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**

***Shiur* #41**

**The Prophecies of Amos**

**The Hearken Sequence:**

**Crescendo and Coda**

Now that we have surveyed the rebukes that we dubbed "the ‘Hearken’ sequence" and the ominous unspoken threat of divine reprisal which will ensue, we come to the crescendo and coda of this sequence, 4:13.

Some read verse 13 as a psalm or, to use Freedman and Andersen's title, "A Cosmic Hymn", wholly disjointed from the aforementioned rebukes and serving as a type of stop-gap in the middle of Amos's diatribes. We will take a decidedly different approach, interpreting this beautiful paean as both intrinsically linking to the content of the rebuke and confirming the implied punishment of the coda-verse which is sandwiched between those rebukes and this epilogue.

Let us begin with a brief recap.

The verses which make up the bulk of this chapter follow a call to "hearken" and 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 have been 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 hasn’t moved 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 previous *shiur*, we examined the epilogue of this sequence, filled with ominous and foreboding mystery, "revealing a handbreadth and covering two," leaving the substance of the impending punishment to the imagination of the audience. By never expressing, either explicitly or tacitly, what punishment God intends for the people, their imagination is left free to roam the darkest depths of fear and anxiety and to, we would hope, produce a vision scary enough to spur them to repent.

The final verse seems to veer away from the message and operate as a commercial interruption for God, as it were. However, a careful look between the ridges of texture of this elegant text reveals a completely perfect fit with the entire message and a sublimely appropriate crescendo to the mysterious epilogue which precedes it.

THE TEXT: VERSE 13

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

***Ki***

**Therefore**

This short popular preposition bears numerous translations, depending on context (and, in some cases, interpretive leanings). Although in modern Hebrew it is usually rendered "because" and indicates the cause of an aforementioned effect, this is not the case in biblical Hebrew. As Reish Lakish is quoted as saying,[[2]](#footnote-2) *ki* has four different meanings; (1) if, (2) perhaps, (3) rather and (4) because.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Most translations render *ki* here as "for" (while some entirely omit it) but that translation is a bit obscure as to its meaning. Is this the causal *de-ha* (Reish Lakish's last suggestion)? It doesn't seem to fit any of the others, but hardly seems to express causality. Paul[[4]](#footnote-4) suggests briefly that it is a "connecting word" that bridges the threat of verse 12 to the hymn of our verse.

Hakham[[5]](#footnote-5) offers two possible explanations. First he proposes that it connects to the opaque warning “*Hikon likrat Elokekha, Yisrael,” “*Prepare to encounter your God, Yisrael,” in the previous verse. Our hymnal verse will explain **why** that encounter demands preparation.[[6]](#footnote-6) Alternatively, he raises the possibility that the phrase *ki hinei* is a poetic opening to hymns of praise — such as the in popular Yom Kippur poem *“Ki hinei ka-chomer be-yad ha-yotzer,”* "Just as is the clay in the hands of the potter…"[[7]](#footnote-7)

I will make a different suggestion below.

***Hinei***

**Behold**

As pointed out above, some read this introductory word as connected to *ki,* and together they form an introduction to the hymn. If, however, *ki* stands alone (see the previous section), then *hinei* requires explanation.

The word *hinei* is usually translated as "behold" and almost always introduces something unexpected. Whether it is detailing the unusual sequential manifestations in Pharaoh’s dreams (e.g. “*Ve-hinei sheva parot,*" “Behold, seven cows,” *Bereishit* 41:3) or introducing a suitable substitute for Yitzhak atop Mount Moriya (*“Ve-hinei ayil,”* "Behold, a ram," ibid. 22:13), we come to expect the unexpected when seeing this word. What, however, is unusual or surprising about learning that God is the creator Who not only formed the mountains but continues to control the world on a daily and constant basis? Perhaps a different solution to *ki* will help us decipher the "surprise" of *hinei* here. We will explore this further below.

***Yotzer harim u-vorei ruach***

**He Who fashions mountains and creates the wind**

With these powerful words, Amos begins his praise of God. Why, we might ask, is there a hymn here at all; and why does that hymn include these specific descriptions of God? There is no mention of God's role in history, which is a common enough feature of praise throughout *Tanakh* — and the components of this praise are themselves somewhat surprising.

