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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #26:**

**The Prophecies of Amos: "The Hearken Sequence"**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-25-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we began our study of chapter 3 with the introductory lines to the broader "inevitability of prophecy" passage, which in turn serves to introduce the "hearken" oracles. In these next two *shiurim*, we will analyze this passage, first from a structural and linguistic perspective, then from the point of view of Amos's audience and how it may have readied them to "hearken".

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INEVITABILITY OF PROPHECY: THE TEXT (3:1-8)

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, 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. **Will two walk together, unless they have agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion give forth his voice out of his den, if he hasn't taken anything? Will a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it? Will a snare spring up from the ground, and have taken nothing at all? Shall a shofar be blown in a city, and the people not tremble? Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it? For the Lord God will do nothing, if He has not revealed His counsel to His servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy****?**

This larger introduction is followed by two sets of prophecies, each beginning with the *leitwort* "*Shimu*" (Hearken), just as the opening verse does.

In this *shiur*, we will address this "causal introduction", i.e. the "inevitability of prophecy" text which serves as the introduction to the *Shim'u* oracles.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATION #1: THE SEQUENCE

The argument for the inevitability of prophecy serves two functions in Amos’s speech. First of all, it **explains** why he must repeat the prophecies given to him by God and that there is no escaping them. Secondly, it operates as a type of *apologia* before he utters imprecations that are surely hard for the audience to hear.

His argument is presented as a series of rhetorical questions. In order to decipher the structure of this passage — which holds the key to understanding his message — we need to take a step back and explore some basics about the nature of literary prophecy.

On the one hand, it is clear that the primary audience of any *navi* is the contemporary populace and that, with few exceptions,[[1]](#footnote-1) the primary **mode** of presentation is oral. As such, we "listen" to the text as we read it and look for oral/ verbal clues (including alliteration, meter, etc.) which we assume the audience will pick up on, if only subconsciously. These subtextual nuances, it is further assumed, will enhance and deepen the prophet's message. Nonetheless, we also have to remember that in the final analysis, these books of prophecy — or, if you will, records of prophetic speeches — were edited and committed to writing. As *Chazal* teach, any prophecy which has import "for generations" was committed to writing and canonization (BT *Megilla* 14a). As such, the written form is also meaningful *per se* and it behooves us to re-examine the text from that perspective as well.

When reading our series of rhetorical riddles, it is easy to imagine an audience listening, being drawn in by the entertaining nature of the questions and perhaps even participating in the "game" — until the hammer crashes down with the leonine roar from Tziyon. The audience, if we are to assume the same setting and group as the opening series of oracles, may even anxiously anticipate the seven non-threatening (hence comforting) prophecies followed by the dreaded eighth.

On the other hand, we have the written record and it is the piece of this prophecy which remains for eternity.

From the perspective of an oral presentation, the structure of these riddles follow the same numerical scheme as Amos uses before — seven plus one.

PROPOSAL A: THE ORAL PRESENTATION:

AMOS’S SEPTAD PLUS ONE (7+1) MODEL

1. Will two walk together, unless they have agreed?
2. Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?
3. Will a young lion give forth his voice out of his den, if he hasn't taken anything?
4. Will a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it?
5. Will a snare spring up from the ground, and have taken nothing at all?
6. Shall a shofar be blown in a city, and the people not tremble?
7. Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?

For the Lord God will do nothing, if He has not revealed His counsel to His servants the prophets.

1. The lion has roared, who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?

Following the pattern of his opening oracles, presenting seven prophecies against the other nations and then, with the ultimate eighth, hitting home, Amos employs a similar structure here. He uses seven riddles, each of which speak to the causal relationship between known events; the line beginning "For the Lord God will do nothing…" is a continued explanation of the Cause of all causes and His role in human affairs. The crescendo eighth is of a different tone, where the question is not to cause but to inevitable effect and the final line: "the Lord God has spoken…" echoes the eighth line and brings the message home.

