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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 #27:**

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

In [last week's *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-26-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we continued our study of Chapter 3 and analyzed most of the "inevitability of prophecy" passage, which serves to introduce the "hearken" oracles. We will now complete our analysis of this passage and consider how its underlying message may have impacted on the audience and prepared them for the "hearken" oracles.

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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 will not prophesy?**

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

We addressed the structure of the passage and the literary devices used until the "coda" of this introduction.

**For** *Hashem Elokim* **will do nothing, if He has not revealed His counsel to His servants the prophets.**

As has been noted by nearly every modern commentator, this verse does not appear to be an organic part of the riddle-sequence. All of the other segments are, first of all, presented as rhetorical questions – "does a trap spring up unless it has caught prey?" etc. This statement is declarative.

Secondly, moving away from the rhetorical shift, the earlier statements/ riddles are all demonstrable and, while arguable (it is possible for a trap to be sprung without prey having been caught), are inherent in the relationship between the subject and object. A predator yells in triumph when he has caught the prey; the bird is lured by the bait and the trap springs up when **something** has fallen in. Even the last claim — that if evil happens in a city, it is God's doing — is as assumed as the rest when viewed from a theistic/ providential point of view, certainly the one held by both prophet and audience.

However, this next one is not at all obvious nor to be assumed. Are we to accept as axiomatic that God will act **only** if He has first revealed His plans to the prophets? To wit, there are no "surprises"? And does this further mean that every prophet is guaranteed to broadcast that message in advance? Otherwise, God informing the prophet is of little value; it doesn't even have the advantage of an "I-told-you-so" epilogue (or epitaph).

A modular look at the statement reveals several sub-statements or claims being made.

Firstly, God speaks to His prophets. This is, contextually, a safe assumption to make and, as such, a valid point to utilize in presenting an argument in a public forum.

Secondly, God reveals His plans to the prophets, i.e. when God is prepared to act in this world, He first notifies His servants, whether He is bringing blessing to the world or not. This is a further assumption which does not follow from the first. It may indeed be the case that God communicates with prophets, but that doesn't imply that the content is anything more than purely exhorting, consoling or chastising without its being predictive.

Truth to tell, these two assumptions sit at the heart of the prophetic mission and the latter is the prophet's *raison d'être.* As such, there is nothing remarkable here; we might even ask what the purpose of this self-referential claim might be. We are left with one answer — it is the final implication to which all of this leads — and that is where our difficulties begin.

The most radical implication of the statement is that God will **not**act in this world unless He has first informed His prophets and, we further assume (as above), they fulfill their task to declaim the message to the public. This is surprising and theologically troubling on two counts. First of all, it seems to "tie God's hands," as it were, and in some sense puts the prophet in charge of God's actions in the world. If the prophet doesn't deliver the message, is God held back from punishing, withholding rain, etc.?

Secondly, this statement implies that with the cessation of prophecy, God ceases to act in the world — a truly troubling assertion, one which attacks the basic tenets of religion.

We could respond to the second radical implication by proposing that this divine "rule" of only acting after having notified His prophets only held as long as prophecy was an active and regular phenomenon, with which the people were familiar. In that case, the people would be accustomed to hearing a prophet pronounce the frightening prognostication. They would be familiar with the rhythms of living in a society modified and defined by prophecy. As such, it may even be considered "only fair" to withhold punishment until the people have been made aware of the dire consequences of their behavior and the looming threat hanging over their society, families and land if they fail to right their ship and correct their course.

Regarding the first surprising implication, however, the verse leaves us without a defense. If the text is to be taken at face value and understood in a literal sense, then God has "tied His own hands" and kept Himself from acting in any significant way in the world before notifying His prophets and, again, without their fulfilling their mandate to broadcast the message to the people. We might soften the statement by positing that the divine action intended here refers to punishments on a grand scale. God will certainly bless the household of the loyal person (e.g. *II Shemuel* 6:11, cf. also *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 13:14) and, perhaps, even withhold rain from the field of that individual, tribe or city that has fallen from divine favor (e.g. *Amos* 4:7).

When we step back and consider the history of God's interactions with His people, we see this principle borne out with consistency; since the times of Noach, "major" divine punishments come about only after God notifies **someone** about the impending calamity. Moreover, since the times of Moshe, when the role of *navi* evolves into more than a "man of God" and intercessor (viz. inter alia *Bereishit* 20:7, ibid 25:22-23 and the Rishonim ad loc.), the most vital part of that role is exactly this: to inform the people that their behavior is not acceptable to God and that a specific and catastrophic consequence "crouches at the door".

We have come full circle. We began by challenging the contextuality of this statement and its place within a series of rhetorical riddles about causality. At this point, however, we are comfortable reading this final punchline of the riddle sequence as appropriately set. It can now shed light on the earlier riddles in this oracular introduction.

We earlier pointed out that the causal relationship of all of these is not inevitable; it is possible for two people to meet by happenstance and then choose to walk together. A predator may give a yell when he has **not** captured his prey and a trap may be sprung without having secured its victim. However, personal experience informs our conclusions, as much as (if not more than) rigid causal inevitability. If we lived in an environment of bird traps and lion's lairs, we would probably learn to expect the results presented here. In other words, these are not **necessary** effects and therefore not **inevitable**causes; they are, rather, anticipatedeffects and, therefore, **reasonable** causes.

One final note on this verse. Amos's assertion here is that God will do nothing if He has not first "revealed His counsel" to "His servants, the prophets." Why does the text have to add the honorific "servants"? The point of the statement is that God always informs His prophets first; their being His servants is superfluous here.