Let's begin with these first two phrases, which use a familiar yet uncommon pairing of verbs – *yotzer* (forms) and *borei* (creates). This pairing appears, in the same sequence, in only one other passage in *Tanakh* and, in a reverse sequence, in one other.[[8]](#footnote-8) The first is a well-known anti-dualist polemic:

***Yotzer*** *or* ***u-vorei*** *choshekh* ***oseh*** *shalom* ***u-vorei*** *ra, ani Hashem oseh kol eileh.*

He Who forms light and the creator of darkness, maker of peace and creator of evil — I, the Lord, do all of these (*Yeshayahu* 45:7)

The phrase with the inverted pattern appears in the same chapter:

*Ki kho amar Hashem,* ***borei*** *ha-shamayim hu ha-Elokim,* ***yotzer*** *ha-aretz ve-osah, hu khonenah, lo tohu* ***vera'ah****, la-shevet* ***yetzarah****, ani Hashem ve-ein od.*

For thus says the Lord, the creator of the heavens, He is the God, Who forms the land and makes it, He established it; He did not create it to be a wasteland, rather He formed it to be settled, I am the Lord and there is no other. (*Yeshayahu* 45:18)

The verb *bara* is used consistently to describe God's role in creation (beginning with *Bereishit* 1:1), but *yatzar* is rarely used. It seems to be borrowed from the world of artisanship, specifically the potter. Borrowing this term to reference creation of the world relies on seeing the earth as clay, a perfectly understandable metaphoric use. Yirmeyahu's visit to the potter (18:1-4 and the subsequent application ibid. v. 6) is a classic example of *yotzer* as "potter;" indeed, we have reason to suspect that Yirmeyahu builds his entire presentation there on Amos's use of *yotzer* to describe God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Still, why the emphasis on God as the one Who forms the mountains and Who creates the wind? Why are these two, hardly a matched pair, used to describe God here? The mountains are typically matched with the seas (see, *inter alia*, *Tehillim* 114), or if staying closer to home, with hills (*harim/ geva’ot,* e.g. *Yeshayahu* 54:10[[10]](#footnote-10)).

Among traditional commentators, these two "unmatched" descriptors are meant to define the range of God's control and power: not only does He create the firm, constant pillars of the world (mountains), but He also excites the occasional phenomena that are unseen and changing (wind).

Indeed, this is the approach taken by ibn Ezra. Paul[[11]](#footnote-11) recommends this view, pointing out the alliterative repetition of the letter *reish* in these four words: “*yotze****r*** *ha****r****im u-vo****r****ei* ***r****uach.”*

R. Eliezer of Beaugency sees the two as inextricably tied together: even though He created the mountains, He also created and directs the wind that has the potential to destroy those selfsame mountains.

Both of these approaches are surely impactful and should inspire awe and fear among the recalcitrant Shomeroni audience — but, again, why these specific examples?

***U-maggid le-adam ma seicho***

**And informs man of his words/ His words (?)**

As indicated by the question mark, the translation of this phrase is anything but clear. The meaning of the first two words appears to be straightforward, and in spite of the famous and frightening *midrash* that "even innocuous talk which constitutes no sin is brought before man when he dies”[[12]](#footnote-12)(or the more popular version: even unnecessary talk between a man and his wife they tell him at the moment of death[[13]](#footnote-13)"), within the context of the passage we will read it as a present-tense participle, in line with *yotzer* and *borei*.

The difficulty revolves around the meaning of *seicho*, which is translated here as "his words" or "His words". Even if we are sure about the meaning of *seicho,* the referent of the pronominal suffix is equivocal. Does it mean that God tells (or will tell) man about his (man's) thoughts (as per the *midrash* quoted above) or that God reveals His thoughts/ intentions/ plans to man (perhaps via prophecy)?

Beyond this, the meaning of *seicho* is opaque — what is it that God is revealing to man? His speech (from the root *sin-yud-chet)*, his ruminations,[[14]](#footnote-14) his wanderings[[15]](#footnote-15) or something else? Scholars, both medieval and modern, have presented an entire palette of meanings, chiefly based on the phrase *“Vayetze Yitzchak la-****suach*** *ba-sadeh.”[[16]](#footnote-16)* They are summarized in Vall's article cited at the end of this *shiur*.

However, this ambiguity raises a question. If the prophet intends to communicate a clear message, why does he not speak unequivocally? If he wishes to remind the people that God has revealed His words to them, he should use *davar*, as in “*Maggid devarav le-Ya’akov,”* “He informs Ya’akov of his words”[[17]](#footnote-17)); if the intent is that God will (or does) tell man about his wanderings, then *orechotav* would be more appropriate; and so on. We get the sense that the unusual and obscure *seicho* is meant to express multiple meanings — as a double or triple entendre. We will revisit this below, once we have considered the rest of the verse and its traditional interpretations.

***Oseh shachar eifa***

**Makes the morning darkness (?)**

Most commentators read this as a parallel to the rabbinic *“Golel or mipenei choshekh,”* “Who rolls away the light in favor of the darkness” (from the first blessing before *Shema* in the evening) — i.e., Who turns light (*shachar*) into darkness (*eifa*).

