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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

***Shiur* #40**

**The Prophecies of Amos**

**The Hearken Sequence:**

**Crescendo and Coda**

In the past few *shiurim*, we have studied the rebukes that we dubbed "the hearken sequence" as they are introduced with the word *“Shimu*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In the sequence, five different disasters, each worse than the one before, are presented as having happened to the people. All of them are wrought by God with an aim to inspire/ frighten the people into repentance — to no avail. Even a catastrophe of the magnitude of "the overthrow of Sedom and Amora" still doesn’t move them! Again and again, we hear, *“Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne'um Hashem,”* “Yet (with all of this), you did not return to Me, says God.”

In the [last *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-39-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), having analyzed the text in detail, we took a broader view of the five rebukes and their sequencing as well as their structure, discerning a spiraling message of divine frustration with the obstinate and stiff-necked people of Shomeron.

The unit and chapter conclude with a “consequence,” introduced as such with the causal *lakhein* (therefore), which leads to a prophetic description of God's response to the people's unwillingness to repent. In this *shiur* and the next, we will analyze the text of this coda with an eye to understanding the particular wording and the poetic propriety of its usage here.

The coda is more than that; it is a frightening yet majestic crescendo in two verses. These verses are majestic in their hymnal praise of God, but frightening because the more that God is exalted, His awe increases and those who stand to be punished by Him ought, by rights, to be petrified. It isn't only the explicit praise which exalts and frightens; as is often the case with our literary prophets, the brilliance of the rhetoric lies as much in what is omitted as in what is stated. The empty beats between the notes sing their own song and carry their own weight, as we will discover.

THE TEXT: VERSE 12

This verse is elusive and appears to be verbose without aim, but appearances are most deceiving.

*Lakhein*

Therefore

This word, used two hundred times in the canon, is (nearly) always part of dialogue; it is used only once in narrative (*I Shemuel* 27:6 in noting why Tziklag is a longstanding possession of the Judean kings). Although the word is inherently neutral, it usually connotes a consequence — sometimes a reward,[[2]](#footnote-2) more often than not a punishment.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although usually spoken in God's name, sometimes it is a purely human expression of threat.[[4]](#footnote-4) In all cases, human or divine, reward or retribution, it represents a causal connection. To wit, because of the aforementioned, **therefore** the following will happen (or I will do the following to you/ for you, etc.).

Our instance fits the mold of the classic use. Once the prophet has painfully recounted the five scourges which did not succeed in inspiring the people to return to God, they are about to be informed of the consequential divine response. It is worth noting that Amos uses *lakhein* seven times (we've already seen it above, at 3:11), and each time it introduces a punishment. It may be further indication of the great debt owed by Yirmeyahu to Amos that the former uses the word fifty-five times (more than a quarter of the instances in the canon); perhaps, as we've seen in several other instances, he is utilizing the rhetorical flairs and nuances of his predecessor from Tekoa.

*Ko e'eseh lekha Yisrael*

Thus will I do unto you, O Yisrael

Some have interpreted the opening *ko*, along with the *zot* in the next clause, as indicative of gestures, that the prophet is gesticulating to emphasize his point.[[5]](#footnote-5) Others suggest that *ko* is a shortened form of the oath-formula “*Ko ya’aseh ve-kho yosif.”*[[6]](#footnote-6) A third suggestion posits that the word *ko* (thus) is pointed and means that God will inflict just these same punishments on you as have already been described.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Each of these suggestions has some merit, but each has its own weaknesses as well.

Although we are charmed to picture the prophet gesturing as he says "thus" and "this", it doesn't fit our general method of reading prophetic rhetoric. Although there is undoubtedly some sort of theatrical component to prophetic declarations, at least in some cases (especially in some of the more unusual scenes involving Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel, such as the breaking of the yoke on Yirmeyahu’s neck), they are invariably described or more than implicit in the text.

There is a reason for this: although the prophecy *in situ* is intended to have an effect on the contemporary and present audience, the inclusion of a specific passage in the canon indicates that it has a discernible and meaningful message for a later readership. To quote *Chazal*, “A prophecy that was needed for generations was written (i.e. canonized); if not needed for generations, it was not written” (BT *Megilla* 14a).

