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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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot***

**Amelia Ray and Morris Ray   
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

**on the occasion of their twelfth *yahrtzeits***

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**Shiur #38: The Prophecies of Amos: "The Hearken Sequence"**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-37-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 fourth of these rebukes, directing our efforts at understanding the use of Exodus imagery — allusions to both the Plagues as well as the Exodus itself — within prophetic rhetoric. We also investigated the use of the verb *shalach* (send) in the context of violence, theft and divine retribution.

In this *shiur*, we will tackle the final rebuke and complete the series. In the next *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 #5: DESTRUCTION AND SURVIVAL (Verse 11)**

11a1: EVOCATION OF SEDOM AND AMORA

*Hafakhti vakhem ke-mapeikhat Elokim et Sedom ve-et Amora*

I have overturned (some of) you, as God overturned Sedom and Amora

There are three independent issues to tackle in this phrase.

First of all, unlike the earlier divine attacks/ plagues (etc.) described in the earlier rebukes, anything approximating the destruction of the cities of the Jordan Plain, as described in *Bereishit* 19, would be absolutely devastating and would leave no survivors. If so, how is this cataclysm unmentioned anywhere else in the period texts (*Yeshayahu, Mikha, Hoshea*) or elsewhere in *Amos*? In addition, who is Amos's audience? Throughout this sequence, we have assumed that he has the ear of the people who have at least witnessed the described devastation, if not the victims themselves. That seems to be a stretch (charitably) in this case; in the destruction of those cities, there is only one surviving witness of whom we hear, Avraham; the other person who tries witnessing it, Lot’s wife, becomes a symbol of that destruction herself. The use of the verb *hafakh* (overturn) is completely appropriate here and is not at all surprising, as it used both in the description of the event (ibid. vv. 25, 28) and in its evocation in the covenant at the plains of Moav (*Devarim* 29:22).

Both the second and third issues are broader in scope.

These oracles are all presented in the first and second person — i.e. God is speaking about what He has done to the people and addressing his victims directly. Our rebuke begins no differently: “*Hafakhti vakhem,”* "I have overturned you." Abruptly, the reference of the destruction of Sedom and Amora is placed in the third person, “*Ke-mapeikhat Elokim et Sedom ve-et Amora*,” “As God did overturn Sedom and Amora." The person switches back, almost immediately: "And you were as a brand plucked from the fire, yet you did not return to Me." Why the switch in person? Wouldn't it have been more seamless for the text to state the following: *Hafakhti vakhem* ***ke-hofkhi*** *et Sedom ve-et Amora,* I overturned you **as I overturned** Sedom and Amora?

Finally, the nearly automatic inclusion of Amora along with Sedom, dating back to the original story of their destruction in *Bereishit*, warrants our attention. When is Sedom just "Sedom" and when is it "Sedom and Amora"? When is it the Jordan Plain, and when is it five small city-states (four of whom are destroyed, as Lot’s prayer saves Tzo’ar)?

Due to space limitations, we will focus our attention on the first and third issues. We will address the rhetorical phenomenon of God's word vacillating between first and third person in prophetic speeches in a later *shiur*.

Of the two questions remaining, we will address them in reverse order. The rationale for this is, simply put, that we must determine when a mention of "Sedom" implies the story of the destruction, or of the sinfulness of the people, or of their role in the war recorded in *Bereishit* 14 (“the four kings against the five kings"). This will be clarified in our response to the third question; after that, we can address the specific event of the destruction of the "cities of the Plain" and how that story is read and used in later biblical texts.

**SEDOM, AMORA AND THE "CITIES OF THE PLAIN" IN *TANAKH***

**PART 1: SURVEY OF THE RELEVANT TEXTS**

The city of Sedom is mentioned 39 times in *Tanakh*. Twenty-one of these are, not surprisingly, in *Bereishit*. Of these, Amora is exclusively mentioned with Sedom six times and it is mentioned along with the other neighboring city-states three times. The first of these inclusive lists is in the first mention of either town, in the description of the postdiluvian settlement by the descendants of Cham (specifically Kena’an):

And the border of the Kena’ani was from Tzidon, as you go toward Gerar, to Aza; as you go toward Sedom and Amora and Adma and Tzevoyim, to Lasha. (*Bereishit* 10:19)

Twice more, Sedom is mentioned with its neighboring cities – both of these in the context of the rebellion against the empiric coalition of the Mesopotamian kings (ibid. 14:2, 8). It is prudent to note that consistently, whether in the context of the cities of the Plain or just paired with Amora, Sedom is always mentioned first. We will return to this point below.