This is the broad consensus of traditional commentators, but is a difficult read. If the intent is that God turns light — i.e. peaceful, prosperous times — into darkness, then why use *shachar* instead of *yom* or *or*? *Shachar* refers to the earliest part of the morning, while it is still "black" outside and light is barely on the horizon; turning that into darkness is not the frightening and impactful feat that turning midday into black might be, if that were the intent.

Hakham notes — without citation — some who interpret our verse as "He makes the light **as well as** the darkness," but this is contextually difficult, as it does not fit the rhythm of the hymn until this point.

Ibn Janah[[18]](#footnote-18) interprets our phrase in the diametrically opposite fashion. He reads the root of *Iyov* 10:22’s *eretz eifata (ayin-yud-peh)* as a scrambled version of (*yud-peh-ayin*), to appear or to glow. In other words, *eifata* is light and *shachar* darkness (*shachor =* black). To wit, God causes the darkness to turn to light. This is not only a reversal of the general exegetical trend regarding the phrase, but also changes the tenor of the entire passage – and makes the contextual sense harder to figure. Since verse 12 sets up ominous anticipation of punishment, to have this epilogue speak to God's redeeming the darkness seems a bit out of place. Nonetheless, as ibn Ezra (first commentary, v. 12) explains, some (unnamed) commentators interpret the entire verse as hopeful rather than dire. This approach is further made difficult by the final descriptive clause.

***Ve-doreikh al bamotei aretz***

**And treads on the high places of the earth**

Unlike the rest of the passage, this description is decisively anchored in earlier text:

*Ashrekha Yisrael mi khamokha… ve-ata al bamoteimo tidrokh*

Happy are you Yisrael, who is like you… and you will trample on their high places. (*Devarim* 33:29)

Although here it is the Jewish nation that is destined to "trample on their high places", the wording is nearly identical. (See *Chavakuk* 3:19 for a related expression.)

Amos's contemporary, Mikha, uses the same wording to describe God:

*Ki hinei Hashem yotzei mi-mekomo veyarad vedarakh al bamotei aretz*

Behold, the Lord will leave His place, he will come down and trample upon the high places of the land (*Mikha* 1:3)

In wisdom literature (*Iyov* 9:8), we find this description of God:

*Noteh shamayim levado ve-doreikh al bamotei yam*

He alone stretches out the heavens and tramples on the high places (waves?) of the sea

*Hashem Elokei Tzevaot Shemo*

Hashem, Lord of Hosts is His name

This phrase works as an extended "signature" to the entire section, identifying the one Who is praised here.

All told, we've seen a collection of descriptions of God that seem to impart a powerful, frightening and destructive image — but, again, to what end? What holds these descriptors together?

In addition, as we asked earlier, what is the place of this paean here, at the conclusion of the rebukes which make up the bulk of this chapter?

*KI HINEI = KE-HINEI*

We begin with the introductory phrase “*Ki hinei*.” There are numerous places where these two words introduce a declaration, almost always in prophetic rhetoric (such as here, *Yoel* 4:1, *Yirmeyahu* 25:29, *Yeshayahu* 3:1 and *Malakhi* 3:19) or in wisdom literature (e.g. *Tehillim* 92:10 [twice!]). In *Tehillim*, it usually signifies some sort of observation, e.g. "Behold, the kings have gathered" (48:5); but in prophetic rhetoric it almost always introduces an eschatological promise. This is usually a threat of punishment (e.g. *Amos* 6:11 and *Mikha* 1:3), although on occasion it can be one of succor and reward, such as in *Yirmeyahu* 30:3.

In almost all of these instances, the punishment fits the evil behavior of the targeted population (and, conversely, the comfort is awarded to those who are long-suffering). Perhaps we should read the introductory phrase *ki hinei* as an expansion of *ke-hinei*; in other words, reading the word *ki* as a poetically expanded prefix *khaf*, indicating similarity. This would work in parallel to *min* and its contracted *mi* prefix. We would then read this hymn as directly related to the aforementioned rebukes and to the unexplicated punishment that awaits the obstinate nation, as follows:

THE REBUKES

In the main section of this oracle, Amos identifies a sequence of five disasters with which God tried to correct the people. They are, in order: a famine, a drought, crop disease, plague associated with Egypt and complete destruction associated with Sedom and Amora.

We have analyzed each of these in detail in the earlier *shiurim*, but let's take a fresh look at our verse in light of these disasters and the intended implication of the hymn.

