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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #45:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**The Fall of Israel**

In the [last *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-44-prophecies-amos-fall-israel), we continued 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 and analyzing the opening dirge, we considered the opening "seek" rhetoric, examining the use of the verb *li-drosh* and its meaning in a cultic context. We also introduced the notion of "nostalgia-worship" (or, to borrow an Eastern motif, ancestor-worship) to explain the inclusion of Be’er Sheva among the sites to which the people would make pilgrimages. These pilgrimages and visits are condemned by Amos; rather, the people are to seek God and live.

This brings us to the rebuke section. Structurally, we have suggested, there are two rebuke sections; and the hymn, which sits at the fulcrum of the chiasmus, interrupts them. Nonetheless, recognizing the hymn as exactly that, an interruption, we will assess both rebuke sections as a single whole.

The rebuke includes verse 7, then verses 10-13. In the next shiur, we will examine and study the hymn, which comprises verses 8-9.

**THE TEXT**

**VERSE 7: THE ACCUSATION (a)**

*Ha-hofekhim le-la'ana mishpat*

 You who turn judgment to wormwood

*La'ana*, translated here as "wormwood,” is a bitter and potentially poisonous plant which is often matched with *rosh*; its identity is subject to some scholarly debate. Many identify it with Artemisia absinthium, but this species is not native to the Land of Israel. Therefore, the suggestion is that the biblical *la'ana* is some other member of the genus Artemisia, five species of which are native to Israel. In any case, its character and impact (bitter, possibly poisonous) is similar to the species used to make absinthe.

In five of its eight mentions in *Tanakh*, it is matched with *rosh* (or the "juice" of that root, known as *mei rosh*; see, e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 9:18; 23:15). It is not surprising to find that Yirmeyahu references *la’ana* (with *mei rosh*) twice, along with two mentions in the autobiographical chapter of *Eikha* (3:15, 19). Once again, we see Yirmeyahu picking up on images used by Amos. We ought to note that the use of the *la’ana* as a metaphor for bitterness and punishment (it seems, from those two mentions in *Yirmeyahu*, that it is force-fed punitively) first appears in the covenant of Arvot Mo'av, as a bitter and poisonous growth of rebellion and apostasy of which to be wary (*Devarim* 29:17).

Amos later uses it again (6:12), this time matched with *rosh*, and again to describe the warping of justice.

The irony of using an image of punitive poison as the outcome of perverted justice is powerful and ought to be noted. The same bitter pill that violators are forced to swallow is now the symbol of the warped justice — when the innocent are subjected to the fate rightfully meant for their oppressors.

*U-tzedaka la-aretz hinichu*

And cast justice down to the ground

Even though the verb used here (*hinichu*) is gentler than the translation, the intent seems to be closer to the word *hishlikhu* (compare *Daniel* 8:7-12 and the three instances of *hashlekh* there), meaning "to cast down,” usually in anger, resignation or disposal (see, *inter alia*, *Shemot* 1:22). The verb *hiniach* does appear elsewhere in this sense (of violently casting down). In *Yeshayahu* 28:2, we read:

Behold, the Lord has a mighty and strong one, as a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction, as a storm of mighty waters overflowing, that *hiniach* down to the earth with violence.

We would be hard-pressed to translate the end of the verse as "He gently placed,” even if we were to ignore the translator's free-form addition of "with violence.”

This opening verse of the accusation is presented as a chiasmus:

*Ha-hofekhim le-la'ana*

*Mishpat*

*U-tzedaka*

*La-aretz hinichu*

This mini-structure serves to highlight "justice" and serves notice to the audience that the accusation will focus on issues relating to justice — a topic that Amos already addresses in his first oracle against Yisrael (2:6-8).

The next two verses comprise the "praise-hymn" that interrupts the accusation; as noted, we will address these in next week's *shiur*, along with the rationale behind that interjection.

**VERSE 10**

*Sanu va-sha'ar mokhiach*

They hate the one that rebukes at the gate

In the biblical period, the gate of the walled city is the location not only of the court, but of commerce and gathering. When Boaz wants to formally gain permission to redeem Elimelekh 's field — and marry Ruth — he meets Ploni at the gate, where the members of the court are present and where the populace of Beit Lechem is sure to be gathered as they go out to the fields in the morning (Ruth 4:1ff).

When the Torah commands us to establish courts, it references the gates: “*Shofetim ve-shoterim titen lekha be-khol* ***she'arekha,”*** "You shall appoint judges and officers in all of your **gates**" (*Devarim* 16:18)

If someone were to come and rebuke the judiciary for its corruption, the rebuker would stand at the gates of the city. In such a location, one may address not only the judges in their official setting, but a significant audience.

