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 #42:**

**The Prophecies of Amos -**

**The Fall of Israel**

Having completed the first rebuke sequence, complete with the coda and crescendo which simultaneously praise God and subtly warn of upcoming punishment, this next unit in Amos's prophecies is more overt and explicit. The first seventeen verses in Chapter 5 comprise a unit we will dub with the dire sobriquet "The Fall of Israel,” a title which will be borne out in the first presentation of the text.

These seventeen verses are arranged in neat chiastic fashion as seven segments, with the fourth functioning as the central axis of the rhetorical unit. In this *shiur*, we will take a broad look at the entire unit; then, in each of the next seven *shiurim*, we will look in greater detail at each of the components of the speech, in sequence. The final *shiur* of this sequence will revisit the entire chiasmus with an eye to discerning the internal message of the lofty rhetoric and its scheme.

Note that even though all seven of these segments are part of one Masoretic paragraph (with the exception of a *setuma* after verse 15), their division is self-evident, as we will see below.

All translations are based on the 1917 JPS Bible, with archaisms modernized. I have generally followed Paul's proposal for the structure of these passages, with two significant emendations which will be explained in later *shiurim*.

A: DIRGE

**1** Hear this word which I take up for a lamentation over you, O house of Yisrael: **2** The virgin of Israel is fallen, she shall no more rise; she is cast down upon her land, there is none to raise her up. **3** For thus says the Lord **Hashem**: The city that went forth a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which went forth a hundred shall have ten left, of the house of Yisrael.

B: SEEKING GOD

**4** For so says **Hashem** unto the house of Yisrael: Seek Me, and live; **5** But do not seek Beit El, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Be’er Sheva; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Beit El shall come to nothing. **6** Seek **Hashem**, and live — lest He break out like fire in the house of Yosef, and it devour, and there be none to quench it in Beit El.

C: REBUKE

**7** You who turn judgment to wormwood, and cast righteousness to the ground*;*

D: HYMN

**8** He that makes the Pleiades and Orion and brings on the shadow of darkness in the morning and blackens the day into night; that calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the face of the earth; **Hashem** is His name; **9** That causes destruction to flash upon the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. 

C: REBUKE *b*

**10** They hate him that reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one that speaks uprightly. **11** Therefore, because you trample upon the poor, and take from him exactions of wheat; you have built houses of hewn stone, but you will not dwell in them, you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you will not drink of their wine. **12** For I know how many are your transgressions, and how mighty are your sins; you that afflict the just, that take a ransom, and that turn aside the needy in the gate. **13** Therefore the prudent keeps silence in such a time; for it is an evil time. 

B: SEEKING GOD *b*

**14** Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so that **Hashem**, the God of hosts should be with you, as you say. **15** Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that **Hashem**, the God of hosts, will be gracious unto the remnant of Yosef. 

A: DIRGE *b*

**16** Therefore thus says **Hashem**, the God of hosts, the Lord: Lamentation shall be in all the public places, and they will say in all the streets: 'Alas! alas!' and they shall call the husbandman to mourning and proclaim lamentation to such as are skillful of wailing. **17** And in all vineyards shall be lamentation; for I will pass through your midst, says **Hashem**.

FIRST OBSERVATIONS

Surveying these seven paragraphs, we immediately sense the structure. (Of course, the graphic layout helps, but even a quick perusal of the passage leads to such an arrangement.)

Hashem's name, the Tetragrammaton, is used seven times, with an additional, eighth mention serving as the signature of the unit (at the end of verse 17). These appearances of God's Name are equally apportioned, such that three appear in the first half, one in the axis verse and another three in the second half.[[1]](#footnote-1) Note also that the Name does *not* appear in the actual rebuke sections (B and B*b*).

The opening and closing sections are the only ones that employ lamentation language (*kina, misped).* In addition, the opening dirge has three verses, whereas the final one has two, just as the opening "seek" section has three verses and the closing "seek" section has two. This sense of tapering is further bolstered by the use of *darash* in the two "seek" sections: it appears three times in the first, but only once in the closing "seek" passage, as if to solemnly hint to a lessening of the desired seeking out of God.

Furthermore, even though there are fewer verses in the closing "dirge" section, the intensity of sadness and mourning is palpable, as there is only one word for lamentation (*kina*) in the opening section, while there is a flurry of (seven!) dirge-words in the closing section (*misped, ho-ho, evel, misped, nehi, misped)*. Note, however, that the most explicit lamentation word, *kina,* used in the opening section, is omitted in the final one, as if to indicate that by now the expression of torment and loss is of an entirely different type.

The rebuke section is interrupted with a hymn — not dissimilar from the one we studied at the end of the previous chapter — and when we analyze that section, we will discuss the thematic connection between the cosmic praise and the rebuke in which it is embedded.

However, all told, the rebuke section (including the hymn) comprises seven verses. There are numerous "sevens" in this section, a common schematic number used by Amos starting from the opening chapters.[[2]](#footnote-2) The rhetorical scheme appears to be deliberate and fits well with Amos's general rhetorical strategy.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The structure seems to follow a reasonable suasive order. First, the prophet proclaims lamentation — which is prognosticative, not descriptive. He then outlines the faults of the people that, if left uncorrected, will lead to the traumatic catastrophes which will result in the lament. He continues with the direct rebuke of their behavior which is the kernel of exhortation that (hopefully) will move them in the desired direction; this rebuke is followed by a clearer vision of the society that they ought to be building. All of this concludes with intensified and multi-layered lamentation, which becomes ever more real should they choose to ignore the rebuke.

There is another rhetorical progression at play here. In the opening section, there are seven mentions of "house": the "house of Yisrael" (*beit Yisrael*) three times, "the house of God” (*Beit El*) three times and the "house of Yosef" (*beit Yosef*) once. Whereas "house" is mentioned twice in the second half, these are not specific houses that represent people (or God), but rather the generic mansions of the rich, "houses of hewn stone (*batei gazit*)."

Contradistinctively, the second half does not refer to a house, but rather to public locations, the gate (three times), the vineyard (twice), the public square (once) and the outskirts (once) — again, a septad. Note that the "house of Yosef" becomes "the remnant of Yosef" in the second half. The message may be one of publicizing the crimes and shaming of Yisrael: they cannot be hidden inside the house, nor can the aristocratic criminals keep the poisoned fruit of their immorality hidden from view.

In addition, it may be signaling the destruction of the "house;" furthermore, as the last dirge implies, the lamentation will be felt most deeply and expressed most overtly by the farmer and vintner as their crops fail.

We have considered this rebuke sequence with an eye towards the structure and the use of terms which bear multiple meanings and lessons. Amos, at this point, is poised to "shut the door" on the Northern Kingdom (as verse 2 states), yet he isn't ready to give up on the possibility that its people may recognize the poison which is killing their society and which will rapidly lead to its utter downfall. This explains his renewed attempt to speak to their hearts and to frighten them towards repentance.

In the next *shiur*, we will begin to look at each of these sections independently. This method will allow us to discern the rhetorical and persuasive tools that Amos harnesses to try to accomplish his (hopeless?) mission.

1. Note a similar structure in, *inter alia, Tehillim* 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of special note is the oracle against Israel in Chapter 2, which utilizes numerous sequences of seven, as we pointed out in the earlier *shiurim* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)