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

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-36-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we continued our study of 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 the Lord." We focused on the third of these rebukes, giving special attention to the devastating biblical pair of plagues, *shidafon* and *yeirakon,* and the association with the Egyptian plague cycle and its place in biblical rebuke and warning texts.

In this *shiur*, we will tackle the next rebuke; in the next, we will complete the series. In the following *shiur*, we will engage in more detailed analysis of them as a group, taking the panoramic view and issues of literary structure into account.

**REBUKE #4 – DEVASTATING PLAGUE (Verse 10)**

**10a1: PESTILENCE**

*Shilachti bakhem dever be-derekh Mitzrayim*

I have sent among you the pestilence in the way of Egypt

This plague is described as having been "sent" (*shin-lamed-chet);* this root has three normal usages, and a fourth which is decidedly different. It may refer to dispatching things (e.g. *Bereishit* 37:32) or people (e.g. *Bereishit* 32:3-4). It may mean "summon", when followed by the *lamed* prefix or by the preposition *el* (e.g. *II Shemuel* 11:6; *Bamidbar* 22:37) or it may mean to exile (e.g. *Devarim* 24:1, paralleled in *Yirmeyahu* 3:1).

However, in several texts relating to human endeavor, it has a destructive and even murderous intent. At *Akeidat Yitzchak* (*Bereishit* 22:12), Avraham's hand is stayed from slaughtering his son with the words, “*Al* ***tishlach*** *yadekha el ha-na'ar,”* “Do not send your hand against the boy.” When a bailee (*shomer*) swears as to his innocence regarding the theft of a surety, it is to the effect that “*lo* ***shalach*** *yado bi-mlekhet rei'eihu,”* “he did not send his hand upon his friend’s work” (*Shemot* 22:7).

Significantly, the same usage appears in the context of divine punishment:

*Ve****shilachti*** *dever (!) be-tokhekhem*

I will send pestilence among you

(*Vayikra* 26:25; see also *Yechezkel* 28:23)

The entire enterprise of the Exodus and the requisite punishment of the Egyptians which precedes it is foretold with the words:

***Veshilachti*** *et yadi vehikeiti et Mitzrayim*…

**I will send** My hand and strike Egypt*…*

(*Shemot* 3:20)

This verb clearly has an additional meaning, one of attacking. This is common to human, even sinful, attacks and to divine punishment.

It is specifically within the context of pestilence, the cattle plague of Egypt (the fifth plague) that the *shin-lamed-chet* root is used. When referring to the *dever* (at the introduction to the plague of hail), God states:

I sent My hand, and I smote you and your nation with pestilence… (*Shemot* 9:15)

This is immediately prefaced by His promise to Pharaoh:

This time, I will send all of my plagues to your heart… (9:14)

I would like to make a parenthetic note, marveling at the beauty of the Torah's literary flourishes. Throughout the plague narrative, the text uses the verb *shalach* repeatedly. Moshe's request-refrain is, of course, the anthemic *“Shalach et ammi ve-ya'avduni,”* popularized to "Let My people go". At numerous junctures during the plague cycle, Pharaoh sends for Moshe, sends messengers to his people to learn about the extent of the damage and, of course doesn't **send** the people. The verb appears an unusually high number of times (60) within the ten chapters that comprise the Exodus narrative. The epilogue to the exit is found at the end of chapter 13 (v. 17): “*Vayhi be-****shalach*** *Paro et ha-am,”* "And it happened when Pharaoh **sent** (released) the nation…" His soldiers and courtiers bemoan the fact that “*shilachnu et Yisrael mei-ovdeinu,* “we **sent** Yisrael from working for us” (14:5). The subtle but powerful point seems to be that while Pharaoh is sending here, sending there, summoning his servants and so on, God is doing the real "sending" (of plagues). Ultimately Pharaoh obeys and "sends" the Israelites to their freedom.

As we have seen, God's punishments are often described as being sent by Him, and *dever* is a classic example. We are not surprised to find Amos using this verb to describe God's having attacked the people with a plague.

It is the second clause of this phrase which is difficult and causes disputes among the commentators, traditional as well as modern: What is *be-derekh Mitzrayim*? Does it mean that God plagued them as He did to the Egyptians in the pre-Exodus plague-cycle? Or does it mean that something happened (recently) on the road to Egypt which could be rightly called a plague? The mention of "young men" (soldiers?) and "horses" in the next two phrases, respectively, support the notion that there was a military campaign, somehow related to Egypt,[[1]](#footnote-1) that is the referent here.

