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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #43:**

**The Prophecies of Amos -**

**The Fall of Israel**

In the [last *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-42-prophecies-amos-fall-israel), we introduced the first seventeen verses of Chapter 5, which make up the second rebuke-sequence. We identified the septad of segments and the chiastic structure which frames it and, as promised, we will now begin to analyze these seventeen verses, segment by segment. We will start with the opening lamentation (verses 1-3) and will confine this *shiur* to the analysis of these three verses.

THE TEXT

VERSE 1: PRELUDE

*Shimu et ha-davar ha-zeh*

Hear this word

We are familiar with this opening, as it headlines the response to the oracle against Yisrael at the beginning of Chapter 3 and the rebuke which begins with the pointed accusation at the "cows of the Bashan" in Chapter 4. Some readers assume that the sequence of prophecies in Amos represents a rhetorical flow — i.e. that the prophecies were delivered in the order in which they appear in the book (more on this in the appendix to this series). Others see the sequence as edited.

Whatever premise we accept about the order of the book, the opening *shimu* here should be read in light of the foregoing. If this is the order in which it was presented, then we certainly want to contextualize the opening in light of the last two verses of Chapter 4. If, on the other hand, we read it as an edited sequence, then the purpose of that editing would be for us to read them as a continuum.

The previous rebuke-sequence ends on an ominous note, with a sense of foreboding about the imminent *“*Prepare to encounter your God, Yisrael.” The prophet continues by imploring his audience to listen to the word of God (which may be the essential meaning of “*Hikon likrat Elokekha, Yisrael,” “*Prepare to encounter your God, Yisrael”). What they likely do not expect is for him to speak of the ominous future as if it were already realized.

*Asher anokhi nosei aleikhem kina*

Which I take up as a lamentation over you

The verb *nosei*, lift up, is comfortably used in the *Tanakh* with the object "voice," usually in the context of wailing and crying. In *Bereishit*, for instance, the three characters who "lift up" their voices are Hagar (21:16), when she thinks that her son is going to die in the desert; Esav (27:38), when he discovers that Ya’akov has stolen his rights of primogeniture; and Ya’akov (29:11), when he first encounters Rachel.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is only natural that the wailing that accompanies a funeral rite (*kina*) would be a raised voice, thus being defined by the verb "to raise." Significantly, Amos is the first prophet to utter a dirge and, with the exception of David's laments for Yonatan and Shaul (*II Shemuel* 1:17-27) and for Avner (ibid 3:33) the word *kina* does not appear before our passage. (Curiously, David does not raise his voice in lamentation upon hearing of the death of his best friend and the king; Amos is the first to raise his voice in lamentation.) Having seen numerous examples of Yirmeyahu's borrowing from Amos's rhetorical style, it should not surprise us that the former also raises his voice in lamentation (*Yirmeyahu* 9:9).

The preposition *aleikhem* (over you) is jarring. Instead of lamenting **with you** or **on your behalf,** the prophet is lamenting **over you,** as if the audience is a dead body, a loved one who has been tragically killed, as we will soon hear, in the spring of her life. Amos is not inviting the audience to join him in the rites of mourning; rather, he is describing them as the subject of the lament. This certainly has the potential to wake the Shomeroni aristocracy from their sopor.

The word *kina* itself, which, as pointed out above, begins with David's laments over Yonatan and Shaul and then his dirge for Avner. is a relatively rare word in *Tanakh*. It appears a total of eighteen times in the entire canon, ten of which are concentrated in *Yechezkel*.

A *kina* is not only recognizable by its content — mourning a great and deep loss — but also by its form. Biblical poetry is generally balanced in meter and has a symmetrical relationship in stressed syllables between its constituent halves. *Kina*-meter, however, is deliberately imbalanced, as if to indicate that the world of the lamenter is out-of-whack; the intuitive search for balance in a poem is a constant for the *Tanakh* audience. When that balance fails, the reader instinctively feels that things are not right.