As Amos alludes to here, these rebukes have already been sounded and the reaction of the people has been to "shoot the messenger" for identifying and calling the judges out on their behavior — instead of despising the judges for their corruption and for the rot that they have been cultivating within the body politic.

Hating the one delivering rebuke is a trope invoked twice in *Mishlei*:

*Ve-sonei tokhachat ba'ar*

He who despises rebuke is a fool (12:1)

*Sonei tokhachat yamut*

He who despises rebuke will die (15:10)

Who is the "hated *mokhiach"*? Is it Amos himself?[[1]](#footnote-1) Or is it some earlier prophet who has been ignored, whose reputation has been tarred or possibly whose person has been attacked? While Yirmeyahu’s travails are recorded in full, we never hear about the people's response to Amos or any action that they take against him (aside from his interaction with Amatzya in Beit El in Chapter 7), so we don't have a context with which to answer this question. The text does not give us any information from which we could draw a conclusion about this.

*Ve-dover tamim yeta'eivu*

And they abhor the one that speaks uprightly

*Sanei* and *ta’eiv* are an unusual and singular pairing. Although the words do appear together in *Devarim* 12:31, *to’eiva* there is a noun and hardly analogous to our case.[[2]](#footnote-2) In later poetic texts (e.g. *Tehillim* 119:163 and perhaps ibid. 5:6), the two are used as parallels, but otherwise it is unmatched in *Tanakh*. As such, we ought to be prepared to read the words as complementary and not necessarily synonymous.

*Sina* is generally understood to be a personal and subjective determination. When a man has two wives and prefers one to the other, the non-preferred one is called *senua* (*Devarim* 21:15-17). *To'eiva*, on the other hand, is a more formal category of things (typically related to sexual fetishism or idolatrous practices) that are to be abhorred. We are never told "to hate,” but we are told "to abhor."

You shall bring no abhorrence (idolatrous appurtenance) into your house, as you will become *cherem* (taboo) like it; rather you shall utterly reject it (*shaketz teshaketzenu*) and utterly abhor it (*ta'ev teta'avenu*), for it is *cherem*. (*Devarim* 7:26)

Perhaps we ought to read Amos's rebuke as describing the response of the people to chastisement in two stages. First of all, they internalize a hatred towards the person who stands at the gate, accusing them of judicial malfeasance. Then they formally ostracize the source of the words (see below for the meaning of *dover tamim*), allowing themselves to continue their perditious behavior.

Although *tamim* is a relatively common adjective, starting with the famous description of Noach and the command to both Avraham (*Bereishit* 17:1) and the Israelites (*Devarim* 18:13) to "be *tamim*" — i.e. wholeheartedly and exclusively committed [to God]. There is, however, no other use of *tamim* with speech, and no one is called *dover tamim*, save the anonymous or generic chastiser here. Hence, we have no frame of reference to interpret the phrase. It may mean "a wholehearted speaker" (Radak's first proposal, Paul and Hakham) which could be a synonym with "rebuker.” It may also mean "one who speaks perfect things" — thus explains Targum Yonatan, as well as (apparently) Malbim.

As with the opening line of the accusation (v. 7), Amos presents his rebuke chiastically:

*Sanu va-sha'ar* (They hate at the gate)

*Mokhiach* (The rebuker)

*Ve-dover tamim* (And the one who speaks uprightly)

*Yeta'eivu* (They abhor)

Chiastic structure helps to highlight the center (see, *inter alia*, I *Shemuel* 1:2, where the barren wife is "on the outs"). Here, the focus is on the rebuke; after the interjected hymn-praise, the prophet is redirecting the audience's attention to his rebuke of their brand of "justice.”

**VERSE 11**

*La-khein ya'an boshaskhem al dal*

Therefore, because you trample upon the poor

The opening conjunctive adverb *la-khein* (formed of the prefix *lamed* and the word *kein* — to wit, "for thus") is common in prophetic rhetoric and is just as likely to announce consolation as to reveal divine wrath.

The predicate in this clause *boshaskhem* is a *hapax legomenon* and must be interpreted from context. Rashi (ad loc.) and, following him, Malbim, relate the word to the root *bet-samekh-samekh*, as in “*bosesu et chelkati”* (*Yirmeyahu* 12:10), meaning "to trample" (hence the translation here). Klein, in his *Etymological Dictionary of Hebrew*, suggests, based on the Akkadian, that it means "to draw farm-rent" and this finds (possible) support in the commentary of R. Eliezer of Beaugency, who interprets the phrase as "taking their house and inheritance in court.” Further support may be found in the parallel passage (below) which accuses the people of taking the grain allotment from the poor.

However we interpret the specific word, the context is clear. The wealthy have been gouging the poor, taking advantage of them and depriving them of their basic needs.