***Be-derekh Mitzrayim:* A Survey of the Rishonim**

R. Eliezer of Beaugency suggests that the people went to Egypt for help, but he doesn't clarify what sort of aid. Yosef ibn Kaspi develops this further, associating the help with that sought out by King Hoshea ben Ela (mid-8th century BCE), who turned to Egypt for military assistance (as does Tzidkiyahu 150 years later). He ties this in with the horses, and we'll follow his take later on in our analysis of this verse. R. David Kimchi (Radak), on the other hand, reads that they were going to Egypt for provisions: "And you did not think that I was the one who brought the famine upon you that you should return to Me…" R. David Altschuler (Metzudat David) adopts this take.

Rashi and his school take a decidedly different direction. Rashi himself interprets that "*be-derekh Mitzrayim"* refers to a plague (?) with which the Israelites are afflicted on their way out of Egypt. R. Yosef Kara, his contemporary and colleague,[[2]](#footnote-2) makes an unusual claim. He interprets *be-derekh Mitzrayim* as "who died during the three days of darkness."[[3]](#footnote-3) Unlike the other commentators quoted, he associates this plague with the plagues of Egypt — but, in an unusual twist, not the plague of *dever*.

Paul[[4]](#footnote-4) sees a parallel between our *be-derekh Mitzrayim* and the phrase found twice in *Yeshayahu* 10 (vv. 24, 26), interpreting all of them as "in the same fashion that I did to Egypt" — and, in our case, as a direct allusion to the plague of pestilence of the Exodus narrative.

**10a2: THE SWORD AND THE HORSES**

*Haragti va-cherev bachureikhem*

Your young men have I slain with the sword

Is this a separate event or a continuation of that described in the first clause? In other words, is there a singular event of a plague *be-derekh Mitzrayim;* and, in that context, are young men slain by the sword? Or, to put a finer point on it, is that the plague itself — the slaying of young men?

The broad approach of the medievalists is to read them as one attack. With slightly more finesse, R. David Kimchi sees them as two separate devastations that happen within one event: "…and you went to Egypt and I sent against you pestilence and the sword of the enemy on the road…" R. Eliezer of Beaugency sees it as a "one-two punch": they are afflicted by the pestilence on the way to Egypt and then are attacked by the sword on their way back.

On the other hand, more contemporary commentators see them as separate attacks. Hakham[[5]](#footnote-5) understands this clause as referring to some military skirmish against the Arameans (the most commonly confronted enemy of the period), during which an abnormally high number of soldiers perished.[[6]](#footnote-6) Paul[[7]](#footnote-7) has an entirely different take, reckoning the punishments in this entire sequence and counting seven (a favorite number of Amos, as we've seen several times). The pestilence is the fifth attack and the sword the sixth. He does concede that these catastrophes occur in series, a series which follows an earlier biblical trope (e.g. *Vayikra* 26:25), but does not see them as one continuous event.

*Im shevi suseikhem*

And have carried away your horses

The same division among the commentators regarding the relationship between the first two clauses does not carry over here; all seem to be of one mind that the horses are ridden by the "young men" and that either all are taken captive or the horses are taken captive while the young men are slaughtered.

Tying these two phrases together with the pestilence at the beginning of the verse has one clear associative recommendation: the horses. Horses, throughout *Tanakh*, are emblematic of Egypt (and for good reason, as it was, in the ancient world, the source of much equine commerce). The prohibition against the king having too many horses is tied in to the predictable desire to return to Egypt in order to acquire more horses (*Devarim* 17:16); indeed, the might of Egypt is biblically memorialized in the opening words of the Song of the Sea, *“Sus ve-rokhevo rama va-yam,”* "He cast the horse and its rider into the sea.”

This is more significant if we read “*be-derekh Mitzrayim”* as "on the way to Egypt," as Radak and others see it; in other words, the prophet is reminding them of a recent incursion (or mission) to Egypt which ended in unmitigated disaster.

If, however, we follow Rashi and his school and read *be-derekh Mitzrayim* as "in the **manner** of Egypt," i.e. referring to some component of the Exodus narrative, then there is no need to visualize a southern campaign or any real contact with Egypt here. In that case, we would be more likely to read the passage as referencing a military encounter that the audience well remembers (with a painful memory) and that makes it more likely, as noted above, to be a skirmish (or more) with Aram.

Alternatively, if we follow Andersen and Freedman (or Paul) and see these last two clauses as disjointed from the first — as a litany of national traumas — then we have no reason to see the "swords" and "horses" as specifically related to Egypt.