Although the word *kina* never appears there, there is an entire book of *Tanakh* written as a *kina* and, in rabbinic tradition, called *Kinot*: the book of *Eikha*. A quick look at any of the verses in the first, second or fourth chapters provide an easy demonstration of "*kina-*meter."[[2]](#footnote-2) For instance, the famous opening verse has eight stressed syllables in the first half and only six in its second half. The feeling of imbalance, of something being essentially wrong about the world, is generated from the outset. This is the state of the *mekonen*, the dirge-leader, whose job it is to awaken feelings of loss and disorientation among those present. In biblical times, there were professionals (evidently women) who were known as *mekonenot*[[3]](#footnote-3) and whose words, perhaps read responsively or antiphonally, would elicit feelings of loss and grief among those gathered.

Surprisingly, Amos does not abide by the "rules" of *kina-*meter and the "dirge" he invokes here is made up of two balanced verses, with both content and syllabic symmetry. Perhaps he cannot "put on the act" that far, since the populace he is mourning is alive and sits before him; perhaps this is not the case.

*Beit Yisrael*

O House of Yisrael

As pointed out in the last *shiur*, Amos uses the "house" motif throughout the first half of the rebuke-sequence; he laments over the House of Yisrael, the House of God (Beit El) and the House of Yosef. This protective aura of walls and a roof will soon come to an end and by the end of the sequence, the lamenting takes place in the open fields.

VERSE 2: THE FALL OF ISRAEL

*Nafela lo tosif kum*

She has fallen and will never again rise[[4]](#footnote-4)

The verb *nafal* implies more than just a "fall," i.e. a downward movement (physical, political, financial, spiritual or emotional) — it carries with it the sense of an irrevocable plunge. Witness Zeresh's words to Haman:

*Im mi-zera ha-Yehudim Mordekhai asher hachilota* ***li-npol*** *lefanav lo tukhal lo, ki* ***nafol tipol*** *lefanav*

If Mordekhai, before whom you've begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you will not be able to prevail against him, for you will surely fall before him (*Ester* 6:13)

The motif of a "fallen" people is sometimes associated with being military vanquished (see, e.g. *Yeshaya* 24:20 in his description of world-wide destruction, “*ve-nafela ve-lo tosif kum*;” see also ibid. 31:8 regarding the "fall" of Assyria). The added punch of *lo tosif kum* underscore the irreversibility of the "fall" — which Amos describes as if it is after the fact.

*Betulat Yisrael*

The virgin of Yisrael

Using the image of a young girl (*betula* here should probably be rendered "maiden" rather than “virgin,” as her sexual chastity is irrelevant to the image) to represent a nation is not uncommon in *Tanakh*; perhaps the most developed (and brutal) use of this image is in *Yechezkel* 16. The phrase *betulat Yisrael* appears in *Yirmeyahu* 18:13 as well as 31:4, but he also uses it in reference to Egypt (46:11). Yeshayahu uses *betulat bat Tzidon* (23:12) and Deutero-Isaiah uses *betulat bat Bavel* (47:1).

As noted above, the word *betula* here ought to be rendered "maiden,” as opposed to the commonly translated "virgin" (nearly all translations render it as "virgin"). Amos is speaking to a nation that is currently experiencing financial success, political power and a sense of being a player on the international stage. The nation feels youthful power, at the cusp of maturity and with all greatness still possible. Amos's point in using *betula* is to strike at the heart of that confidence: she will be struck down just as her life is beginning. Unlike the imagery of *Yechezkel* 16 and other prophecies which use the *betula* imagery (Yechezkel's use is implicit) and relate it to her infidelity or her status as a bride whose marriage has never been consummated (e.g. *Yoel* 1:8), the image here reflects on her power and military strength, as the next verse bears out.

*Nitesha al admatah*

She has been cast down upon her land

The root *natash* bears a sense of abandonment, as in:

*Al ti****tosh*** *torat imekha* (*Mishlei* 1:8)

or

*ki lo yi****tosh*** *Hashem et amo* (I *Shemuel* 12:22)

The verb reflects more than being "cast down" (*hushlekha*) which speaks to the action; *nitesha* indicates an attitude of disengagement and an abrupt disavowal of responsibility or even relationship. Hence…

*Ein mekimah*

There is no one to raise her up

This last nail in the coffin may be understood in several ways.

