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 #44:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**The Fall of Israel**

In the [last *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-43-prophecies-amos-fall-israel), we began our analysis of the dirge-"seek"-rebuke-hymn-rebuke-"seek"-dirge chiasmus that makes up the first seventeen verses of Chapter 5. After assessing the broader structure in the *shiur* prior to that one, we analyzed the opening dirge and discussed the *kina*-meter form of poetry in *Tanakh*, as well as the role of the *mekonenot* in Biblical society.

In this *shiur*, we will address the second segment of this dirge-sequence, which comprises verses 4-6.

**THE TEXT**

**VERSE 4: THE CALL — "SEEK ME!"**

*Ki kho amar Hashem le-Veit Yisrael*

For so says the Lord to the House of Yisrael

We have already seen Amos use the *ko amar* "messenger formula,” used throughout *Tanakh* (and other Ancient Near Eastern texts) to preface the message of a sovereign to his servant or vassal. The more detailed *ki kho amar* formula used here was used in the previous verse, at the end of the opening dirge, announcing the plague that was destined to eradicate 90% of the population. We might surmise that Amos's use of the same formula here operates as transition, moving us smoothly from the dirge to the divine call to seek out God. In addition, it may serve as the antidote; to wit: X will happen, but to forestall or prevent it, do the following.

In addition, the mini-coda of the line, *le-Veit Yisrael* serves to further cement the relationship between this call to return to God and the foregoing lament, which both begins and ends with *Beit Yisrael*.

*Dirshuni vi-chyu!*

Seek Me and live!

The root *darash* has a fairly consistent meaning of "seeking" throughout *Tanakh*. It has been used to describe judicial inquiry (*Devarim* 13:15; 17:4, 9) as well as describing God's Providence (famously, ibid. 11:12). We are bidden to seek God at the place where He causes His Name to rest (ibid. 12:5) and not to "seek" after the dead (i.e. engage in necromancy; ibid. 18:11). We are also adjured to actively seek the welfare of the city to which we have been exiled, i.e. Bavel (*“Dirshu et shelom ha-ir asher higleiti etkhem shama,” Yirmeyahu* 29:7).

A critical difference in the "direction" of *derisha* is as follows: When man is commanded *li-drosh* or is engaged in *derisha*, there is a specific and, sometimes, stated end in sight. The court must **seek** to learn if the crime was indeed committed as reported. The people must **seek** the peace and welfare of the city. David's agents are sent to find out about the identity (and status?) of that beautiful woman espied by David as she was bathing (*II Shemuel* 11:3). In other words, the *derisha* is a specific intelligence mission with a clear goal; the "seeking" is the chosen (or necessary) vehicle for gaining that information.

Seeking God, however, carries no secondary goal with it. Throughout *Tanakh*, when seeking God is described as a lofty ideal or as a necessary corrective — as in our passages — it is an end in and of itself. Seeking out God is not aimed to finding out information **about** God, rather, it means (re)directing the seeker's attention and focus on God.

This distinction is highlighted in our verse: “*Dirshuni — vi-chyu!”* "Seek Me — and live!" It is the act of seeking which is the elixir here, not any information or experience which that seeking will engender.

**VERSE 5**

**THE AVERSION — "SEEK THEM NOT!"**

*Ve-al tidreshu Beit El*

But do not seek Beit El

Beit El, as mentioned here (and earlier — 3:13, 4:4), is identified with the site of Ya’akov's vision (*Bereishit* 28:12-15). Upon his return from Charan, he goes to the altar he built, fulfilling his vow (ibid. 35:5-6). It sits at the site of modern day Beitin, straddling Route #60 (the "new" bypass road in the Shomeron).

That Beit El was a common pilgrimage site is well-documented throughout *Tanakh;*[[1]](#footnote-1) as we pointed out in earlier *shiurim*, it was made into one of the two royal sanctuaries (in singular, *mikdash melekh*) by Yerovam ben Nevat as related in *I Melakhim* 12. Although there may be several places called "Beit El" (e.g. possibly *Shoftim* 4:5), the one constantly referenced in 8th-century BCE prophecy as a worship site is the one at Beitin.

*Ve-haGilgal lo tavo'u*

Nor enter into Gilgal

See below, regarding the identification of Gilgal here and elsewhere in Amos. Note that in parallel to *li-drosh*, to seek, the operative verb here is *la-vo,* to come or enter. It isn't the worship at Gilgal (or Beit El or Be’er Sheva) that is the focal point of the rebuke; rather it is the very act of visiting there. Perhaps this passage is not a diatribe against idolatrous practices but against something else, something more discreet and, if possible, more insidious.

