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**

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In honor and appreciation of Rabbi Etshalom, dedicated by Asher Reimer

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**Shiur #35: The Prophecies of Amos: "The Hearken Sequence"**

In [last week's *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-34-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we began studying the series of five "disciplinary actions" taken by God to correct the people — each of which ends with the epistrophe “*Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne’um Hashem,”* "(Still and all) you have not (yet) returned to Me, says God."[[1]](#footnote-1) We devoted part of our discussion to the role of epistrophes in biblical rhetoric, along with a brief analysis of the nuanced preposition *adai* (instead of *elai*).

In this *shiur*, we will continue our study of the text and identify local structural schemes in the section. In the next *shiur*, we will complete our study of the text of these five passages; in the subsequent *shiurim*, we will engage in more detailed analysis of them.

**VERSES 7-8**

Part 1 (7a): Introduction of the Drought

*Ve-gam anokhi manati mikem et ha-geshem*

And I have also withheld the rain from you

*Be-od shelosha chodashim la-katzir*

When there were yet three months to the harvest

I have set these phrases off from the rest of the verse as they comprise a sort of topic sentence, introducing God's role in the drought and the intentionality of it all as reflected in Amos's mention of the timing. The rest of these two verses are the details of the selective drought, followed by a description of the necessary responses of the people in order to survive. These strategies should be enough to wake the people up to God's role and to inspire them to reform their ways — but, again, it is to no avail.

A WORD ABOUT A WORD: *VE-GAM*

The opening word, *ve-gam*, can be rendered several ways. How we translate it in this case will impact on our understanding of the "disciplinary measure" that is taken and how the Shomeron audience is to understand it.

The word *gam*, typically translated as "as well, also," appears over 600 times in the canon. There are, however, several instances where it seems to carry a more intense and nuanced meaning. For instance, in *Yehoshua* 9:4, the Gibeonites' masquerade, pretending to be wayfarers from a distant land, is prefaced with *gam*: “*Vaya’asu gam hema be-orma*,” “And they too acted with trickery.” Indeed, the Midrash (*Pitron Torah, Parashat Nitzavim*) reads:

R. Yitzchak b. Tavli said: This teaches that the Gibeonites came to Moshe and he accepted them,[[2]](#footnote-2) as it says, *“Vaya’asu* ***gam hema*** *be-orma…”*

The classical commentators, however, are troubled by the odd insertion of *ve-gam* (they evidently reject the Midrashic tradition above). R. Yosef ibn Kaspi is fairly transparent about his discomfort with the word, explaining that "from several perspectives this wording is correct, according to those who understand reasoning (rhetoric?)." R. Yosef Kara evidently feels similarly and puts some effort into explaining it syntactically.

Rashi, however, interprets *ve-gam* as reflecting back on the deception of Ya’akov's sons as recorded in *Bereishit* 34. Ya’akov’s sons mislead the citizens of Shekhem into thinking that if they undergo circumcision, Ya’akov’s family will agree to become part of the community and live together in harmony.

Radak cites Rashi, then suggests that *ve-gam* carries the usual meaning and proposes that the citizens of Yericho and Ha-Ai (the two cities recorded as having been already defeated at the point of the Gibeonite ruse) engaged in some sort of subterfuge. Hence, the Gibeonites **also** act with deceit. Radak then doubles back to Rashi's reading of the word from a different angle. He suggests that the Gibeonites are under the impression that Yehoshua engaged in trickery in defeating those cities, so they, using the invading army's strategy against it, create their own deception.

Both Radak and Rashi understand that *ve-gam* carries a sense of "response in kind.” To wit, Yehoshua (or, centuries earlier, his ancestors) engaged in trickery against the people of the land; *ve-gam* its current inhabitants will use trickery against him in response. This is a form of poetic justice or *midda ke-negged midda*.

Another example of this usage is in *I Melakhim* 21:19. The word *gam* appears twice in that verse and it is possible that both of them carry this meaning. In reproving Achav for his role in the death of Navot and then seizing his vineyard, God directs Eliyahu to tell the king:

*Vedibarta eilav l-emor: "Ko amar Hashem: ‘Ha-ratzachta* ***ve-gam*** *yarashta?’"*

*Vedibarta eilav l-emor: "Ko amar Hashem: ‘Bi-mkom asher lakeku ha-kelavim et dam Navot yaloku ha-kelavim et damkha* ***gam ata.’"***

And you shall speak to him, saying: “Thus says God: 'Have you murdered and also (***ve-gam***) inherited?'"

And you shall speak to him saying, “Thus says God: ‘In the place where the dogs lapped up Navot's blood, the dogs will lap up your blood as well (***gam ata***).’”

This isn't just a list of indictments against Achav, but points out the ironic twist of evil: not only does Achav have Navot murdered,[[3]](#footnote-3) but he also takes the property of his victim. This instance of *gam* is not one of poetic justice, rather an indicator of bloodguilt.