**10b1: THE STENCH**

*Va'a'aleh be'osh machaneikhem u-vapekhem*

And I have made the stench of your camp to come up even into your nostrils

The opening word here is a familiar one, but in an ironic context and usage. *A'aleh* (literally "I will make to come up,” with the prefix *vav* rendering it “I have made to come up”) is first used in *Tanakh* in a most promising context, as God speaks to Ya’akov just before his descent to Egypt:

*Anokhi eireid imekha Mitzrayma ve-Anokhi a'alkha gam alo*

I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will indeed make you also to come up. (*Bereishit* 46:4)

This promising word is repeated hundreds of years later when God inaugurates Moshe into prophecy and gives him his charge:

*Va-omar: A'aleh etkhem mei-oni Mitzrayim…*

I declare: I will raise you up out of the oppression of Egypt… (*Shemot* 3:17)

The only other use of this form of the verb (first person imperfect), when that "first person" is the Almighty, is in *Shoftim* 2:1, again referencing God's taking His people up out of Egypt.

As such, we would expect *A'aleh*, in God's voice, to either remind us of the Exodus or a promise to take us out of some contemporary quagmire. Surprising though it may be (this is the beauty of *Tanakh*’s penchant for rhetorical irony), God isn't describing His taking us up out of Egypt, but rather, His raising up a foul stench from all of this plague-driven death.

The word used here to describe the awful smell of death is *be'osh*, the radicals of which are *bet-alef-shin*. This noun is an extremely rare one, appearing only three times, all in the Prophetic literary corpus:

In Yeshayahu's prophecy regarding God's war against the nations, we find:

*Ve-chaleleikhem yushlakhu u-figreihem ya'aleh* ***vosham***

Their corpses will be thrown down and their carcasses will raise a **stench** (34:3)

Yoel presents an eschatological prophecy regarding the destruction of the "northern” enemy, either the locusts or a nation represented via the metaphor of the locusts (Assyria?):

*Ve-et ha-tzefoni archik mei-aleikhem vehidachtiv el eretz tziya u-shmama, et panav el ha-yam ha-kadmoni ve-sofo el ha-yam ha-acharon; ve'ala* ***vosho*** *veta'al tzachanato, ki higdil la-asot.*

But I will remove far off from you the northern one and will drive him into a land barren and desolate, with his face toward the eastern sea, and his hinder part toward the western sea; that his **foulness** may come up, and his ill savor may come up, because he has done great things.

Note that in both of these prophecies, the verb used to describe what this foul smell does is *alo*, to rise up, just as it appears in our passage. The clever use of *A’aleh* we pointed out above, as Amos uses a verb which heretofore appears in the context of God's great compassion for His people (Ya’akov and the Israelites) to describe their destruction. He continues with this type of painful yet elegant flourish. The foul-smelling *be'osh* appears in the words of his contemporary Yeshayahu in the context of a victory of God over Yisrael's enemies, as it does in the only other instance, in *Yoel* (time uncertain). Here, Amos uses it to describe the "stench" of the corpses of the young men of Yisrael and their captured horses. The brilliance of the rhetoric cannot help but be overshadowed by the shock and sadness it communicates.

The stench rises from "your camp"; i.e. the slaughter takes place not on the battlefield, but within the camp itself; as if to imagine that the enemy infiltrates the Israelite military base and kills the young soldiers there, such that the surviving audience (the older men who send younger men to war) can smell the death coming from the camp in their very nostrils.

Before leaving this phrase, we ought to note that the stench doesn't arise of its own; God Himself "raises it," directing it to the nostrils of the living, so that they may have direct, sensual contact with the dead; and so that, it is hoped, they will take this to heart and reflect — and return. The disappointment inherent in the refrain of this sequence is palpable.

**10b2: THE RETURN THAT (AGAIN) DOESN'T HAPPEN**

*Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne’um Hashem*

Yet you have not (yet) returned unto Me, says the Lord.

We will yet return to this phrase when we look at the broader structure and message of this sequence; suffice it to say, at this point, that the sense of divine "frustration" and "regret" (forgive the anthropopathism) grows; and we, the removed listener and reader, must sense the growing immediacy of punishment.

In next week's *shiur*, we will complete our textual study of this sequence of five rebukes; following that, we will take a broader look at the scheme and try to decipher the message or messages that Amos the Tekoite is communicating to his audience in Shomeron — and perhaps, across the centuries, to us (see BT *Megilla* 14a).

1. About horses, see, *inter alia,* *Devarim* 17:16 and its related passage in *I Melakhim* 10:25-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alternatively, according to some scholars, he was his student. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is a surprising comment, considering that there is no textual basis for claiming a pestilence during the plague of darkness. It is likely rooted in the Midrashic tradition that the plague of darkness was effected in order to stealthily kill off those Hebrews who were reluctant to participate in the Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Da'at Mikra, Trei Asar*, Vol. 1, Mossad Harav Kook (Jerusalem: 1990), p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, Anchor Bible 24A (New York: 1989,) p. 443, raise the proposal that it may be referring to the events recounted in *II Melakhim* 13:7, but then reject it on the grounds that these events seem to be of recent vintage and fresh in the memory of Amos's audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mikra Le-Yisrael* ibid; see also Andersen and Freedman, p. 447. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)