1. In ancient Israel, planting was done in valleys, surrounded by mountains; the plots of land assigned for grains were bounded by mountains. This is certainly the case in the fruitful Jezreel Valley of the Shomeroni kingdom. Thus, God is referred to as *Yotzer harim*, He Who forms the mountains.
2. The wind has long been associated with rainfall; in our prayers, we praise God "Who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain" – the two are inextricably bound together. Elisha prognosticates: "You shall not see wind, nor shall you see rain" (*II Melakhim* 3:17); and in wisdom literature, we find: "The north wind brings forth rain" (*Mishlei* 25:23). When thinking about the drought, we are reminded that God is *Borei ruach,* He Who creates the wind.
3. Earlier, we presented a few of the interpretations of the obscure *seicho* in the third component of praise. As pointed out, the key locus for interpretation is in *Bereishit* 24, as Yitzchak goes out *la-suach* in the field just before meeting Rivka. The *midrash* identifying *siach* with prayer (based on *Tehillim* 102:1) is well known, and Rashi cites it approvingly in this commentary ad loc. but he is the only one of the classical commentators to do so. Significantly, Rashbam (among others[[19]](#footnote-19)) identifies the word *la-suach* as related to the other sense of *siach*, a bush; Yitzhak is out in the field planting when his future wife is espied from a distance. We certainly cannot suggest that *“Maggid le-adam ma seicho”* would mean that God tells man which trees he (or He) has planted. The simplest interpretation is the one that nearly all translators have used, "His plans”/ “His thoughts." Still, the use of this unusual word seems to hint at another meaning, attached to the planting that man has done and how God has interfered with it, in bringing the crop plague to "your gardens, your vineyards, your fig-trees and olive-groves…" Indeed, God is the one Who is *maggid le-adam ma seicho*, He reveals to man His plans.
4. The fourth "attack" was all about Egypt — whether invoking the *dever* plague of the Exodus narrative or the attack on the young men going to (or leaving) Egypt. It is in that selfsame narrative that God demonstrates His ultimate power over light and dark, plunging Egypt into utter blackness for three days, while keeping His people in the light. He is *oseh eifa shachar*, The one Who turns the morning into dark.
5. Finally, the people experience (some form of) utter destruction, God's full power unleashed on them, evoking the image of the fall of Sedom and Amora. The image of God trampling on the high places (there is a double entendre here, no doubt: both the mountains and the idolatrous *bamot*) evokes the victorious warriors of Israel assured, at the end of Moshe's blessing, of their success in the Land. When we picture God turning against His own people with such fury, we see *doreikh al bamotei aretz,* He Who tramples on the high places of the land.

This final verse is not disjointed or out of place; it is perfectly situated as an elegant match to the ominous words of the previous verse and speaks, phrase by phrase, to the five warnings received by the people.

We have concluded our study of the chapter and this "Hearken" sequence; next week, we will begin our study of Chapter 5.

**For Further Study:**

Regarding *seicho*:

# Gregory Vall, "What was Isaac Doing in The Field (Genesis XXIV 63)?,” *Vetus Testamentum* 44, 4 (1994), pp. 513-523.

# Gary Rendsburg, “Lāśûaḥ in Genesis XXIV 63,” *Vetus Testamentum* 45, 4 (1995), pp. 558-560.

Regarding Janus Parallelism:

Gary Rendsburg, "Janus Parallelism in Genesis 49:26," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99/4 (1980), pp. 291-293.

1. Once we complete our study of Chapter 4, we will embark on another “*Shimu”* sequence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BT *Rosh Hashana* 3a*, Ta’anit* 9a*, Gittin* 90a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi, *Gittin* ibid. s.v. *Ki* for examples of each. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mikra Le-Yisrael: Yona and Amos*, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar,* Vol. 2, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibn Ezra ad loc. makes a similar proposal, [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Note however that in the original source of that phrase, *Yirmeyahu* 18:6, the word *ki* does not appear and the passage begins with *hinei* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is yet a third mention, but without specified objects of creation/ formation – in *Yeshayahu* 43:7: “*Kol ha-nikra vi-shmi ve-likhvodi* ***berativ****,* ***yetzartiv*** *af asitiv,”* “All whom I call by My name and whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and even whom I made.” It is curious that all three other uses of the *bara/ yatzar* pairing appear in Deutero-Isaiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. All of the other mentions appear in the latter half of *Yeshayahu*, ascribed to the anonymous author of Deutero-Isaiah whose work was composed long **after** *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An intriguing example may be *Bereishit* 49:26 and the possible Janus parallelism there; see Rendsburg's short note cited in “For Further Study.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Mikra Le-Yisrael* ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Semachot* 1:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. BT *Chagiga* 5b. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Shadal, *Bereishit* 24:63. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibn Ezra and Radak, *Bereishit* ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Bereishit* 24:63. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Tehillim* 147:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibn Janah, *Sefer Ha-shorashim* (Berlin: 1896), p. 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See ibn Ezra and Radak ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)