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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #39:**

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

In the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-38-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we completed 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 unto Me, says the Lord." We directed most of our attention to the role that the destruction of Sedom and Amora (and “the cities of the Plain") play throughout *Tanakh*.

Now that we have completed our textual analysis of these six verses, we will devote this *shiur* to a broader view of the entire section, looking at the structure and sequence in order to discern the underlying message of this prophetic rebuke.

THE SEQUENCE

The divine attacks are, in order, famine, drought, grain disease, pestilence and destruction. As pointed out through the *shiurim*, these are all events that the people experience; yet we must account for hyperbole, at least in the case of the last one (as discussed in the last *shiur*). Note that the first two of these, famine and drought, are prefaced with the introductory *“Ve-gam ani/ anokhi,”* which we explained as an introduction of a measure of poetic justice (*midda ke-neged midda)*. The first three of these — famine, drought and grain disease — are all Masoretically grouped in one *parasha* (as part of the passage that precedes them), whereas the final two — pestilence and destruction — have their own paragraph. Graphic clues, therefore, hint to several layers of division within these five rebukes.

Although each rebuke stands on its own, the first two comprise some sort of a unit; we’ll call it the “*gam* unit”. The first three also comprise a (broader) unit, which we will dub the “bread-and-water unit”.

To clarify, the first plague, famine, is described as *choser lechem*. Even though *lechem* also takes on the broader meaning of “food” in *Tanakh*, it often is limited to “bread;” hence, the famine is most acutely felt in the area of grain production and consumption. The second plague focuses exclusively on water, both rain for agriculture as well as potable water. The attacks on the fields in the third rebuke, grain disease as well as swarming locusts, seem to raise the stakes in the area of agronomic sustenance. We might even consider the *ve-gam* introduction to carry over to this third attack, as it concludes that *parasha*.

The common feature here is that in spite of the potential allusions to meta-historic events (e.g. the plagues of Egypt), the terminology used is unprecedented and does not directly associate with a divine retribution with which the people would have familiarity. As it were, these rebukes stand on their own, creating their own context.

The final two cataclysms, on the other hand, are bound up explicitly with significant events in the ancient past, events with which the audience would undoubtedly have familiarity. We can safely assume that the Shomeroni audience was familiar with the Exodus narrative (note how Amos had already used it in his oracle against Yisrael at 2:10) and the associated plagues. The story of the destruction of Sedom and Amora, as demonstrated in last week's *shiur*, is well-known throughout the period and is used by Amos's contemporaries (Yeshayahu) and subsequent prophets (Yirmeyahu) as an example of utter destruction.

The sequence of attacks presented here moves from the more mundane to the meta-historic and epic catastrophes. We have no way of knowing if this is the order in which they take place, if they overlap each other, or if they have all taken place in the proximate past. In other words, regardless of what has happened and in what order, the prophet, for his own rhetorical purposes, presents them in this order, moving from the "regular" and relatively light to the unusual and more serious, culminating with the legendary and devastating.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

We have looked at the five attacks sequentially, yet the framing and presentation also speak to an internal structure driven by rhetorical and exhortative aims.[[1]](#footnote-1)

First of all, the scope of the attacks is presented chiastically:

1. Famine in "all of your cities"
2. Drought in "two or three cities"
3. Pestilence and the sword in "your camp"
4. Complete destruction (such that the survivors are a "brand plucked from the fire")

The information provided is also arranged as a chiasmus:

1. Result of the attack (famine)
2. The attack (drought) and its consequences (migration etc.)
3. The attack (locusts)
4. The attack (pestilence and the sword) and its consequences (the stench of the camp)
5. Result of the attack (devastation)

In the first and final attacks, the mechanism of the attack isn't presented (unlike, for instance, the "original" destruction of Sedom, in which we are told about the brimstone and fire descending from the heavens), but only the results: hunger and destruction. In the second and fourth rebukes, we are informed both about the vehicle of destruction (drought, pestilence/ the sword) and the results (having to migrate from drought-stricken city to rain-blessed city, the stench from the camp). In the middle rebuke, sitting at the fulcrum of the structure, we are only told about the attack (locusts) and are left to imagine (or, for the present audience, painfully remember) the awful impact of the plague on their economy, agriculture and lives.