Note that both of the "non-enumerated" lines begin the same way and are the only mention of "the Lord God" in the passage. One might even suggest (tenuously) that those two lines are refrains that the audience was expected to know and use in response. This is tenuous, as stated. There is no evidence of it, nor is it likely that the audience would chime in with words that work against their interest. Nonetheless, it is worth considering, if only briefly.

Once the prophecy has been edited and written, a different scheme seems to appear.

PROPOSAL #2: THE WRITTEN PRESENTATION

TEN STEPS FROM COLLEGIALITY TO DOMINION

1. Will two walk together, unless they have agreed?
2. Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?
3. Will a young lion give forth his voice out of his den, if he hasn't taken anything?
4. Will a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it?
5. Will a snare spring up from the ground, and have taken nothing at all?
6. Shall a shofar be blown in a city, and the people not tremble?
7. Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?
8. For the Lord God will do nothing, if He has not revealed His counsel to His servants the prophets.
9. The lion has roared, who will not fear?
10. The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?

In a written record, there is no "call and response" and it is a (relatively) removed readership that is observing the events and words of yesteryear. As such, these ten lines of riddle/ resolution seem to form a perfect whole. Upon analysis of the composite parts, we will see why this is so.

THE RIDDLES

***Will two walk together unless they have agreed?***

We are not told who the "two" are here — are they friends, colleagues, parent and child, master and servant? The immediate and instinctive reaction of the reader/ listener is to see the two as equals. Unlike the characters in the following riddles, there is no subject/ object relationship. It is a full "I-Thou" partnership here. Nonetheless, the phrasing “*Hayelkhu shenayim yachdav”* immediately evokes a non-egalitarian relationship; it is the phrase used (twice) when describing Avraham and Yitzchak's ascent — together — to the putative locus of Yitzchak's death (*Bereishit* 22:6, 8). Not only are the two who are walking not of an equal status, but their intended ends diverge greatly — from life to death. In spite of all of this (and this belongs to *parshanut* on the *Akeida*), the two walk "together," in a sense, "in one spirit and of one mind."

Aside from the continued evocation of Avraham (as Amos does earlier with his use of *mishpacha;* see the previous *shiur*), the prophet seems to be using an impressive model. If those two giants, ancestors of our nation, going with two very different senses of awareness and towards opposite destinies, were walking "together," it can only be because they came to some prior agreement to do so. Any meeting of two, even two of the same family, implies a prior arrangement and agreement to meet, to walk, to worship. Note that, unlike the rest of the sequence, this effect is generated by a "common cause", i.e. by the two players voluntarily agreeing to work together. This is certainly not the case with the bird and its trap, nor the lion and its prey.

The verb used for "agreement" is also laden with meaning. “*No'adu*,” meaning "they set an appointment," brings us to the precincts of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. Its centerpiece is the *Ohel Mo'ed,* the Tent of Meeting, as we focus on that set place and those set times (*mo'adei Hashem)* at which Man encounters the Divine. Even though the overt model used in Amos’s first riddle is human interaction, partners walking together by design and due to prior arrangement, there are layers of allusion here. He alludes to the great and tragic moment of the *Akeida*, when the two walking together are father and son. On a more sublime level, the two are Man and God — or the prophet and God — who "meet" and commune.

In the overt sense, this first riddle stands as the polar opposite of the final causal riddle, God’s giving prophecy; yet, on a discreet level, the entire *schema* of ten statements comes full circle and the reader (perhaps not the listener) realizes that the first riddle isn't about people, it is about God.

***Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?***

***Will a young lion give forth his voice out of his den, if he hasn't taken anything?***

This couplet, which in our reckoning comprises two lines (but seems to be the same riddle), moves away from the mutuality of the first line to the subject/ object causal relationship. Using deft parallelism, as is the common style of biblical poetry, we can align the two parts of the couplet as follows:

EFFECT

*Hayishag aryeh Hayitein kefir kolo*

Roaring (*yishag*) is parallel to "give forth his voice" (*yitein kolo).*

LOCATION

 *Ba-ya'ar mi-meonato*

The forest is where the mature lion roars, the young lion roars from his den.