This listing of Sedom as part of a larger regional context ceases here; in every other mention throughout *Tanakh*, Sedom is either mentioned in isolation or with Amora.

In the story of Lot's settlement, Sedom is mentioned on its own when describing **where** he settled (13:12) and observing that the people of the town are grievous sinners (13:13); yet, when he is first attracted to the place, the text notes that at the time it looks lush "like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt" and notes that this is before God "destroyed Sedom and Amora" (13:10). At this point, the evil is associated with Sedom alone, but the destruction includes Amora.

In the lead-up to the destruction (Avraham's escorting his visitors towards Sedom, God’s confiding in Avraham regarding the cries emanating from the city and Avraham's negotiations on behalf of the city), Sedom is mentioned four times. In three of these instances, Sedom is mentioned alone — when Avraham's visitors look down at the city (18:16), and when they move away from Avraham, they walk "towards Sedom" (18:22). Most critically, at every point in the negotiations between God and Avraham, only Sedom is referenced — once explicitly (18:26) and several times as "the city" or "there". Only once in this segment is Amora mentioned, in 18:20, when God turns to Avraham (almost inviting him to beseech Him on their behalf), He states that "the cry of Sedom and Amora is great and their sin is very weighty." This is surprising, as mentioned; when we first hear of Lot's choice to move there, it is Sedom alone that is identified as being made up of people who are "evil and sinners exceedingly to God" (13:13).

In describing the events in Sedom, from the arrival of the "agents of destruction" to Lot's hasty retreat, the city is mentioned thrice and always on its own. As we would expect, the emissaries arrive at a specific place, Lot is standing at the gate of a specific place and the citizens of a particular place surround the house, demanding that the visitors be sent out to them. When describing the destruction of the city, from a bird's-eye view, both Sedom and Amora are invoked, but not as exclusively as elsewhere:

Then the Lord caused to rain upon Sedom and upon Amora brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overturned those cities, and all the plain…

And [Avraham] looked out toward Sedom and Amora, and toward all the land of the Plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace. 

And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain… (19:24-29)

The inclusion of "the cities of the Plain" is understandable, as that is, truly, the scope of the destruction; why, however, is Amora singularly mentioned along with Sedom while the other cities are lumped together?

The issue comes into sharper relief when we examine the references to these cities in later books of *Tanakh*.

Sedom appears twice more in the Torah, in Moshe's farewell speech (*Devarim*). When the people are re-covenanted in the plains of Moav, the punishment promised for betrayal of the pact is utter destruction:

And the generation to come, your children that shall rise up after you, and the foreigner that shall come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the sicknesses wherewith the Lord has made it sick; and that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and a burning, that it is not sown, nor bears, nor any grass grows therein, like the overturning of Sedom and Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, which the Lord overturned in His anger, and in His wrath. (*Devarim* 29:21-22)

Here, the range of the destruction is more detailed than in *Bereishit*, and two of the other cities of the plain are identified by name.

The sinfulness of Sedom as well as its destruction are completely ignored throughout the narrative portion of *Nevi’im (Yehoshua-Shoftim-Shemuel-Melakhim*); the earliest post-Deuteronomic mention may be ours (*Amos*) or in the opening speech of his contemporary, Yeshayahu. In what becomes the source of a famous rabbinic adage and piece of advice, the citizens of Yerushalayim respond to Yeshayahu's rebuke by invoking Sedom and Amora:

*Lulei Hashem Tzevakot hotir lanu sarid ki-mat, ki-Sdom hayinu la-Amora daminu.*

Except the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have been as Sedom, we would have been like Amora.

Yeshayahu's response in this dialogue (whether real or feigned — see our earlier discussions about feigned dialogues in the prophetic canon) is telling:

*Shimu devar Hashem ketzinei Sedom; ha'azinu torat Elokeinu am Amora.*

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sedom;

Give ear to the law of our God, you people of Amora.