The first part of the verse contains the indictment against the king; the second part includes the consequences. Here again, the use of *gam* goes beyond the simple meaning of "also/ as well;" in this case, however, it speaks directly to poetic justice.

I'd like to suggest that by introducing the drought with *ve-gam*, the prophet is deliberately pointing to a deeper message carried by the drought. Not only does it demonstrate (as droughts in *Tanakh* always do) God's ultimate control over life and death and over the market, but in the context of Shomeron, it carries a specifically pointed statement of divine justice. Just as the aristocracy, judiciary and monarchy withhold sustenance from the poor, similarly God withholds rain from the land and the selfsame elite suffer accordingly.

This type of divine scale-balancing is found elsewhere in *Tanakh*. When the people ask the Prophet Shemuel for a king (*I Shemuel* 8), God instructs him to declare the *mishpat ha-melekh*, the law of the king, which includes extreme examples of eminent domain. At the conclusion, he states:

And you will call out on that day because of this king that you have chosen for yourselves, and God will not answer you on that day. (v. 18)

The implication is that once the people have placed a human over themselves — in effect, rejecting God as their king (see ibid. v. 8) — He will no longer answer them. There is an even more explicit statement of this aspect of God's measures of justice (that if the people turn away from God, He will turn away from them) in *Shoftim*. As the people suffer under the Pelishtim after having worshipped multiple local gods, God's response is:

And you have abandoned Me and worshipped other gods, therefore I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods that you have chosen, let them save you when you are in trouble. (10:13-14)

A beautiful and painful *midrash* expresses this even more clearly:

Similarly, the leaders of Israel would see a sinful matter and turn their faces away (i.e. not intervene on behalf of the victim); the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: “The time will come when I will do the same to you.” (*Eikha Rabba* 1:33)

BACK TO THE TEXT

The presentation of the drought as God's deliberately "withholding" the rain, and pointing out that it happened with three months to go before the harvest, makes the lack of rain that they have (recently?) experienced a clear statement of providential disapproval. Three months before the harvest puts the drought at the middle of the winter, at a time when the spring grains are germinating and require significant rainfall to ensure a healthy crop.

Note that Amos oscillates between describing God as "making it rain" (in the next clause) and "withholding" the rain, which is instructive in and of itself. We might have staked out the position that the rain in its usual season is a "natural" occurrence and the default status. Conversely, we might have assumed that rain is always a specially ordained gift and that the default assumption is no rain.

The prophet cuts the assumptions in half and renders them both meaningless. If withholding rain is a deliberate divine act, then rain is the assumed position. On the other hand, if God "makes it rain" (next clause), then rain is not to be assumed. The simple answer is that God is in control and nothing is to be assumed or taken for granted. If there is no rain, then God is withholding it; if it **does** rain, that is God "actively" causing it to fall. This is a milder form of the bold statement of Yeshayahu, “*Ani Hashem ve-ein od. Yotzer or o-vorei choshekh,”* "I am God and there is no other. Who forms light and creates dark" (45:6-7)[[4]](#footnote-4). Neither light nor dark is the "default;" each of them is formed by the will of God.

Part 2 (7b): The Selective Drought

*Vehimtarti al ir echat ve-al ir achat lo amtir*

And I made it rain on one city and on one city I did not make it rain

The parallelism in this stich is clear, as is the chiastic structure:

*Vehimtarti*

*Al ir echat*

*Ve-al ir achat*

*Lo amtir*

In a chiasmus (A-B-B-A or more complex versions) the focal point is the middle; in this case, it is the distinction between *ir echat* that gets water and *ir achat* that is dry. This phenomenon, certainly familiar to the herdsman from Tekoa (where such rain-patterns are common) is a sign of God's favor for one of the cities and disfavor for the other — perhaps. We will yet see that Amos turns both of them into warning signs. In any case, the structure of this phrase makes it clear that we ought to pay attention to this tale of two cities; indeed, will it be the case that it is the best of times for one and the worst of times for the other — or is it the worst of times for both?

Notice also how the prophet's rhetoric is so cleverly designed. He uses the same verb *matar* (rain) four times in this verse, yet each time in a unique form. In these first two instances, he varies by using the pluperfect. The opening *vav* is **not** *vav* conversive (*vav ha-hipukh*); rather, it is conjunctive *vav* — translated as "and." This is clear, as the events described here have already happened, hence the verb must be in the past tense (*himtarti*).[[5]](#footnote-5) In the next hemistich, he uses the passive voice (*timater*) followed by *tamtir*, using the neutral third person (literally translated as "it will make it rain"), an uncommon but not unmatched usage in *Tanakh.*[[6]](#footnote-6) We will explore this further in the translation and footnote below.