*U-masat bar tikchu mimenu*

and take from him exactions of wheat

See above, where Klein's interpretation of the *hapax legomenon* fits with this accusation. A *maset* is a gift; e.g. the gifts that "Tzafenat Pane’ach" (Yosef) gives to his brothers when they feast together are called *maset* (*Bereishit* 43:34). It may also mean "tribute" and is associated with *mas*, a tax. If taken from the poor, it certainly is no gift. One cannot "take" a gift, and the poor would most assuredly not be offering gifts to members of Amos's audience. If it is taken in the form of grain (*bar*), then "farm-rent" indeed seems like a reasonable rendering.

Let us note one more detail about this clause. A tribute or farm-tax is usually *offered* by the renter/ debtor; for the creditor/ owner to "take” (more like "seize”) it is another indication of abuse and oppression of the poor. (Compare with the description of Eli's sons, *I Shemuel* 2:13-16.)

*Batei gazit benitem*

You have built homes of hewn stone

Hewn stone is considered a fine, upper-class base for a home in *Tanakh*. For instance, in *Yeshayahu* 9:9, *gazit* (hewn stone) replaces *levenim* (bricks), much as cedars replace sycamore trees. Amos accuses the wealthy aristocrats of Shomeron of using the profits of their abuse of the indigent poor to build fancy houses for themselves. However, the promise of these houses is not to be realized…

*Ve-lo teishevu vam*

But you will not live in them

In spite of their grandiose plans, the abusive rich will not benefit. This type of rebuke is a departure from Amos's earlier threats. In Chapter 2, the first oracle against Yisrael, the abusive judiciary (and its cohorts) is successful in exacting payment from the poor and in using the money for its own selfish entertainment — but the punishment is to come later, on the battlefield. Here, the very purpose of the rapacious behavior of the powerful will not be realized, in spite of (and perhaps due to) the great effort they put in to make it a reality. To have plans thwarted before putting them into action, but to do the work — to build the house and to never be able to live in it — demonstrates the cursed nature of the enterprise. We will discuss this further in the next segment.

*Karmei chemed netatem*

You have planted beautiful vineyards

"Beautiful vineyards" is a singular phrase, unmatched in *Tanakh*. The closest parallel we find is *Yeshayahu* 32:12’s *sedei chemed,* desirable fields.

There is, however, another phrase earlier in *Yeshayahu* that may help us resolve the meaning of *karmei chemed*. In an eschatological vision (27:2), Yeshayahu promises:

*Ba-yom ha-hu* ***kerem chemer*** *anu lah*

On that day, they will respond: "This is a vineyard of wine" (i.e. the vineyard has produced a good bounty of wine)

Some even suggest that the *kerem chemer* in *Yeshayahu* might be read as *kerem chemed* (this is substantiated by several manuscripts). I'd like to suggest that perhaps the inverse may be the case. We are familiar with numerous examples of *reish-daled* permutation: Dodanim in *Bereishit* 10:4 becomes Rodanim in *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 1:7; Deuel in *Bamidbar* 1:14, 7:42, 47; 10:20 becomes Reuel in *Bamidbar* 2:14.[[3]](#footnote-3) Given the lack of any manuscripts supporting *chemer* here, the proposal seems extravagant. Nonetheless, I believe that the context does argue for it: "You will plant **wine-producing vineyards** but will not drink of their wine.” It is not the *chemed,* the desirability (perhaps to be desired avariciously by others), that is the key; rather, it is the product of the vineyard which is the purpose of cultivating the vineyard. In addition, reading *chemed* as *chemer* produces a perfect parallel between *chemer* and *yeinam*.

*Ve-lo tishtu et yeinam*

But you will not drink their wine

Note that this two-step series of curses comprises two of the three curses contained in the Rebuke of *Devarim* (28:10):

You will betroth a woman, and another man will lie with her; you will build a house, and you will not live in it; you will plant a vineyard but will not use the fruit thereof.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Amos beautifully turns this curse inside out in the coda of the book (9:13-15, especially v. 14)

**VERSE 12**

*Ki yadati*

For I know

God's knowledge has already been invoked in Amos's rhetoric: *“Rak etkhem yadati mi-kol mishpechot ha-adama,”* “You alone have I known of all the families of the earth” (3:2) is an explanation for why they are held to such a relatively high standard. This sort of "knowledge" implies intimacy and revelation; in our case, there is a sense of inverted revelation. Whereas in Chapter 3, it is God's revelation of His Word, i.e. what God has revealed about **Himself**that implies a higher standard for his people; here it is God's knowledge of His people's behavior, i.e. what is revealed about **them** that gives this prophecy its fuel.