CAUSE

*Ve-teref ein lo? bilti im lakhad?*

"When he has no prey" is parallel in meaning and sense to "if he hasn't taken anything.”

Although this couplet is removed, contextually and stylistically, from the first line, the prophet deftly connects them through the word *bilti* (without, here translated “if [he] hasn’t,” above translated “unless”); poetically, it is as if the prey has "consented" to be taken by the predator, much as the partner consents to accompany his friend.

The abrupt shift from a case of two friends/ colleagues/ peers who agree to walk together to a case of a predator which catches its prey carries with it the rhetorical effect of a slap, moving from the friendly confines of a near-pastorale to a violent setting involving death. From the consensual journey to the decidedly non-consensual hunt, all seen effects have their root causes; the one common feature of the two is that (at least) one of the parties makes a decision to act.

In addition, the introduction of the lion to the poetic scheme brings us back to the opening lines of Amos’s collection and to his anthemic phrase:

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. (1:2)

The same parallelism of *yishag* and *yitein kolo* appear there and the audience is quickly reminded that it is not just hearing an entertaining riddle, but listening to the roar of the Divine and might be able to anticipate a withering message.

***Will a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it?***

***Will a snare spring up from the ground, and have taken nothing at all?***

This next couplet represents (what we consider to be) the fourth and fifth segments of the poetic sequence. Again, the listener is abruptly pulled, without warning, from scene to scene, from perspective to perspective. In the previous couplet, the focus is on the predator and his success in trapping the prey, leading to his triumphal roar. In this scene, we look at the prey and the cause of its being trapped and doomed. The use of a bird here is not incidental. Birds are occasionally used in prophetic and poetic literature to represent *Am Yisrae*l. Among others, we find the following, including (our first selection) from Amos’s contemporary, Yeshayahu:

As birds hovering,[[2]](#footnote-2) so will the Lord of Hosts protect Yerushalayim; He will deliver it as He protects it, He will rescue it as He passes over. (*Yeshayahu* 31:8)

They have trapped me like a bird, my enemies without cause. (*Eikha* 3:52)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Blessed is the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (*Tehillim* 124:6-8)

If the use of the lion in the previous couplet is intended to remind the audience of the "roaring lion" of Amos’s anthem, then the evocation of the trapped bird may complete the picture. the Lord roars (through His prophets? through His punishments?), and the bird (*Am Yisrael*) is subsequently trapped without hope of escape.

Again, we will diagram the parallels:

*Hatipol tzipor al pach ha-aretz haya’aleh pach min ha-adama*

The subject in the first hemistich is the bird, whereas the trap itself is the subject in the second half. The matched pair *aretz::adama* is a perfect parallel – but note how they are used in apposition. The bird **falls** to the trap **on the ground**; yet the trap **rises up** to catch the bird **from the ground**.

The repeated use of *pach* for trap makes for a tight parallel and the phrases *pach ha-aretz :: pach min ha-adama* sound nearly redundant until we note the opposite movement and point of view of each.

Note how the opening half of each hemistich connects to the first riddle with the use of the opening rhetorical *heh* (*heh ha-she’eila* as in ***ha****yelkhu shenayim yachdav*).

The second half of each hemistich:

*U-mokesh ein lah? ve-lakhod lo yilkod?*

There is no evident parallelism here; the second half of the first hemistich points to the fact that a bird will not fall into the trap unless there is a lure there. The second half of the second half notes that if a trap has sprung up, it must have trapped something.

Again, we can chart out the causal relationship here:

EFFECT:

*Hatipol tzipor al pach ha-aretz haya’aleh pach min ha-adama*

The observer notices that a bird has been caught by a trap, or he sees that a trap springs up.

CAUSE

*U-mokesh ein lah? ve-lakhod lo yilkod?*

He must conclude that there is a cause: the bird was caught because there was a lure in the trap; the trap snapped up because something tripped it.