One further structural observation should be made here.[[2]](#footnote-2) These attacks vacillate in their description between the direct impact on the people (the obvious target) and their impact on its environs. The first attack describes its effect on man ("cleanness of teeth"), then on the city ("I will cause it to rain on one city…"), then on the field ("one field will get rain"), back to man ("two or three cities will migrate to one city to drink water but will not be satisfied") the earth (grain-plague), back to man again (pestilence and the sword), the land ("I have overturned you like Sedom and Amora") and, finally, back to man ("And you were as a brand plucked from the fire").

We may demonstrate this schematically as follows:

1. Man
2. City
3. Field
4. Man
5. Field
6. Man
7. City
8. Man

ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE

If we had only the linear development of the attacks, moving from mundane and relatively "survivable" to epic and total, we would see each member of the sequence on its own terms. Much as we developed here in the past *shiurim*, each attack would be perceived, both in reaction to the event and in response to Amos's recounting, in modular form. In other words, although there would be a series of divine punishments, each would be seen as an independent punishment, rising in severity with the nation's refusal to respond appropriately by repenting.

The various chiastic features, however, serve to intensify the relationship between the five modules and present them as a matrix of sorts, such that the first and last are related via the rhetoric of presentation; just the consequences of the attack are listed, without the vehicle, as well as the scope, which is total. The second and penultimate are similarly associated, by indicating both vehicle and result and the focus on a smaller "field of devastation." The plagues of famine, drought, pestilence/ sword and bare survival are linked by their refocusing on the direct impact on man.

I'd like to propose that the purpose of this multi-layered interlocking rhetoric, punctuated by the epistrophe refrain *“Ve-lo shavtem adai*” takes us back to the opening word of the series. In the opening *shiur* on this five-fold rebuke, I suggested that the introductory *ve-gam* is intended to highlight that the divine plagues are serving poetic justice, *midda ke-neged midda*.

If we were to be satisfied with reading the series in a linear fashion, then only the first two attacks would be understood that way; the audience in Shomeron might be self-satisfactorily muting their own inner voices by seeing the other punishments as divine anger without cause or as a sign of God's abandonment of His people. In other words, they would understand the famine and drought as being direct punishments for their unwillingness to feed the poor and to support the needy; indeed, the disadvantaged have been abused and exploited, as detailed in Chapter 2. However, they would then understand the grain and field attacks, the locusts, the attacks on the army and finally the complete devastation as signs of rejection or anger, but not as relating directly and pointedly to their own behavior. This intricate and elegant rhetorical structure ties all five punishments together such that they would see the whole series in a different light and must interpret each event as speaking to their own behavior.

PLAGUE #1: HUNGER

And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities and want of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned unto Me, says the Lord.

The description of the abuse of the underclass in the rebuke against Yisrael (above, Chapter 2) makes it clear that one of the core sins that Amos intends to address — and he does so repeatedly — is the fundamental lack of concern for fellow citizens and an unwillingness on the part of the "haves" to empower or even support the "have-nots". At the most elemental level (sustenance) the people have been attacked (*ve-gam*) in response to their unwillingness to feed the hungry, so God makes them hungry and doesn't feed them.

PLAGUE #2: DROUGHT

And I also have withheld the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest; and I caused it to rain upon one city and caused it not to rain upon another city; one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered to one city to drink water and were not satisfied; yet you have not returned unto Me, says the Lord.