*Rabim pisheikhem*

How manifold are your transgressions

Whether this translation holds is questionable. Does the phrase mean "I know *how many* are your sins,” "I know *that* your sins *are many*" or "I know *of* your *many* sins"? The latter is unlikely, as it would read then: *Ki yadati pisheikhem ha-rabim*. However, the first two proposals are equally likely, the first meaning that God keeps a "count" as it were of the sins. The alternative is, without recourse to an accounting, that God knows that the sins are many.

*Va-atzumim chatoteikhem*

And how mighty are your sins

This is straightforward parallelism.

*Rabim :: atzumim.* This pair appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*, most famously in *Shemot* 1:7, 9. Even though *rabim* speaks to quantity and *atzumim* to quality, the parallel is a common one and seems to work almost as a merismus.

*Pisheikhem :: chatoteikhem*. These two words, which we analyzed in detail in the opening set of *shiurim* on *Amos*, are not synonymous (a *pesha* is, essentially, a rebellion; a *cheit* is, at its root, an "error"), they are, like *rabim :: atzumim*, used throughout *Tanakh* in parallel.

*Tzorerei tzaddik*

You, who afflict the innocent

Note the alliteration here. *Tzorer* may be understood as a verbal form of *tzar* (enemy), i.e. those of you who treat the innocent with enmity. This is, however, difficult, as the form *tzorer* (as with Haman*, tzorer ha-Yehudim*) is an intransitive verb (if understood as a verb at all). In other words, it describes someone who acts as an enemy, but it does not describe any specific actions taken by the *tzorer*. Besides the difficulty in context, it does not work well with the parallel phrases, both of which have predicates of action (*lokechei, hitu)*. It may be possible to interpret *tzorer* in this fashion if we read this clause as ageneral statement and the two following lines as detailing how this enmity is made manifest.

Rashi, quoting Targum Yonatan, favors "oppress" and sees *tzorer* as a transitive verb. R. Yosef Kara seems to favor the first suggestion and interprets the taking of bribes etc. as the method by which the enmity is demonstrated.

*Lokechei khofer*

You, who take a ransom

*Kofer* has both positive and negative connotations, although always with a "dark" background. In other words, *kofer* is a "ransom" that allows the one paying to be spared a severe (perhaps final) punishment. It can be recommended (e.g. *Shemot* 30:12, ibid. 21:30) or be disallowed (e.g. *Bamidbar* 35:31-32 — with dire consequences for violation). In this case, the implication is that these judges take payment (bribes) to disfavor the poor.

*Ve-evyonim ba-sha’ar hitu*

And turn away the destitute at the gate

Are the poor literally "turned away" as in being refused support, or is their path perverted ("turned away") at the gate (i.e. the court)? Contextually, the latter seems to be more likely.

Note how the "gate" serves to open and close (isn't that what a gate does?) the core of the rebuke:

*Sanu* ***va-sha'ar*** *mokhiach…*

*Ve-evyonim* ***ba-sha'ar*** *hitu*

**VERSE 13**

*La-khein ha-maskil ba-eit ha-hi yidom*

Therefore the prudent one keeps silent at such a time

The prophet concludes his rebuke with a mini-epilogue, evoking the central verse with *la-khein* (above, v. 11).

The *maskil* is one who understands something deeply. It comes from the root *sin-kaf-lamed* which also means "to gaze" — one who looks at a situation in depth and cogitates, then reaches a reasoned conclusion, is considered a *maskil*. Amos seems to be pre-empting the "haters" at the gate by stating that anyone who can understand the situation has nothing to say and will remain silent. This silence reminds us, of course, of Aharon's silence at the tragic death of his sons (*Vayikra* 10:2-3); at such times, there is nothing to say. As the prophet concludes:

*Ki et ra'a hi*

For it is an evil time

Although the audience likely doesn't yet realize it (presumably none of the foretold punishments have come to pass as of yet), a deeper and longer look at the situation reveals that it is a tragic time, a time of evil and a time in which rebuke ought to be heard without response.

In the next *shiur,* we will examine the hymn that "interrupts" the rebuke and comprises verses 8-9; we will also address the purpose of its context, breaking this rebuke into two segments.

**For Further Study:**

*La'ana*

Zohar Amar, *Flora of the Bible* (Jerusalem 2012), pp. 163-165 (also, see associated proposals for *rosh*, pp. 185-187) [Heb.]

1. Hakham (*Da'at Mikra* p. 40) raises this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Contra* Paul (*Mikra leYisrael*) who sees *Devarim* 12:31 as similar to ours. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Radak's comments at 1 *Divrei Ha-yamim* 1:7, ibn Ezra, *Kohelet* 5:1; and Rashi, *Iyov* 15:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This curse famously reverses the order of the military exemptions in *Devarim* 20:5-7; see Tosefta, *Sota* 7:20; for an interesting follow-up, see *Hilkhot De’ot* 5:11 and *Kesef Mishneh* ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)