It may mean that there is no one who is willing to help her rise to power again — and this may mean that her allies have turned their backs on her; or that God has, so to speak, completely terminated the relationship, in which case rising to power again would be impossible.

Conversely, it may mean that no one is able to cure the sense (and reality) of abandonment and that "getting up" means returning to the previously secure place of belonging. In that case, it is clear that no one can possibly cure that sense of being cast away as long as the One who has cast her away refuses to relent.

VERSE 3: THE BITTER DETAILS

*Ki kho amar Hashem Elokim*

For thus says the Lord God

Amos now provides the reason for his dirge. Since God has declared that there will be such devastating loss of life, it is a *fait accompli* and nothing can be done to reverse it. Hence, he mourns as if this reality had already been realized.

*Ha-ir ha-yotzeit elef tashir mei'a*

The city that went out as a thousand shall remain a hundred

There are two ways that this prophecy is read: as a plague afflicting ninety percent of the population or as a calamitous military defeat in which almost all of the army is wiped out.

The use of *yotzeit* (going out) implies a military unit. See, for instance, *Bamidbar* 27:17, in which Moshe asks (demands?) that God appoint his successor

*Asher yeitzei lifneihem va-asher yavo lifneihem va-asher yotzi'eim va-asher yevi'eim*

Who will go out before them and who will go in before them and who will take them out and who will bring them in.

The response to this request is, of course, Yehoshua, which is why the traditional commentators, starting with Rashi (ad loc.) explain that "going out" etc. is a reference to military movements.

If this is indeed a prophecy about an overwhelming military defeat, echoing the threat of the end of Chapter 2, then we understand the use of *yotzeit* and the numbers thousands, hundreds and tens — which are all sizes of military units. On the other hand, it leaves us a bit confused as to why it spells the end of the nation mourning over the "corpse" who will never again be able to rise; it seems like a case of rhetorical overreach.

Conversely, if we read it as a plague that will kill almost the entire population, then the use of *yotzei* is unusual, as well as the rounded, large numbers. The numbers may be explained as just setting up a ratio; if a town is large, ninety percent of its inhabitants will die; but the same will happen to a small hamlet. The use of *yotzei* need not be understood as a military reference; it may even hint to bodies being taken out of a city when a plague strikes. The definition of a plague in Mishna *Taanit* (3:1) is a city that "evacuates" (*motzia*) a certain ratio of the population.

The setting of this incredible loss of life as cause for a dirge seems to recommend the second approach, that it is a plague affecting all.

*Ve-hayotzeit mei'a tashir asara*

And the one that went out as a hundred shall have ten left

See above where we assess this additional line and what it adds to the picture.

*Le-veit Yisrael*

Of the House of Yisrael

As the dirge begins with a call for the "House of Yisrael" to hear the dirge, the prophet cleverly concludes the lament with these selfsame two words. Not only does this provide the lament with an "envelope" structure, ending with the same phrase with which it began, it also points to the actual "corpse" over which the lament is being said. It is the "House of Yisrael" that will fall and that will not be able to be raised — unlike the "*Sukka* of David" which God Himself will raise (below 9:11).

In the next *shiur*, we will address the next component in the sequence, which the prophet calls out against the idolatrous sites in the Shomeron and beseeches his audience to turn to God… so, after all is said, is this dirge a bit premature?

**For Further Study (*Kina*-Meter):**

W. Randall Garr, *The Qinah: a study of poetic meter, syntax and style**,* ZAW 95, 1 (1993), pp. 54-75.

1. This last one, of course, requires some explanation, as Ya’akov seemingly has no reason to be sad and his crying is interpreted by many as tears of joy. Further discussion is beyond the scope of our *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See "For Further Study." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *inter alia*, *Yirmeyahu* 9:16 and Mishna *Mo’ed Katan* 3:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note the clever Midrashic parsing that the community in the Land of Israel would use to read this verse favorably: *nafela lo tosif* (she will never fall again) — *kum betulat Yisrael* (arise, maiden of Yisrael)! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)