*U-Ve’er Sheva lo ta'avoru*

And do not pass by (?) to Be’er Sheva

See below regarding the place of Be’er Sheva in this thread. It is prudent to note that the storied "capital of the Negev" is first mentioned in *Bereishit* (eleven times); in the prophetic history (*Yehoshua* through *Melakhim*) a total of fourteen times; and in the Second Temple histories of *Divrei Ha-yamim* and *Ezra-Nechemya* a total of seven times.

Be’er Sheva is never mentioned in poetic literature (e.g. *Eikha*, *Shir Ha-shirim*) or liturgical literature (e.g. *Tehillim*).

The only book wherein the town first named by Avraham and then by Yitzchak, the place where Ya’akov offers his "farewell" offerings before leaving the Land and the place where Avraham and Yitzhak make covenants and oaths with the Pelishtim, is mentioned at all in the literary prophetic canon is in *Amos*, twice.

This bears scrutiny, as it is clear that the place holds little significance during the period of the monarchy, at least within the context of prophetic rhetoric. This glaring near-total silence implies that the site is not one made into an idolatrous shrine. So what are we to make of its mention here? See below in our discussion of the triad of Beit El, Gilgal and Be’er Sheva.

*Ki Ha-Gilgal galo yigleh*

For Gilgal shall surely be exiled

Besides the clever and appealing wordplay in the phrase (see below for more on this), what is the meaning of the curse? When an idolatrous site is lambasted — or when the people are rebuked for honoring it — the threatened prognostication is that the place will be made desolate (see, e.g. *Vayikra* 26:31) or destroyed (ibid. v. 30). What is the import of *galo yigleh*? See below in our discussion.

*U-Veit El yihyeh le-aven*

And Beit El will come to nothing

This is another clever play on words;[[2]](#footnote-2) unlike *Gilgal galo yigleh*, however, which is purely alliterative, this is somewhat topographical. Yehoshua records a town named "Beit Aven" as part of the Binyamin border (18:12); this town appears as a landmark to identify the location of Ha-Ai (ibid. 7:2). The name, read uncharitably, means "house of iniquity."[[3]](#footnote-3)

DISCUSSION: BEIT EL, GILGAL AND BE’ER SHEVA

In a previous *shiur* ([#33](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-33-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence)), I presented the "Gilgal" problem, in that there are several sites in Israel called Gilgal (as there are several places called "Beit Lechem,” "Beit Shemesh,” "Rama" and so forth, each for its own reason). I proposed that the earlier instance of Gilgal (in 4:14) referenced the Gilgal of Eliyahu (see *II Melakhim* 2:1), due to its location in the area of Shomeron.

Generally speaking, those commentators (medieval as well as modern) who identified the Gilgal of Chapter 4 with the one in the Samarian mountains do the same here; while those who identify the Gilgal of Chapter 4 (and *Hoshea* 9:15) with "Yehoshua's Gilgal" just northeast of Yericho do the same here.[[4]](#footnote-4) I do not think this necessary and it may be that the Gilgal of Chapter 4 (and *Hoshea* 9) is distinct from the Gilgal in our rebuke.

The reason that the broad approach of commentators is to identify these mentions of Gilgal with the one in *Yehoshua* is because it was an ancient worship site. As such, the *Mishkan* is established there upon entering the Land — until it is set up in Shilo (*Yehoshua* 18:1). According to rabbinic tradition, the *Mishkan* is housed in "Yehoshua's Gilgal" for fourteen years — seven of conquest and seven of division of the Land — until it is enshrined at Shilo.

From that point, the assumption is that the Gilgal where Shaul's third coronation takes place (*I Shemuel* 11:14 ff.) is the same and, thus, every subsequent mention of Gilgal — especially in the context of a worship-site — is interpreted as being a reference to that same one. There are, however, no geographic markers in any of the other mentions of Gilgal, save for the two mentions in the narratives of Eliyahu and Elisha,[[5]](#footnote-5) both of which point to a different location in the mountainous area of Shomeron.

Whereas it stands to reason, both topographically and geographically as well as tactically, that the Gilgal where Shemuel directs Shaul to meet him for the coronation is Yehoshua's Gilgal, near the banks of the Yarden, I proposed that the Gilgal mentioned above in *Amos* 4 (and, by association, *Hoshea* 9) is Eliyahu's Gilgal (near the village of Jiljilyya). Shaul's coronation has to take place as far from the Philistine oppressors as possible, along with taking on the meta-historic significance associated with the first encampment in the Land. In addition, Shemuel tells Shaul to "go down" to Gilgal, which is understood **altitudinally —** to wit, a descent into the Jordan Valley, where Yehoshua's Gilgal is situated.

