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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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Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of

Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**Shiur #33: The Prophecies of Amos: "The Hearken Sequence"**

In [last week's *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-32-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we completed[[1]](#footnote-1) our study of Amos's rebuke of the "cows the Bashan," the wealthy women of Shomeron. Keep in mind the imagery used — of cows — and the odd terminology for how they relate to their husbands: “*adoneihem,”* "their masters.”

As noted in the first *shiurim* on this chapter, Amos's oracle moves on from here to chastise the people for their involvement with the idolatrous cults[[2]](#footnote-2) at Beit El and Gilgal. We suggested breaking the oracle after verse 3 due to two considerations. First of all, the signature form “*ne’um Hashem”* serves as a literary marker at the end of v. 3, indicating the end of a specific segment of the oracle. In addition, the addressees of the first three verses are the wealthy women, whereas the entire nation is "on the hook" for participation in foreign worship.

THE SEGMENTATION OF THIS ORACLE

Even though this oracle occupies most, if not all, of the thirteen verses of chapter 4, even a cursory look at the text implies a subdivision of the oracle. We already separated the first three verses as aimed at the women and marked off by *ne’um Hashem*. We can also identify a separate coda to the oracle in the last two verses as they diverge, thematically, from the previous verses and contain a "creation hymn" which neatly concludes the passage.

In addition, the ends of verses 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 are identical, using the epiphora *“Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne’um Hashem,”* "You have not (yet) returned to Me, says the Lord" to mark off the segments. We will, as such, address these five pieces separately over the course of several *shiurim*. In this *shiur*, we will focus our attention on the next two verses, which comprise an indictment of Yisrael's participation in the idolatrous cult at the various worship sites set up in Samaria.

Before addressing the text of these two verses, we will need to present three short prefaces, all of which relate to the two sites and, perhaps, the worship practiced there.

PREFACE 1: THE WORSHIP AT BEIT EL AND GILGAL

The medieval commentators are of one voice in maintaining that the worship referenced here is idolatrous or, at the very least, sinful: idolatrous, as a straightforward cultic place of Baal worship; sinful, either in the details of the offerings or else because it is worship done at a *bama.* (A *bama,* literally a high place, refers to an alternative altar outside of the place designated for God’s service; once Jerusalem is chosen, all *bamot* are forbidden.) We will note these different opinions below, as we review the text. Modern commentators have viewed Amos's rebuke here as set against the people's focus on sacrificial worship as a way of justifying or excusing their laxity in the realm of ethical behavior. Indeed, some moderns claim that Amos at no point chastises the people for their attachment to idolatry; rather, he emphasizes the central role of justice and minimizes the importance of the sacrificial order.

While there is no question that Amos places a great emphasis on justice and accuses the Samarian aristocracy of terrible societal failings in the ethical arena, it is simplistic to view his diatribe against the worship at these two sites as simply a polemic against offerings or against the people's misplaced priorities. The one biographic sketch we have of Amos, in chapter 7, has him facing off against the *kohen* at Beit El, which is called a "royal sanctuary" (*mikdash melekh)*.

Much earlier in Israelite history, the worship at Beit El, where Yerovam had erected a golden calf (*I Melakhim* 12:28-29) is challenged and Yerovam himself is subject to the chastisement of the unnamed prophet from the south (*I Melakhim* 13:1ff.) Whether that worship site is perceived at that time as idolatrous or as rebellious (in that it is deliberately set up as an alternative to the *Mikdash* in Yerushalayim; see *I Melakhim* 12:26-27), it is always understood to be a place where worship is inherently wrong, not just due to errant priorities. To be sure, the issue of misplaced priorities and overemphasis of offerings at the expense of obeisance to God's word is an old problem. Shaul is certainly caught in this trap, as Shemuel rebukes him:

And Shemuel said: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in hearkening to the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” (*I Shemuel* 15:22)

Nonetheless, this issue is not explicitly evident in the words of the Prophets of the middle Temple period (8th century BCE — i.e. Amos, Yeshayahu, Mikha and Hoshea).

As such, we will take the approach favored by the Rishonim — that there is something inherently evil about the worship at Beit El and Gilgal.

PREFACE 2: THE LOCATION OF GILGAL

Many commentators assume that the Gilgal mentioned here is the same Gilgal of Yehoshua (4:19-20, 5:9-10). To be sure, this is the location where the people offered up their first public sacrifice, the *pesach* (5:9-10) brought upon their entry into the land.

There is, however, at least one other location known as Gilgal (likely named for an abundance of roundish rocks) in the mountainous region near Shekhem. In *Devarim* 11:30, the mountains of Eval and Gerizim are identified as *mul ha-Gilgal*, which can hardly be the Gilgal of Yehoshua, which is a few miles northeast of Yericho.