In the next *shiur*, we will analyze these cause-and-effect relationships in greater detail; suffice it to note at this point that the causal relationships here are getting weaker. Whereas it is safe to presume that when two people walk together, this is occasioned by prior arrangement, it is plausible to hear a lion roar without its having prey between its teeth. It is certainly possible to imagine seeing a bird fall without a lure in the trap or a trap’s being falsely set off. We will attend to these considerations after completing our literary analysis of the passage.

***Shall a shofar be blown in a city, and the people not tremble?***

In this sixth segment of the series, the prophet apparently reverses syntax. He first presents the cause (the sounding of the shofar) and follows it with the effect (trembling). What is the rhetorical strategy operating here?

It may be that he is **not** switching the pattern. The sounding of the shofar may be an effect of an unstated cause, and the subsequent effect of the sound (and what it represents) is for the people to tremble. This is rhetorical virtuosity. By omitting the root cause of the shofar’s being sounded, the prophet shrouds the calamity which seizes this town in mystery, heightening the tension and anxiety associated with it. Unseen terrors are more frightening than the scariest (viewable) disasters. As authors like Shirley Jackson and directors like Alfred Hitchcock well understood, the subconscious can create horrors far worse than those which can be described in prose or shown on film. The creaking door which never fully opens is far more threatening than the door that swings wide to show a gory scene. The imagination can summon much worse scenes than those on the printed page or the screen. If the shofar is being sounded in the town, there is a terror looming and the people tremble; they aren't shaking because of the shofar, but due to what it heralds.

This then fits well with the next line and may allow us to view it as another couplet.

***Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?***

In other words, the (unstated) evil that has befallen this paradigmatic city has necessitated the blasting of the shofar (for communal gathering and prayer to plead with God to protect them). This evil is of necessity God's doing, and that is why the people are trembling.

Once again, we can see the parallels:

*Im yitaka shofar be-ir Im tihyeh ra'a be-ir*

Both lines begin with the conditional "if" ("*im"*) followed by a passive participle, *yitaka :: tihyeh*. The parallel here to the *shofar* is *ra'a,* evil. This seems like an odd pairing, but once we consider that the shofar is a response to the "evil," it fits well. Each hemistich ends with *be-ir*, forming a perfect match in the first halves.

*Ve-am lo yecheradu va-Shem lo asa*

The second halves use parallels of apposition (*tikbolet nigudit*).

This form of parallelism is common in *Tanakh*, such as in *Devarim* 32:1:

*Ha’azinu* ***ha-shamayim*** *ve-adabera ve-tishma* ***ha-aretz*** *imrei fi*

There, heaven and earth are parallel. Here, however, it is a far broader span — the nation which is quaking in fear presented in apposition to God, Who has chosen to bring this (unnamed) disaster to the city. The upshot of these parallel hemistichs is that just as, of necessity, the people who hear the shofar tremble, similarly if this evil comes about at all, it is of necessity done by God.

This concludes the septad (in our first treatment of the sequence) which, to the listener, is very likely a non-threatening treatise on cause and effect, in which the prophet draws an analogy between various causal relationships, some of which are inherent (seeing two people engaged in a mutually beneficial activity and assuming a prior agreement), some of which are reasonable (the roar of the lion comes because he has trapped his prey; the bird's trap has snapped because he has been caught) to those which depend on a theological stance which is assumed by the speaker — and, likely, by his audience.

In next week's *shiur*, we will conclude our structural and linguistic analysis of this section and then look further into its meaning and how its audience may have understood it.

**For Further Study**

See James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (1981) specifically his introduction of Lowth's "antithetical parallelism" (pp. 12-14).

1. E.g. Yirmeyahu's letter to the exiled Jews in Babylonia, ch. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This unusual imagery is better understood against Sancheriv's claims of trapping Chizkiyahu "like a caged bird" as found on the famous Sennacherib Prism. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As we mentioned in the previous shiur, Yirmeyahu builds much of his style and imagery on Amos’s work; as author of this semi-autobiographical chapter of *Eikha*, it is not surprising to find the bird imagery used to represent *Am Yisrael*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)