On the other hand, worship sites where offerings are made to other gods need have no association with this location. It stands to reason that the Gilgal of *Amos* 4 and *Hoshea* 5, places about which the people are rebuked, are squarely in Israelite territory, unlike Yehoshua's Gilgal (see fn. 2). That is why I suggested that the Gilgal mentioned above is further north, in the mountains — i.e. the Gilgal of Eliyahu-Elisha.

Our rebuke, however, includes a third location which gives us pause. Along with Beit El (location known) and Gilgal (several possibilities), Be’er Sheva is mentioned; and there is scholarly consensus that there is no "other" Be’er Sheva to look for (besides the age-old problem of identifying "the" Be’er Sheva and solving whether "Sheva" and "Be’er Sheva" are one and the same).

Suddenly, in our rebuke, there is a *katuv shelishi* (third verse) which forces us to think about this specific rebuke differently and makes us re-examine our assumption about the location of (this) Gilgal. There are two anomalies about the mention of Be’er Sheva here. First of all, as pointed out, Be’er Sheva is squarely in Judean territory, hardly a convenient worship site for members of Amos's Samarian audience. In addition, we have no record in *Tanakh* of Be’er Sheva being used for idolatrous worship (unlike Beit El, Gilgal and numerous other cities throughout the land). As noted above, Be’er Sheva is never mentioned in prophetic rhetoric, save for its two occurrences in *Amos*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Before addressing the broader issue, which ties these three sites together, we ought to note the clear structural consideration of this verse:

*Beit El (do not seek)*

*Gilgal (do not come)*

*Be’er Sheva (do not pass)*

*Gilgal (will surely be exiled)*

*Beit El (will become "Aven")*

The chiasmus here is clear and places Beit El as the *inclusio* (generating the "envelope" of the structure), highlighting Be’er Sheva as the focal point or axis of the chiasmus. This observation only serves to heighten our curiosity about Be’er Sheva's inclusion — not only is it presented here as a place to refrain from visiting, itself an anomaly, but it is placed front and center in the rebuke.

THE MODES OF FOREIGN WORSHIP

We are accustomed to prophetic warnings (dating back to Moshe) about engaging in one of two types of foreign worship. The one obvious temptation, which is repeatedly addressed in *Sefer Devarim*, is the worship of the local nations in Canaan. Working within the framework of pagan thinking (the mode that the Israelites themselves are still being weaned from in the desert), local gods have powers and it is scary for ancient man to occupy a land and refuse to pay homage to the local deities. It takes an absolute faith in the emptiness of their promise and in the singularity of God’s dominion to take that step, so the warning is understood.

There is, however, a second temptation that appears in *Yehoshua* (24:15):

And if it is bad in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell…

In his farewell speech, Yehoshua (speaking facetiously) provokes the people to swear allegiance to God by "offering" two "alternatives" — worshipping the local gods (mentioned by Moshe) and worshipping family deities from "the old days." This seems to be Yehoshua's motivation in mentioning the idolatrous practices of Terach's family at the beginning of his speech (ibid. v. 2). Lurking behind the temptation to (also) serve local gods is the lure of nostalgia. Throughout *Tanakh*, we find people yearning for the "old days,” whether in complaining about the rations in the desert (*Bamidbar* 11:5ff) or about the apparent lack of God's Providence "these days" (*Shoftim* 6:13).

But not all that is old is hallowed, and not every practice of our forebears maintains its integrity. Witness the *matzeiva*, which is constructed devotionally by Ya’akov (four times!), yet prohibited later on by the Torah (*Devarim* 16:22); witness the permission to worship God "in any place" (*Shemot* 20:20) with the exclusivity of worship outlined in *Devarim* 12. Indeed, much of *Sefer Devarim* could be encapsulated under the heading of “*Lo ta'asun ke-khol asher anachnu osim po ha-yom,”* "You shall not practice in the manner that we do here this day" (ibid. 12:8). Entering the Land and establishing the various national institutions (*mikdash*, monarchy, etc.) will usher in a new era, an era of *issur bamot* (the prohibition against erecting multiple worship-sites).

In other words, much as we properly and dutifully revere our ancestors and see ourselves as mandated to continue their divine mission, we also recognize that what was considered proper worship for them may no longer be proper for us.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A key word in Amos's rebuke is *darash*; this word is used pointedly in *Devarim* 12, in which Moshe directs the people to abjure the practices to which they are accustomed and to seek only the singular place where God chooses to make His Name reside.

The use of *darash* in our passages, coupled with the unusual mention of Be’er Sheva suggests that the prophet is not railing — at this point — against idolatrous practices, but rather against "ancestor-worship". His vision, articulated in the final chapter that "On that day, I will raise up the fallen *Sukka* of David" (9:11) speaks to a full restoration of Judean monarchy with all that this implies. This includes not only a reunification of the people under one king, but also a recognition of the centrality of Yerushalayim and the *Mikdash —* the place that God has chosen to make His Name reside.

