary, “will flee away naked in that day.” An additional argument for a chiasmus is the similarity between lines 3, 5 and 6. In all three of them, the hero cannot save himself. The implication and reach is clear: the one who was charged with saving many others cannot save **even** himself. These observations seem to place the fourth line (the only one to mention a specific type of fighter, the archer) at the axis of the chiasmus. This is far from perfect (line 2 does not match up with line 6 and seems to feed directly into the last line), but it is an appealing proposal.[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are, however, several difficulties in the claim that this is a chiasmus. The one fleeing in line 1 is unable to escape the enemy, an idea mentioned again in line 5. The courageous one who will not be able to stand his ground and will (successfully?) flee the enemy in the last line most closely approximates the incompetence referred to in line 2. Further analysis continues to bear out the seeming mishmash (or mismatched) nature of this list.

Keeping the abovementioned structural style in mind, we can now reevaluate the structure and, thereby, the meaning of our passage.

*Kal* (fleet of foot) appears in line 1 and then line 5 – but with a slightly different meaning. In the first, he is incapable of fleeing; but in line 5, he does not escape. These are related but not identical. Flight, however, appears as well in the last line: not as something which the (speedy) soldiers are incapable of, but rather as something that the mighty **will** do (which is **his** failure) on that day. The *gibbor* of line 3 doesn't save himself; in line 7, the most courageous of the *gibborim* does flee, unclad and disgraced.

In other words, our three verses are an interwoven crescendo, in which the various arms of the military are deprived of their particular abilities and, ultimately, these "talents" are adopted, desperately and without dignity, by the other forces. Those who would stand their ground and fight adopt the flight of the fleet; those who are fleet of foot can only fall. The horseman who should be able to escape cannot do so (line 6) while the archer who should be able to stand his ground and take aim, must flee (line 4). The crescendo is, as expected, in the final line: the most powerful, who should be advancing on the enemy without fear, flees without dignity on that selfsame day.

The various components of the ultimate failure — the mightiest and most courageous of the combat soldiers fleeing in disgrace — are sowed, here and there, in the first few passages; and they are brought together for the powerful climax: “And he that is courageous among the mighty will flee away naked in that day.”

In the final installment on this oracle, we will return to a panoramic view of these two opening chapters and identify the underlying message to Israel, the target audience.

1. Cf. Etshalom, *Between the Lines of the Bible, Vol. 2* (2012), Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The argument for adopting this interpretation is beyond the scope of this *shiur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am interested in hearing from readers with better suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul (*Mikra leYisrael*, p. 54) assumes the structure to be chiastic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)