This ironic and pointed response gives rise to R. Shimon b. Lakish's advice, buttressed by R. Yosef, citing our verses:

A person should never open up his mouth to Satan (i.e. refer to himself in a demeaning manner, giving his adversary an opening to use that same sobriquet against him). (BT *Berakhot* 19a, ibid. 60a; *Ketubot* 8b).

What does Yeshayahu intend to convey here, putting these words into the mouths of his audience? The conventional reading is that the people feel as if they are at the precipice of utter destruction. Were it not for God's saving a remnant, they would be as completely wiped off the face of the earth as those infamous cities. This reading is the most reasonable within the context of its own verse, yet Yeshayahu's response seems to point us in a different direction. Why call them "*ketzinei Sedom”* and “*am Amora*" (which is best translated, respectively, as "officers of Sedom” and “army of Amora")?

This is the earliest mention (if we date it before *Amos*) of Sedom and Amora being used in an analogy and compared to Yerushalayim. Why? Sedom is well-known as a city once lush, rich and fruitful, but now "scorched earth" (perhaps the first example of this in history). In addition, however, Sedom is also infamous for its sinfulness, the cause of that terrible destruction. When a city is compared to Sedom, is it in anticipation of devastation or in description of its heinous crimes?

I would like to propose a different take on the plaint put in the mouth of the people: "We would be considered as *guilty* as Sedom, cast as similar *in culpability* as Amora." This works easily with the prophet's rejoinder and much more easily supports R. Shimon b. Lakish's adage. This interpretation is further buttressed by the next appearance of Sedom in *Yeshayahu*.

In Chapter 3, the people of Yerushalayim are described in most disparaging terms:

For Yerushalayim is ruined, and Yehuda is fallen; because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord, to provoke the eyes of His glory.

The prophet then lays out the full extent of their rebelliousness:

The show of their countenance does witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sedom, they do not hide it. Woe unto their soul! for they have wrought evil unto themselves. (*Yeshayahu* 3:8-9)

It is as if the people are stating explicitly that they are as evil as the people of Sedom.

Sedom appears once more in *Yeshayahu* of Yerushalayim (it isn't mentioned at all in the post-exilic chapters of Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah). At the beginning (13:19) of Yeshayahu's speeches against the nations (chapters 13-24), he addresses Babylonia:

And Bavel, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the pride of the Kasdim, shall be *ke-mapeikhat Elokim et Sedom ve-et Amora* (as when God overturned Sedom and Amora).

Here, without a doubt, the prophet is invoking the destruction (and not the moral bankruptcy) of the cities of the Plain. As we saw in *Bereishit* and *Devarim*, the operative verb describing the impact of the heavenly fire and brimstone is *hafakh* (overturn). Note that the key phrase here (presented in the original as well as translation) is exactly the same as used in *Amos*'s rebuke, “*ke-mapeikhat Elokim et Sedom ve-et Amora*.”

*Amos*, in our passage, is the only other occurrence of Sedom (or Sedom plus) until the end of the First Commonwealth. It is most telling that in the context of the anticipated or just-experienced destruction of Yehuda (in *Tzefanya*, *Yirmeyahu* and *Yechezkel* and of course *Eikha*), Sedom reappears.

Chronological fidelity requires us to address *Tzefanya* first. In his rebuke against the nations (Chapter 2), when he addresses the neighboring Ammon and Moav and their blasphemy against God, he prophesizes that:

*Ki Moav ki-Sdom tihyeh, u-vnei Ammon ka-Amora*

That Moav will be like Sedom, and the children of Ammon like Amora (2:9)

This sentiment is echoed in two passages towards the end of *Yirmeyahu*. In his prophecy against Edom he invokes the destruction of Sedom and Amora:

As in the overturning of Sedom and Amora and the neighboring cities thereof, says the Lord, no man shall abide there, neither shall any son of man dwell therein. (49:18)

In his words "against Bavel", he predicts desolation:

As when God overturned Sedom and Amora and the neighboring cities thereof, says the Lord; so shall no man abide there, neither shall any son of man dwell therein. (50:40)

Note that in both cases, he again uses the verb *hafakh*, the latter quote using the same exact phrase as ours and as that found in *Yeshayahu* 13. This is another example of a phenomenon that we've already pointed out: prophets borrowing phrases from their predecessors. As we've pointed out several times in this series, this is particularly pronounced in *Yirmeyahu*’s use of *Amos*'s language and imagery.