Although the oath-formula *“Ko ya’aseh… ve-kho yosif”* is well-attested in *Tanakh* and does take on several varied forms (often at the point of the marked ellipsis), it is a jump to associate it with the far shorter and distinct *“Ko e'eseh*.” The oath-formula is always presented in the name of God; even when stated as a prophecy in God's Name, He is always referenced in the third person. “*Ko e'eseh,”* "Thus ***I*** will do" does not fit this model. Nonetheless, there is a component of biblical oath-formula that is utilized in this passage, which we will discuss at the end of our analysis of these two verses.

To maintain that *ko* alludes to God’s punishing the people with the aforementioned attacks is the least likely of these proposals. These are not presented as theoretical punishments or as plagues that the people **witness**happening to others; they are catastrophes that the people themselves experience and from which they suffer. Nonetheless, the epistrophe “Yet you have not returned to Me” says it all; none of these work to inspire repentance and return. If so, what would be the point of using the same tactics? More drought, more grain-disease, etc. will not suddenly move the people's hearts, if they aren't moved the first time around. In addition, if the intent of the text is to subtly threaten a repeat of these plagues, we would expect the word *kein*, as in *“Ki khein e'eseh lakhem*,” which could be translated "I will do thusly (i.e. the same) to you." Still we would be much more comfortable with this interpretation, surprising as it is, if there were a clearer marker — for instance, if it were to say: *Ki khein e'eseh lakhem* ***sheinit***, Thus will I do to you **again**. Without a clear and explicit indication of intent to repeat these (futile) plagues, this reading is not compelling.

Within the context of this approach, we ought to note that R. Eliezer of Beaugency interprets the phrase as meaning that God will finish the destruction that He started. In other words, he is sympathetic to the interpretation outlined here, but resolves the problem of futility by turning it from a corrective measure (beforehand) to utter destruction. This is a clever approach, but it posits two things that are a bit difficult here. First of all, it assumes that the destruction "like the overturn of Sedom and Amora" of the fifth and final rebuke is actual but partial; there is no evidence in the text for this. In addition, it presumes that God has moved from punishment as a corrective measure to punishment as divine rage; this is also something which stands without evidence, at least in this text.

Of course, if we reject these creative approaches to the inscrutable phrase, we ought to provide an alternative which avoids or overcomes the deficiencies inherent in the others. We will do so below after completing the textual analysis of this verse.

One final note on this phrase. Although we have translated *e'eseh* as "I will do," both in this phrase and the next, there is room to read it as the pluperfect "I have done", which considerably alters the exegetical challenges of the verse. Now, instead of some foreboding message of doom, the prophet is simply summarizing the drastic events recounted in the preceding verses and then coming to a conclusion. This is how Andersen and Freedman[[8]](#footnote-8) read it, and they argue this based on Amos's sevenfold use of the word *zot*, which, in some cases, refers to past events or something present before the people:

[*Zot*] is never used [in Amos] as an adjective but always as the independent pronoun, so it stands alone. It has a specific theological sense: it always refers to something or, more specifically, to the thing that [God] has done, is doing, or will do, or has said, or has revealed in a vision.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In spite of their arguments, nearly all versions and translations (including the Targum, Septuagint and Vulgate) read *e'eseh* as future tense, "I will do." We will maintain this approach.

*Eikev ki zot e'eseh lakh*

Because I will do this unto you

Together with the previous clause, this statement seems circular and deliberately vague: What is the anticipated punishment? What is it that God is going to do to His obstinate and recalcitrant people?

One brief interjection is called for here. From the beginning of this installment, we have assumed that these two verses are threatening and foreboding for the people and have interpreted the words as such. We ought to note that this is, surprisingly, not a matter of complete consensus among the Rishonim. R. Avraham ibn Ezra (2nd commentary) informs us that "some interpret it negatively, some interpret it positively," and he goes on to present the "negative" (i.e. punitive) take on the verse. Later on (v. 13, s.v. *Ve-oseh)* he presents the positive, which is oriented towards driving the people to repent, rather than destroying them. He is, however, alone among traditional commentators. Moreover, he doesn't present it as his own take, but rather as "some interpret it positively."

The opening word *eikev*, appears a total of fifteen times in *Tanakh*; six in wisdom literature (*Tehillim* and *Mishlei*), five in narrative, and four times in oratory. Significantly, all nine of these last two sets are heard in God's voice or the voice of His prophet.