There is likely a third "Gilgal" and this one is also identified as something of a holy place. When Eliyahu is taking leave of his students as he prepares to leave this world (*II Melakhim* 2), he goes to Gilgal, then Beit El (!), then Yericho then into the Yarden, from where he (doggedly followed by Elisha) ascends to heaven. At each of these stops, he bids farewell to his students, the *benei ha-nevi’im*; just as Beit-El at that time is seen as a holy place (in spite of the presence of Yerovam's altar there), so is the Gilgal which is seemingly further north. Although this may have been the same as the one mentioned in *Devarim* 11, many researchers associate the Gilgal of Eliyahu with the town of Jiljilyya, approximately 15 miles due north of Baytin, the biblical site of Beit El. That would place it a good 25 miles south of Gerizim, thus disqualifying the Gilgal mentioned in *Devarim*.

Although Yehoshua's Gilgal is likely used at least once more for worship, at the third and final coronation of Shaul (*I Shemuel* 11:14-15), there is no record of any return to that Gilgal after Shaul in the canon. To be sure, Shaul keeps his military based there after the disrupted coronation (*I Shemuel* 13) and returns there after his "victory" over Amalek to establish a memorial and bring offerings (ibid. 15:12,21), but there is no clear evidence for another mention of that Gilgal in any cultic context again in the *Tanakh*.[[3]](#footnote-3) There are several reason suggested for the choice of that Gilgal by Shemuel, but none of that is germane to our discussion.

It is most likely that the Gilgal referenced both in *Amos* and in *Hoshea* (4:15, 9:15, 12:12) is in Samaria and can be identified with Eliyahu's Gilgal. This is the position we will adopt in our discussions.

PREFACE 3: THE COWS REDUX

As alluded to above, we segmented off the first three verses as the prophecy against the women of Samaria, the "cows of the Bashan". That segmentation is accurate, but the bovine imagery may not be as modular as first presented. Klaus Koch makes the point that

Perhaps the comparison [of the wealthy women to cows] is not the work of Amos' own outraged imagination. He may be mockingly picking up a cultic name the women gave themselves, since they imagined themselves to be the worshippers of the mighty bull of Samaria (*Hoshea* 8:5f)…[[4]](#footnote-4)

In a note published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature (JBL*)[[5]](#footnote-5), Paul Jacobs lends support to this suggestion, noting several finds of cultic sites from the period of the monarchy which are evidently Israelite in provenance and depict bovine figures (in wall drawings) that are identified with divine names.

In addition, the odd use of *la-adoneihem*, which we discussed earlier, may take on an added dimension of cult-worship.

As such, we may have to reconsider the appellation of "Cows of the Bashan" and review the impact of our segmentation of this oracle. Even though the first three verses are aimed at the women, their sin may not be limited to the gouging of the poor to fill their stomachs and enhance their feasts. The entire scene may be cultic in nature (similar to the "reclining on pledged clothes near every altar" of 2:8) and may not be divorced from the segment of the oracle against the cults at Beit El and Gilgal.

THE TEXT: VERSE 4

This verse is written in perfect parallel, as can be seen here and below

**1st hemistich**

*Bo'u Veit El u-fishu ha-Gilgal harbu li-fshoa*

Come to Beit El and rebel[[6]](#footnote-6) to Gilgal and multiply rebelliousness

As noted above, Beit El and Gilgal are presented here and later in Amos as a matched pair of worship sites; as suggested above, these are not sites of proper Divine worship. They may be associated with Baal cults or may be sites originally dedicated to proper worship of God. Either their very existence outside of Yerushalayim is problematic (as a *bama*) or something about the method of offering is considered sinful. The classic medieval commentators all read the worship as idolatrous and point to the specifics in Amos's speech as related to "leniencies" offered by the pagan priests relative to the "stringencies" of proper divine worship.

Note that the prophet is "inviting" his audience to come to Beit El to sin/ rebel. He clearly does not intend to coax them to sin further. As Rashi notes:

This is similar to a man saying to his wayward son: "Keep doing that until your measure (of sin) is full."

R. Joseph Kara restates this a bit more forcefully:

This is not a command, rather it is like a man saying to his fellow: "Do all of the bad things you are able to do now; the day will come when your evil acts will be accounted for."

Note also that Amos repeats the root *p\*sh\*a* — rebel — in his faux invitation. As we discussed in our opening *shiurim* on *Amos*, there are several words in Biblical Hebrew for wrongdoing: *cheit, avon, pesha* (among others). A *cheit* is best translated as an "error", perhaps an inadvertent sin (the root is also used to depict "missing a target" as in *Shoftim* 20:16). An *avon* seems to be a deliberate sin, done with intent aforethought but **for its own sake**, i.e. driven by greed, appetite or the like. *Pesha*, however, is rebellion — used even in human relations. When the king of Moav ceases paying his tribute to the king of Yisrael, the text reports this as a *pesha*: *“Vayifsha melekh Moav”* (*II Melakhim* 3:5). Hence, a *pesha*, in terms of sinful behavior, is done not due to appetite, avarice etc*.* but rather to throw off God's authority.

Going to Beit El or Gilgal is an act of rebellion against God. According to those modern commentators who read Amos's chastisement as against proper divine worship and its taking the place of justice in the people's priorities (see above), they read this line as "go to Beit El, yet continue to rebel (when you return from worship)." The approach of the Rishonim has going to these sites itself as a direct act of defiance against God.