*Chelka achat timater ve-chelka asher lo tamtir[[7]](#footnote-7) aleha tivash*

One plot was rained upon and a plot whereupon it did not rain withered

This phrase seems to merely echo the previous one, with the discerning element moving from city to field; yet there is an additional phrase here which merits our attention. The first half of this clause mirrors the first half of the previous phrase (*ir echat/ chelka achat),* but the second adds the assumed consequence. It is not just the event of rain or drought but the result: the field that gets no rain dries out.

Stepping back from the eloquence of the text, we might ask: why does the field that gets no rain wither? And why isn't the same result mentioned in the first segment regarding the cities?

We easily understand the silence regarding the cities. Imagine two neighboring cities, one with plentiful rainfall and the other suffering from drought. There would be no reasonable way (in the ancient world, to be sure) for the "blessed" city to share its water with its neighboring village.

When it comes to abutting fields, however, it is far from impossible to dig trenches or use some other conveyance to bring water from field to field. We would assume that the two *chelkot* here belong to different people, for why would anyone refuse to water his dry field if he has a surplus of water elsewhere?

It is a more likely reading of this verse to assume that there are two fields, owned by two people, and the one with plenty does not share with his neighbor. Hence, this verse stresses that the field which hasn’t received plenty "from heaven" withers, because the neighbor refuses to help. Perhaps Amos is cleverly "re-stringing" the accusation into the consequence; or, more accurately, he is putting extra backing behind the epistrophe, “*Ve-lo shavtem adai*.” Even when God blesses some and withholds from others, the people do not help each other.

To further buttress this claim, note that the next verse only makes mention of the inter-city migration and not of intra-city (field-to-field) requests for rainwater. Perhaps they are made and the answer is “no.”

Part 3 (8a): Resultant Transience

*Vena'u shetayim ve-shalosh arim el ir achat li-shtot mayim ve-lo yisba'u*

So two or three cities wandered to one city to drink water and were not sated

Perhaps a more accurate breakdown is:

*Vena'u shetayim ve-shalosh arim el ir achat*

*Li-shtot mayim*

*Ve-lo yisba'u*

Situated in the middle of our structure is the same *ir achat* from the previous verse, the one blessed with water. On the outside are the deprived cities, who are described with *lo yisba'u*.

Nearby cities flock there for water, but there isn't enough to sate them; alternatively, the city with the water refuses to share. Both of these interpretations are possible; to some extent, it depends on how we read the previous verse.

If we assume that the city with the rain is blessed, then it may be that its citizens aren't willing to share with the deprived city. This is difficult, as it calls into question the selection, since the blessed city demonstrates such utter selfishness. Alternatively, it might be argued that they are willing to share, but there isn't enough to go around and the populace of the other cities simply can't be satiated by the meager waters that are there to go around. This fits the verb *yisba'u* a bit more smoothly.

There is, however, another approach to the "blessing" of the rain in the *ir achat*. R. Yosef Kara, following Rashi (based on BT *Ta’anit* 6b[[8]](#footnote-8)) suggests that both cities are cursed here: the one that gets no rain obviously so, but the one that gets a surfeit of rain never gets sunshine and the crops go moldy. If this is the case, we understand why the visiting cities are not sated, the *ir achat* that they are turning to for help has its own problems, as it experiences not an inversion of the curse but an inverted curse.

The verse concludes with the familiar epistrophe:

*Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne'um Hashem*

In spite of all of this, with the manifest providence of God, you have still not returned…

In next week's *shiur*, we will address the rest of the series of "instructive plagues" with which God tries to bring His people back.

1. I have added in the two parenthetic phrases reflecting the **sense** of the verse, beyond the literal translation of the words. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, however, the version in *Yalkut Shimoni, Parashat Nitzavim,* Paragraph 940, where Moshe is described as **not** accepting them. This rabbinic story in which the Gibeonites approach Moshe is part of a larger Midrashic scheme to present Yehoshua as re-experiencing moments of Moshe's leadership. For instance, the most famous scene of Yehoshua's career — stopping the sun and moon — is imputed to Moshe; see *Eliyahu Rabba*, Paragraph 2, s.v. *Yom le-yom.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is not Achav’s direct actions which kill Navot, but his wife, the wicked Izevel, uses his seal to direct the kangaroo court that leads to Navot's wrongful execution. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the case of Yeshayahu, we assume it to be an anti-dualist polemic, likely responding to the cult of Zoroaster. This is highly unlikely in the case of Amos. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Oddly, the accent is *mi-lera* (on the ultimate), which would usually signal a future verb. In this case, however, it is certainly an occasion of past tense. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, *inter alia*, *Tehillim* 68:15, *“Bah* ***tashleg*** *be-tzalmon.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. LXX and Vulgate read *amtir*, avoiding the third-person neutral and matching the second half of the previous phrase. Hence, the pattern is *himtarti-amtir/ timater-amtir* or A-B-C-B. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It seems that Rav's statement is in reference to the second half: the field which gets rain is also cursed. This is borne out by Rav Ashi's support ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)