Perhaps the intent of the added title "servants" is to remind us that the prophet always does what his Master directs him to do — and, therefore, not only is the prophet told about impending punishment, but that message is, perforce, passed on to the necessary audience. The force of this line is due to the **reliability** of the prophets who, against all sociological barriers and challenges, fulfill their rhetorical and oracular missions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In much the same way, given the context of Israelite history, the experienced effect of God's punishment implies a prophetic warning:

*For Hashem Elokim will do nothing if he has not revealed his counsel to His servants the prophets*

At this point, it would seem that the introduction, arguing for the inevitability of prophecy, has successfully concluded. However, there is one more introductory verse presented before Amos begins his message:

*The lion has roared, who will not fear? Hashem Elokim has spoken, who can but prophesy?*

THE CODA: THE RHETORICAL RIDDLES BECOME THE MESSAGE

Up to this point, Amos's presentation has been, as we suggested in the previous *shiur*, an academic exercise. It surely hints to ominous messages, as lions catch their prey and birds are ensnared by traps. Nonetheless, on the face of it, the sequence of epigrams is a bit engaging, even entertaining. The rhetorical strategy is clear: the prophet intends to engage his audience, using imagery which represents no overt threat to draw them into his monologue. We might even imagine a dialogue, with the audience responding to his questions or completing his statements (if we assume that these riddles were well-known at the time).

Even the last line could be seen in this light. God's speaking to His prophets is not (yet) presented as a direct threat to the people, merely as the next experientially demonstrated cause-effect relationship.

The brilliant use of the lion here speaks to Amos's oratorical skills. Is this the lion of verse 4 above, or the lion from Amos's anthemic saying in 1:2? Is this the lion who roars because he has succeeded in catching his prey? In that case, the roar does not generate fear; if anything, it would generate relief as those who hear it know that the lion has already caught his prey and that they are, for the meantime, safe. Or is this the lion of Amos's anthem, whose roar is not the **effect** of catching prey, but is, rather, the **cause** of the withering of the pastures and the top of the Carmel becoming sere?

From all appearances, the roaring lion in verse 8 is the lion whose roar generates fear, the lion from Chapter 1. Amos brilliantly introduces a lion which we need not fear — and then loops back to the divine roar which animates his prophecies of doom.

Picking up from Chapter 1, if God is roaring from Tziyon and giving forth His voice from Jerusalem, then, following the causal relationship established in our oracle, the addressees of His roar are wise to fear, and their trembling ought to be an instinctive, automatic reaction. The lion, however, is no longer a lion; it is God's voice, roaring through the words of the prophet. If so, how do we understand the second half of the verse – *Hashem Elokim has spoken, who can but prophesy?”* We would typically look at a verse of this sort and regard it as a clarifying parallelism (*tikbolet meva'eret)*[[2]](#footnote-2) where the second, parallel half of the verse explicates a discrete component of the first half. To wit, the "lion" in the first half is really God's voice. This, however, does not comport with the rest of the parallel:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Aryeh* | *🡨 🡪* | *Hashem Elokim* |
| *sha’ag* | *🡨 🡪* | *dibber* |
| *mi lo* | *🡨 🡪* | *mi lo* |
| *yira?* | *🡨 🡪* | *yinavei?* |

OR

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *The lion* | *🡨 🡪* | *Hashem God* |
| *has roared* | *🡨 🡪* | *has spoken* |
| *who can but* | *🡨 🡪* | *who can but* |
| *fear?* | *🡨 🡪* | *prophesy?* |

The fear, which is the reaction in 8a, is not parallel to prophesying in 8b. If the lion's roar is God's voice, why are there two distinct and irreconcilable reactions to it?

It seems that we have a rather unusual type of verse. The parallelism represents two elements that are clearly linked and, in some sense, one and the same. God's voice is the lion's roar but the reactions vary, depending on whose point of view we adopt. From the perspective of the people, God's words (should) induce fear, as these are words of rebuke and impending punishment. For the prophet, however, his course when hearing the words is instinctively, automatically and under "organic coercion" to prophesy. Of course, it is his prophecy which finally brings the divine roar to the people, so that the causal relationship here is complex and multi-staged:

The lion roars 🡪 the prophet must speak 🡪 the people must tremble.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

At this point, the audience, which has (perhaps) felt engaged and involved in the "entertaining" rhetoric of the prophet, is stunned (again!) to find that the calm and detached examples of cause and effect from the world of nature have come home to roost; the listeners are about to experience the voice which causes prophets to speak and causes their audiences to tremble.

Although we have presented these eight verses as an introduction to the "*Shimu"* oracles and raised the question as to whether it even followed the first two chapters in its original presentation, we see things differently from a literary perspective. As a finished work, the first two chapters of Amos lead beautifully and smoothly to this next step. Having drawn the people in with the seven oracles about surrounding nations and then hitting home with the longer eighth oracle about the audience and their kingdom, Amos has "set up" both his current audience as well as his eternal audience (that's us) to be on guard for relatively harmless oracular statements to be followed with a stinging rebuke. As we prepare to hear his next ominous words, we realize that we are about to hear the roar of the lion from Tziyon, spoken through the prophet who has no choice but to deliver these words.

1. This last point leaves us puzzled about the mission of Yona, who pointedly refuses the agency. Without deviating too far from our focus here, we might argue that Yona, per the story itself, might not properly be called "*eved Hashem,"* insofar as he does not act with the expected allegiance to His master. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not to be confused with *tikbolet mashlima* (synthetic parallelism), in which the second stich clarifies or completes the first; in this case, the second stich **reveals** what the first stich means. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)