**2nd hemistich**

*Ve-haviu la-boker zivcheikhem li-shloshet yamim maseroteikhem*

And bring your offerings in the morning and your tithes after three days

Some of the Rishonim, led by Rashi, read these "invitations" as echoing the "tolerant" practices of the pagan cults, in contradistinction to the "limiting" rules of God's altar. Others, including Radak and R. Eliezer of Beaugency, read the critique as one of correct behavior, which should have been the people's approach to worshipping God; but they are now demonstrating this otherwise praiseworthy behavior in the context of idolatrous offerings.

Thus, Rashi reads that the pagan priests announce that our laws are limiting and do not allow an offering to lay on the altar overnight (*Shemot* 23:19), but they allow it (hence: "bring your offerings in the morning"). The Torah forbids us from eating an offering beyond the second day of its being offered, but the idolatrous priests allow it be eaten on the third day. Both of these reads of the verse are, admittedly, a bit forced.

Radak, however, reads both of these as laudable acts — were they done for God. Bringing the offerings first thing in the morning is an ideal demonstration of alacrity and zeal. He then reads the "three days" in our verse as "three years" (as *yamim* does mean "years" in some contexts). This is, again, the proper behavior, as commanded in *Devarim* 14:28-29; but they are doing this at the pagan sites.

THE TEXT: VERSE 5

This first half of this verse is written in parallel and matches both halves of the previous verse. Note that in these three hemistichs, Amos uses some of his favorite numerical types. From the beginning of the book, we've observed that Amos favors the numbers 3 and 7, with the "for three sins…" trope of the oracle against the nations; and again, here, with the three days of the tithes. This number will repeat twice more in this extended oracle. The sevens are replete in Amos, beginning with this repeated "for three and for a fourth" which becomes "three and four" for Yisrael in Chapter 2. He declares seven oracles against neighboring nations and then listed seven sins of Yisrael, matched with seven kindness He had performed for them and finally seven punishments that they will receive as a consequence of their behavior. In these three verse-halves (hemistichs), Amos uses seven verbs: *bo'u* (come) *u-fishu* (rebel), *li-fshoa* (to rebel), *haviu* (bring), *kater* (burn), *kiru* (call out) and *hashmiu* (sound out, publicize). These two verses comprise, as argued above, a mini-oracle with its own rhetorical wisdom.

**1st hemistich**

*Ve-kater mei-chametz toda ve-kiru nedavot hashmiu*

Offer a thanksgiving sacrifice of that which is leavened

And proclaim free-will offerings and publicize them

The thanksgiving (*toda*) offering is to be brought with forty loaves, ten of which are to be *chametz,* so the *toda* referenced here seems to be ritually proper. What is unclear in the verse is what is being burnt and, again, we have to wonder whether the indictment is against **improper worship of God** or against **zealous worship of Baal.** R. Eliezer of Beaugency reads the word *mei-chametz* as "without *chametz*;” in other words, they would bring their offerings without waiting, zealous to offer to Baal. Malbim reads it simply as "including *chametz*", just as it was to be done in the *Mikdash* — but here, it is done in the wrong place and for a foreign deity.

The second half of this passage is not as clear: are the people being chastised for announcing their offerings, i.e. braggadocio, for singing about how this offering is accepted (Rashi) or for making a public appeal for people to bring offerings (Radak)? The passage is a bit opaque and defies a clear determination as to its meaning.

**2nd hemistich**

*Ki khein ahavtem Bnei Yisrael ne'um Ado-nai Elokim*

For so you love to do, O you children of Yisrael

 Says the Lord God.

Like the one before it, this mini-oracle has its own signature to mark it off as distinct.

Perhaps the most powerful and painful phrase here is exactly this. Whether it is the leniencies of idolatrous worship (per Rashi) or the zealousness which the people demonstrate specifically away from God (Radak), the fact that this is the behavior that they love to engage in is enraging to the prophet — and, presumably, to his readership. Is it as upsetting to his immediate audience? We will see, in the next few passages, how the people respond not only to threats but to actual consequences and whether that inspires them to correct their ways.

In the next *shiur*, we will begin to address the five passages of consequence, each of which concludes with *“Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne’um Hashem*,” which may already provide an answer to our question.

**For Further Study** (regarding the "Cows of the Bashan"):

Terence Kleven, “Cows ofthe Bashan: A Single Metaphor at Amos 4:1-3*,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly (CBQ*) 58:2 (1996), pp. 215-227.

Brian Irwin, “Amos 4:1 and the Cows of the Bashan: A Reappraisal,” *CBQ* 74:2 (2012), pp. 231-246.

1. Or so we thought; see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Not all commentators would reference it that way; see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gilgal is mentioned in David's return after Avshalom's death (*II Shemuel* 19:41 is almost assuredly Yehoshua's Gilgal), but there is no cultic reference there. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period,* Fortress (Philadelphia: 1983), p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul Jacobs, “‘Cows of Bashan’ — a Note on the Interpretation of Amos 4:1,” *JBL* 104:1 (March 1985) pp. 109-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I have chosen "rebel" to represent *pesha,* as explained in the *shiurim* on the first chapter; reiterated below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)