Visiting ancestral sites may have been, on the part of the Shomeroni community, an attraction to the "old days and the old ways" and, as such, they would make pilgrimages to Beit El (which was already a "Royal Sanctuary" — more on that in Chapter 7); to Gilgal (where our ancestors first camped upon their entrance into the Land); and to Be’er Sheva, the site where Avraham, Yitzhak and Ya’akov all worshipped.

Note that the text does not identify actual worship, rather "seeking,” "coming" and "passing" — i.e. pilgrimages on their own terms. It is specifically Be’er Sheva which becomes the focal point of the rebuke, as that links back furthest and serves as the most direct route to the *Avot*, whose worship is certainly a beacon but should not become a lodestone, drawing us away from the "new" place that God has chosen.

**VERSE 6:**

**THE CALL REDUX — "SEEK HASHEM!"**

*Dirshu et Hashem vi-chyu*

Seek out the Lord and live

Note that here the prophet voices God's threat in the third person — no longer *dirshuni* but *dirshu et Hashem*; the sense is that even the mention of the Beit El/ Gilgal/ Be’er Sheva pilgrimages have distanced God from the people.

*Pen yitzlach ka-eish Beit Yosef*

Lest He break out like fire in the House of Yosef

"The House of Yosef" is used, in various forms, as a cognomen for the northern kingdom (see, in a beautifully lyrical example, *Yirmeyahu* 31:19). Note also how the repeated trope of *bayit* is used here, to set off *Beit Yosef* (the Northern Kingdom) against, but allied with, *Beit El* — to wit, if Yosef's house is burned, that will also mean the devouring and destruction of God's house (Beit El).

Note also how a later prophet (*Ovadya* 1:18) turns this image inside out and "redeems" the House of Yosef:

And the house of Ya’akov (*Beit Ya’akov*) shall be a fire, and the house of Yosef (*Beit Yosef*) a flame, and the house of Esav (*Beit Esav*) for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the House of Esav (*Beit Esav*); for the Lord has spoken.

*Ve'akhla ve-ein mekhabeh le-Veit El*

And it will devour and there will be none to quench it in Beit El.

This final line can be read in three ways:

1. There will be none *left* to quench the flames; in other words, the destruction of the north will leave no survivors.
2. There will be none *capable* of quenching the flames; people will stand by helplessly as the destructive rot sets in and none will be able to intervene.
3. There will be none *interested* in quenching the flames; all those witnessing the imminent downfall will turn their backs and withdraw their assistance.

The verse allows for all three meanings and, indeed all three may co-exist. None of those who would be interested and capable will remain; of those who remain and are merely interested in helping — none will be able to do so.

In next week's *shiur*, we will continue our analysis of this sequence, looking at the extended rebuke (vv. 7, 10-13), which is interrupted with the hymn. We will examine that hymn in the following *shiur*.

**For Further Reading:**

**Be’er Sheva**: Yitzchak Meitlis, "*Chai* Derekh Be'er Sheva*: Le-mashma'uto shel Ha-mizbe'ach Be-Tel* Sheva*,"* Al Atar 15 (Adar 5769), pp. 21-26 [Heb.].

1. See, *inter alia, I Shemuel* 10:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I often point to this verse as an example of why *Tanakh* ought to be studied and taught in the original (Hebrew). So much of the glory and exquisite play of the text — not to mentions the double- and triple-entendres that give birth to Midrashic expansions — are lost in translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keep in mind that we have already encountered *Aven* in the opening series of oracles (1:5), but that is in Syria. See our discussion ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Radak, *Amos* 4:14, *Hoshea* 9:15; see also Hakham, *Da’at Mikra*, p. 28, fn. 1b and Paul, *Mikra leYisrael* p. 76. It should be noted that nearly all commentators assume that the Gilgal in all three citations is Yehoshua's; Andersen and Freedman have an extended discussion about the administration of the location and whether it was under Judean or Israelite control during the 8th c. BCE (*Amos*, Anchor Bible, pp. 430-433). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *II Melakhim* 2:1, ibid 4:38. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We will address the second mention in 8:14 when we analyze that section. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As to why this is the case — due to our requiring stricter guidelines as a result of our fallen stations relative to our ancestors (a common trope heard in some circles); or whether the bar has been raised as a result of the Exodus, the Revelation, the Conquest and so forth; or due to external conditions (see, e.g. *Sifrei*, *Devarim* 16:22) — is beyond the scope of this forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)