YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #24**

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

We have devoted nearly all of the *shiurim* until this point to an analysis of Amos’s set of oracles against the nations, delving into historical, literary and exegetical issues raised by the text and trying to gain a deeper understanding of Amos’s mission and goals, as well as the backdrop against which he operates in the middle of the 8th century BCE.

Before moving on to the next unit in the collection of Amos’s prophecies, we will take a broader look at this entire set, keeping in mind two broad questions that we are now better equipped to address. What is Amos’s rhetorical and didactic purpose in crafting the seven leading oracles before delivering his main message to Shomeron about Shomeron? In addition, why does his book start with this?

Regarding the second question, we might suggest that this sequence is the initial entry in Amos’s prophetic career, but this is a difficult argument to make. Chronological markers appear in narrative contexts in some prophetic books (including *Yeshayahu, Yirmeyahu, Yechezkel, Chaggai*, *Zekharya —* and *Amos*) or date a specific prophecy (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 6, *Yirmeyahu* 25, *Yechezkel* 1), but they are clearly not the basis for organizing such works. Unless specified (e.g. “When the Lord spoke at first with Hoshea,” 1:2), there is no reason to assume that the opening passage of a given prophetic book precedes the rest.

In addition, Amos’s "anthem,” which is presented at the beginning (1:2), leaves the reader with the sense of a standard formula:

And he would say (*va-yomar*):

 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.

The introductory *va-yomar* implies not "he said" but rather "he would say" (i.e. before every prophetic declaration). If so, we would reasonably expect that the first oracle that he delivers would be aimed directly at Yisrael, rather than the "roundabout" way that this series moves from neighboring nation to neighboring nation until it finally gets to the royal house of Yisrael.

As it is unlikely that this oracle-set is Amos’s first delivered prophecy, our second question stands: why is this set presented first? These two questions may be intertwined and discovering the (likely) goal that Amos sets for himself will also explain the placement of these oracles at the beginning of his book.

OVERALL THEMES

Whereas the larger prophetic collections are too big to yield an obvious single theme, there are certainly sections among them that are discernible and in which singular message are identifiable. Of course, the section of *Yeshayahu* we refer to as Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55) carry an obvious theme of return and consolation. The "oracles against the nations" there (chapters 14-24) similarly have a common theme, as do Yirmeyahu's prophecies against the nations at the end of his collection. Even so, particular themes seem to course through each larger collection, such that the Messianic themes of Trito-Isaiah (chapters 56-66) clearly evoke and invoke themes prevalent in the first part of the collection.

Smaller prophetic books such as the twelve collected in *Trei Asar* generally are single-themed (with *Zekharya* being the notable exception). *Yoel*‘s focus is apocalyptic, from his description of the devastating locust plague (or military invasion?) to his description of the Day of Judgement in the Valley of Yehoshafat. Yona's book is all about his struggle with God's compassion, from west to east, from sea to land. Chaggai speaks to — and about — the challenge of convincing the people to engage in rebuilding the Temple.

If we were pressed to identify a single, unifying theme in *Amos*, it would be the ideal of justice. The famous line (made ever so popular by preachers in the postbellum American South) "Let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream" comes from 5:24; indeed, the argument might be made that Amos’s repeated vilifications of the people's engagement in idolatry is also aimed at the destructive social consequences that such a life has brought to Shomeron.

One central message of *Tanakh*, beginning with the opening chapters of *Bereishit* and reemphasized by every prophet since is that ultimately all of mankind is accountable to God. The bar is set (much) higher for the Jewish people, but basic morality and justice are expected of all peoples and their failure to live by this divine mandate is hugely disappointing. Significantly, for all of the families on God's earth, moral rot in the social fabric engenders calamitous consequences.

Bringing this message to the royalty and aristocracy of Shomeron sits at the core of Amos’s mission. God is angry when **any** people mistreat their poor, act with gratuitous belligerence, abuse their power etc. This is true about nations that never had Avraham as a father, Moshe as a teacher or David as a king; how much more so when the nation that falls so short of expectations has been miraculously redeemed, brought to the canopy of Sinai and encountered the Divine face-to-face, cared for like a little child through the desert and led, victoriously, into its land.

This is the gist of the introduction to the next section, which we will begin to analyze when we resume our series after Sukkot:

Hear this word that Hashem has spoken against you, O children of Yisrael, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities

In other words, it is the exclusively intimate relationship with Hakadosh Barukh Hu which raises the bar and justifies a more exacting mode of justice. Hence, the build up of Divine justice to be meted out against those nations that God did not "know" as he did Yisrael pales next to the measure of consequences which the aristocracy in Shomeron must now anticipate.

THE ORACLES REVISITED

Whether or not this set — which was almost assuredly presented in the order found here, in the court or streets of Shomeron — is the first prophetic declaration of Amos (likely not, as above), it certainly sets the tone for his entire career and, as such, belongs at the beginning of the collection.

Using the “*Ko amar…ashivenu”* pattern, he builds a rhetorical rhythm, binding all neighboring nations into one common indictment. Even though their crimes are not identical, he poetically draws them together and we sense the theme of ruthlessness occasioned by a complete lack of moral compass.

As we noted in the first *shiurim* of the series, Amos rhetorically creates a geographic box, starting with Aram (northeast), then Peleshet (southwest), then Tzor (northwest) and then Edom, Ammon and Moav (all in the southeast). Finally, the seventh nation is none other than his own, Yehuda. The clear and unavoidable message is the God's judgment will be visited on any nation that fails His moral expectations. Those expectations, as seen in the oracle, are much higher for Yehuda, but no one gets a free pass; everyone's power will be forfeit, sooner or later.

Amos’s goal is, of course, not to chastise any of these nations (not even Yehuda!). His audience is his target and he draws them in brilliantly. To the Shomeron listener, there is a measure of relief, almost good news that God's anger is directed at all of the neighbors, most of whom are (if not now, at some point) enemies. Nevertheless, any intelligent listener must sense foreboding, as if the hammer that has swung north and south, east and west is going to hit center. When Amos finally declares *“Al shelosha pishei Yisrael,”* the blows are more detailed, powerful and painful than all of the earlier chastisements.

In sum, at whatever point Amos present these prophecies, they fit his overall message and become a larger anthem, as it were, of his prophetic mission.

It will be intriguing for us to see how Amos’s further prophecies and rebukes work within this message of universal justice and the higher expectations which God has of His people.

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After breaking for the *chagim*, we will restart the *shiur* two weeks after Sukkot, picking up at chapter 3 with the passage invoked above:

Hear this word that Hashem has spoken against you, O children of Yisrael, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities

*Gemar chatima tova!*