So far, we've found that the prophets either prop up Sedom (and Amora) as the archetype of a sinful society or use their destruction as an illustration of utter devastation. We will find a unique usage in the prophecy of Yechezkel.

SEDOM AND "HER DAUGHTERS" IN *YECHEZKEL*

Chapter 16 of *Yechezkel* comprises one of the most powerful, graphic and terrifying prophecies against Yisrael. In "informing Yerushalayim of her abominations" (v. 1), the prophet begins by gently recalling God's protective love over this young maid, born in Egypt as a virtual orphan with no one to care for her, taking her under His protective wing and ultimately taking her as a wife — and her consistent infidelities form the core of this difficult chapter. Towards the end of the chapter, he invokes the image of Sedom:

Behold, everyone that uses proverbs will use this proverb against you, saying: As the mother, so her daughter. You are your mother's daughter, that loathes her husband and her children; and you are the sister of your sisters, who loathed their husbands and their children; your mother was a Chittit, and your father an Emori. And your elder sister is Shomeron, that dwells at your left hand, she and her daughters; and your younger sister, that dwells at your right hand, is **Sedom and her daughters**. Yet you have not walked in their ways, nor done after their abominations; but in a very little while you did deal more corruptly than they in all your ways.

As I live, says the Lord God, **Sedom your sister** did not do, **she nor her daughters**, as you had done, you and your daughters. Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister **Sedom**: pride, fulness of bread, and careless ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before Me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. Neither had Shomeron committed even half of your sins; but you have multiplied your abominations more than they and have justified your sisters by all your abominations which you have done.

You also, bear your own shame, in that you have given judgment for your sisters; through your sins that you have committed more abominable than they, they are more righteous than you; indeed, you should be also confounded, and bear your shame, in that you have justified your sisters. And I will turn their captivity, **the captivity of Sedom and her daughters,** and the captivity of Shomeron and her daughters, and the captivity of your captives in their midst; that you may bear your own shame and may be ashamed because of all that you have done, in that you are a comfort unto them.

And your sisters, **Sedom and her daughters**, shall return to their former estate, and Shomeron and her daughters shall return to their former estate, and you and your daughters shall return to your former estate. **For your sister Sedom was not mentioned by your mouth in the day of your pride**; before your wickedness was uncovered, as at the time of the taunt of the daughters of Aram, and of all that are round about her, the daughters of the Pelishtim, that have you in disdain round about. You have borne your lewdness and your abominations, says the Lord. (16:44-58)

A full treatment of this passage properly belongs to a study of *Yechezkel*; nonetheless, this lengthy passage may shed light on the variegated mentions of Sedom throughout *Tanakh* that we have surveyed.

Note that in this text, Sedom alone is named; no Amora, no "cities of the Plain," no "Adma and Tzevoyim" are listed here. However, Sedom is not always listed on her own here. Of the six references to Sedom, four of them add "and her daughters." What are the "daughters" of Sedom? Simply put — and this is borne out in texts throughout *Tanakh*, from *Bamidbar* 21 through the latter part of *Yehoshua* and on — the "daughters" of a city are the suburbs that have some sort of dependent relationship towards the main (typically fortressed) city. "Sedom and her daughters" describes a geographic plane where smaller villages are under the influence of Sedom. Note that the added "daughters" appear both in the context of the sin as well as the consequence (destruction) and promised future (amazingly, a return to her former "estate"). Still, the detailed identification of the sin isolates Sedom (without "her daughters") and points to her wealth, juxtaposed with her unwillingness to help the needy, as the core crime of which she stands accused.

**PART 2: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Before proposing a solution, I'd like to pose a question that takes us back to the second mention of Sedom in *Bereishit*. When Lot chooses to move to this "garden of the Lord," we are immediately informed that the people of Sedom are exceedingly sinful; yet the city remains safe (until their rebellion and war against the empires of the east). Their destruction happens at least 14 years after that war (compare *Bereishit* 16:16 with 18:10) and, Lot has already been living there for a while. Why does Sedom's fate only get investigated and then sealed decades later?