As described in *Devarim* 11, the core difference between the Israelites’ former lives in Egypt and their new lives in the Land is focused on water:

For the land, which you enter in order to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from where you came out, where you did sow your seed, **and did water it with your foot**, as a garden of herbs; but the land, which you enter in order to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, **and drinks water as the rain of heaven comes down**; a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:10-12)

The relationship with God is constant and dependent in the Land in the most immediate and vital fashion, as water, the resource without which no civilization can endure, is fully dependent on God. Drought, especially in the Land, is always perceived as divine disapproval and is the central motivation for public fasting and prayer (see *Mishna Ta’anit*, chapters 1-3). In our case, however, it carries a more pointed and specific message. As the people refused to give basic sustenance to the poor, that selfsame sustenance is taken from them; and as they sat in their palaces, "reclining next to every altar" (above 2:11), now they must migrate, looking for water, as nomads — and there won't be enough to slake the thirst of all of these wandering souls.

PLAGUE #3: GRAIN AND FIELD DISEASE

I have smitten you with blasting and mildew; the multitude of your gardens and your vineyards and your fig-trees and your olive-trees the locust has devoured; yet you have not returned unto Me, says the Lord.

The great blessing of the Land, of agricultural bounty and of the "grain, wine and oil", of the "flowing milk and honey" are all predicated on the people’s keeping to the moral high road, as delineated in *Vayikra* 26 (and, more devastatingly, in *Devarim* 28). Specific attacks against the crops are both symbolic, per the above-cited threats, as well as actively destructive. Not only does this increase the famine and make those few rains that fall to be of little use, but the economic infrastructure upon which the entire corrupt society rests is undermined.

Again, if we read all of these attacks in the light of *ve-gam,* as directed and poetic justice, we understand that again, the unwillingness of Amos's audience to feed the poor has come back to them sevenfold.

PLAGUE #4: PESTILENCE AND THE SWORD

I have sent among you the pestilence in the way of Egypt; your young men have I slain with the sword and have carried away your horses; and I have made the stench of your camp to come up even into your nostrils; yet you have not returned unto Me, says the Lord.

The Exodus carried with it an implicit danger: that those who had been enslaved for several (two?) generations would, when opportunity presented itself, turn into slave-owners and instead of identifying with the isolation, humiliation and rootlessness of the slave class, would grab the chance to "finally be on top" and act as merciless masters. Perhaps this is why the first law given in *Parashat Mishpatim* is about proper treatment of a fellow Hebrew who has been forced to sell himself as a servant.

The Shomeroni kingdom and elite, as depicted above in Chapter 2, have forgotten that core lesson and have enslaved their fellows, at least figuratively. If it is not outright slavery that they impose on the common folk, then the elites have certainly been encouraging and enabling demotion to a lower class, which their behavior (in and out of court) has sustained. As such, the plague of *dever*, so reminiscent of the plagues against Egypt, is most telling. When we add the context of "the road to Egypt" and "your horses" (an Egyptian trope), this is enough to underscore the message that they have turned their backs on the Exodus, both in returning to Egypt (see *Devarim* 17, *Shemot* 14) and in arrogating the position of "taskmaster" over their fellows.

PLAGUE #5: "AS SEDOM AND AMORA"

I have overturned some of you, as God overturned Sedom and Amora, and you were as a brand plucked from the fire; yet you have not returned unto Me, says the Lord.

As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the mention of Sedom and Amora brings us not only (or chiefly) to **what happened to them** but, more critically, to **what they did to deserve it.** As Yechezkel points out (16:49), the sin of Sedom was in its refusal to share its wealth with the poor. God had blessed Sedom with "plenty of food" (*sivat lechem)* yet "they did not support the hand of the poor and destitute." Once we see the recent cataclysm as reminiscent of the destruction of Sedom and Amora, armed with the awareness that this, too, is a case of divine poetic justice, intended to teach, to reach and to inspire to repentance, we should see the message clearly.

Nonetheless, “*ve-lo shavtem adai, ne’um Hashem*.”

In the next *shiur*, we will study the final two verses of Chapter 4 with an eye to their impact as a possible follow-up to this series of rebukes.

1. See Meir Weiss, *Sefer Amos* (Jerusalem: 1992), Vol. 1, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Weiss, loc. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)