In *Bereishit*, there are two occurrences, both relating to Avraham's fealty to God and, *eikev* that loyalty, to the reward awaiting his progeny (22:18, 26:5). In *Bamidbar* 14:24, Kalev is singled out by God as gaining the reward of entering the Land and inheriting it *eikev* his having "a different spirit" and demonstrating his loyalty to God (against the other scouts). In *Shemuel*, David pronounces sentence on the wealthy neighbor of the poor man (in Natan's juridical parable) as, beyond the death penalty, having to pay fourfold *eikev* he had no compassion (*II Shemuel* 12:6). In Natan’s unraveling of the parable, he responds that David’s house will be plagued with the sword *eikev* his disgracing God.

All five of these promise either divine reward or divine punishment in response to either loyalty (Avraham, Kalev) or disloyalty (David).

The term shows up again as a pair (just as it did with Avraham and David) at a turning point in Moshe’s speech (*Devarim*). As Moshe moves from exhorting the people to a general and overwhelming commitment to God to a specific presentation of the law, he states that *eikev* the people obey God (“*vehaya eikev tishme’un”)* and are loyal, they will gain a great reward, including successful inheritance of the Land and prosperity there.[[10]](#footnote-10) At the end of that speech-segment, they are told that if they fail to maintain their loyalty to God, they will be punished and driven from the Land, “*eikev lo tishme’un*.”[[11]](#footnote-11) It is entirely plausible that Moshe is alluding to the blessings given to Avraham in his speech, using the matched *eikev* iterations.

The word appears only one other time in oratory, besides our instance. In *Yeshayahu* 5:23, we find:

*Matzdikei rasha* ***eikev*** *shochad*

Acquitting the wicked *eikev* bribery

*ve-tzidkat tzaddikim yasiru mimenu*

while removing the innocence of the blameless from him

In this case, the *eikev* consequence is not divine; rather, human corruptibility leads *eikev* to a miscarriage and perversion of justice.

The relatively rare use of *eikev* indicates that *Tanakh* uses it in a narrow sense with specific overtones. Starting with Avraham, it seems to reflect the rewards of loyalty and the consequences of treachery. Avraham is the paragon of fealty to God and he is the first to be rewarded *eikev* his staying true to the divine command. David, God’s eternal chosen one, is singled out for his disrupting all sorts of trust-relationships and, again, *eikev* appears in both his own words and, hoisted by his own petard, in the words of punishment uttered against him. The corrupt judges (whom we recognize well from our study of *Amos*) are entrusted with judgment, so accepting graft is an act of treachery against their constituents as well as against the God of justice; again *eikev* appears in tying their self-indulgent motivation to their betrayal.

This brings us back to our instance, where *eikev* is presumably associated with divine punishment, coming on the heels (pun very much intended; see Ramban at *Devarim* 7:12) of the people’s refusal to “self-correct.” As we noted in the last *shiur*, the five catastrophes which they experienced may be seen as manifestations of poetic justice (*midda ke-neged midda)*; the use of *eikev* here may convey two messages. Firstly, the people bring these disasters on themselves with their own unethical behavior. Secondly, perhaps on a more sublime level, the corruption which infects the upper echelons of society is not only the cause of injustice; it is also a betrayal of the national and institutional mission which is the raison d’être of the people and those institutions (specifically, the court).

The phrase “*zot e’eseh lakh”* is opaque and seemingly redundant. A simplistic and untutored translation of the verse until this point would leave us with: “Therefore, I will do this to you, because I will do this to you…” This murkiness leads to the multitude of distinct interpretations of the passage, some of which were presented above. If we aren’t immediately informed as to what the *ko* and *zot* mean, we are left hanging, waiting to hear the specifics of the punishment which the audience — both immediate as well as distant — certainly anticipates.

*Hikon likrat Elokekha Yisrael*

Prepare to meet your God, O Yisrael

Is this the long-awaited resolution to *ko* and *zot*? Quite possibly, this indicates that the ultimate reckoning is not found in brutal punishment, but in facing God directly, as it were, in battle. The clause may thus be read: “Prepare yourselves to come and do battle with God.” Most commentators, both medieval and modern, do read this passage as threatening; they are divided as to whether it is inherently frightening or allusively so. In other words, is it the very meeting with God that should inspire fear and a sense of dread at retribution? Or is it that God is coming to this meeting with yet another punishment — harsher than those before, or more severe in intensity due to the immediacy of His presence? Either read works with the text and its mood; neither is more compelling than the other.[[12]](#footnote-12)

THE WORDS BEHIND THE SILENCE

Verbal taboos are as old as human civilization. People avoid discussing intimate details of their lives, or mask private or distasteful subjects with euphemism; instead of "dying", we speak of someone’s "passing away" and the like.