When we first hear of God's decision to punish Sedom, we are told that:

The cry of Sedom **and Amora** is great. (18:20)

Still, in Avraham's negotiations, only Sedom (by name, and then "the city") is mentioned and the search for innocent people (*tzaddikim)* only takes place there, in Sedom.

I'd like to propose that Sedom's sins of haughtiness and ignoring the plight of its poor (as outlined by Yechezkel) are, for many years, a unique characteristic of that town alone, perhaps the biggest city in the area. Once this attitude and these mores spread to neighboring cities, such that Amora is also identified as adopting this heartlessness, their fate is sealed. In other words, it is the **contagion** of immorality and a lack of ethics that incurs God's wrath to the point of destruction.

As such, when the "cry of Sedom **and Amora**" come before God, the end is nigh. The destruction of the "cities of the Plain" are what we might consider "collateral damage" — on two planes. First of all, destruction does sweep up those around it, but collateral damage is not just measured in terms of effect, but also cause. If the haughtiness of Sedom is catching on and spreading, it is inevitable that it will "sweep the valley" and infect all of the neighboring towns. The investigation must take place at the core (hence, the search for 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 and then 10 innocents in Sedom alone).

Hence, any mentions of Sedom alone speak either to events that take place there (such as the arrival and treatment of Lot's guests) or to the core sin and its source. Mentions of Sedom and Amora reference the guilt which is now spreading and has to be stopped; any mention of the other cities, either by name or under the umbrella of "the cities of the Plain" reference the destruction itself. Looking back at our survey above bears this out, with a few seeming exceptions (*Yeshayahu* 13, *Yirmeyahu* 49 and 50, *Tzefanya* 2, and our mention in *Amos* 4). In all of those, the destruction is associated with Sedom and Amora, without mention of the other cities.

I'd like to suggest that these mentions are all deliberately crafted, perhaps designed by our own Amos and then borrowed by later prophets. The destruction of the entire area is testimony to God's power, to how a beautiful area can become devastated. However, we never hear of sinful behavior on the part of the citizens of Adma and Tzevoyim (or Tzoar); instead, they are destroyed because of the likelihood that the already-spreading immorality would infect them as well. Mentions of the destruction of Sedom and Amora (alone) are directly the archetype of immorality and its consequences. When the prophet threatens Ammon, Moav, Edom and Bavel with a fate similar to Sedom and Amora, this is a not-so-subtle accusation against those nations; they stand to be destroyed as immoral societies, not as vulnerable neighbors.

It is telling that from Yeshayahu on, this type of phrasing is used prophetically against our enemies, yet it starts (if *Amos* predates *Yeshayahu*) with such a statement against Yisrael itself! Compare this usage against Shomeron with *Yechezkel*'s mention of Yerushalayim’s "sisters," Sedom and Shomeron.

11a2: SURVIVAL, NARROWLY AND BARELY

*Vatihyu ke-ud mutzal mei-eish*

And you were as a brand plucked out of the fire

This pointed comment directs our attention to a later verse in *Zekharya*, identifying the *kohen gadol* of the rebuilding (Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak) as a "brand plucked from the fire" (*Zekharya* 3:2); this *dis legomenon* (phrase appearing only twice in the canon) is clearly borrowed by Zekharya from Amos. The use by the former is ironic, as Amos intends to identify the audience that has survived these harrowing catastrophes as something akin to Lot, whose salvation is not by his own merit (see *Bereishit* 19:29); Zekharya turns this around and describes the *kohen gadol* in precious terms and as a defense against the accusations of the prosecutorial angel (Satan).

Nonetheless, in our context, those who remain and have survived have nothing to be proud of and no merits upon which to rest; they are living testimony to the destruction that their immorality has wrought.

11b: THE RETURN THAT (STILL AND ALL) NEVER HAPPENED

*Ve-lo shavtem eilai ne'um Hashem*

And you have (still) not returned to Me, says Hashem

This is the common refrain of all of these rebukes.

In the next *shiur*, we will take a panoramic view of the series of six verses with their five rebukes, suggesting a rationale and message behind the structure and sequence of their presentation.

**For Further Study:**

Nachman Levine, “Sarah/Sodom: Birth, Destruction, and Synchronic Transaction,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31(2) (2006), pp. 131–146.