A similar reticence to speak of matters explicitly is evident in the first passage in BT *Pesachim*, specifically as regards mentions of "night" or "darkness", such that "night" is called, euphemistically, "light".

This is also evident in textual emendations in *Tanakh*, where overly upsetting words or phrases are substituted with milder versions. The assumption is that the reader understands the depth of horror or depravity of the intended text, but his or her tender ears are protected by use of these *tikkunei soferim*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

There is, however, a more intense textual silence, not replaced with protective niceties, which inhabits biblical rhetoric: the oath-formula used in *Tanakh* often omits the consequence for breaking its terms.

For instance, when Lavan parts from Ya’akov, he states: "This rock-pile is testimony and this pillar will be a witness **if I do not pass**this rock-pile over to you…"[[14]](#footnote-14) He then invokes God, Who will judge between them if they violate the agreement; but he never states what the punishment will be for violation.

Similarly, in *I Shemuel* 3, after Shemuel received his inaugural prophecy, foretelling the fall of the House of Eli, the latter comes to him in the morning and compels him to reveal the prophecy. Eli utters an oath-formula, adjuring the lad to tell him everything, but never states what the consequences would be for failure to comply.

There are dozens of examples of this "protective silence" in *Tanakh*. The reason for omitting explicit mention of the consequences usually falls into one of two types. Either the listener is being protected from hearing a terrible and terrifying divine punishment, or the speaker leaves that to the imagination of the listener. The principle is something which great novelists, movie directors and other artists have long understood: the imagination is a far more powerful tool than any lexicon. The images that can — and inevitably will — be called up by someone under threat are significantly worse and more terrifying than anything that can be described.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This device is used liberally in *Tanakh*: the text is silent about Yitzhak's post-Akeida whereabouts in *Bereishit* 22, and it is similarly mute about Vashti's fate in *Ester* 2 (dead? sent to the harem? enslaved? exiled?).

I'd like to propose that this is also the rhetorical device used here by Amos. The *ko* and *zeh* are ominous and the audience waits, with bated breath, to hear what punishment awaits them. The silence which follows is deafening and, potentially, terrifying enough to scare them into reflection and, possibly, repentance. (Spoiler alert: it doesn't work.)

Instead of hearing the painful details, they are told to prepare to meet God. However, that meeting is in the dark, with neither preparation nor foreknowledge of what they are about to encounter in the Divine.

They might expect to be better informed about what awaits them after the next verse, but that hope is also dashed.

We will study the last verse in this series in the next *shiur,* contemplating what they do hear next — and the message implicit in Amos's words.

**For Further Study:**

# Yael Ziegler, “‘So Shall God Do...’: Variations of an Oath Formula and Its Literary Meaning,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126:1 (2007), pp. 59-81.

1. Once we complete our study of Chapter 4 (in the next *shiur*), we will embark on another *shimu* sequence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. *Bamidbar* 25:12: “Therefore, declare: behold, I am giving him my covenant of peace." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. ibid 20:12, *Shoftim* 10:13; and in prophetic rhetoric, *Yirmeyahu* 5:14, 7:32, 8:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. *Shoftim* 8:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shalom Paul, *Mikra Le-Yisrael: Yoel and Amos,* Am Oved (1994), p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *I Shemuel* 3:17 *inter alia.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar I*, Mossad Harav Kook (1992), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Francis L. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (1989), pp. 450-452. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. p. 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Devarim* 7:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 8:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Curiously, *Chazal* use this phrase — and it is adopted and extended by later decisors (Posekim) — in a prescriptive manner. For instance, the practice of the Babylonians to put on a belt before praying (BT *Shabbat* 9b-10a) is associated with this verse, as if to say, “when you are going to encounter God, a preparation on your part is appropriate.” This is not an unusual move on the part of the Sages, taking phrases from *Tanakh* out of their context and eisegetically reading norms into them. This is commonly referred to as *asmakhta.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, *inter alia*, I Shemuel 5:6, 9, 12 and, most notably, *II Melakhim* 18:27 (parallel at *Yeshayahu* 36:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Bereishit* 31:52. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hitchcock understood this well; note also Stephen King's paean to Shirley Jackson, in reference to her classic *The Haunting of Hill House*: "She never had to raise her voice." [↑](#footnote-ref-15)