YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #46:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**The Fall of Israel**

We continue to study the dirge-"seek"-rebuke-hymn-rebuke-"seek"-dirge sequence which comprises the first seventeen verses of Chapter 5; we have analyzed the broader chiastic structure, discussed dirge-poetry in *Tanakh*, introduced the notion of ancestral worship built on nostalgia and seen Amos's core message of mistreatment of the disenfranchised brought to the fore in his accusation against the Samarian aristocracy. As noted in the last *shiur*, the rebuke is interrupted by two verses which contain one of the three hymns in *Amos*. We've already studied one at the end of Chapter 4 (v. 13) and will see the third near the end of the book (9:5-6). Note that none of the hymns is longer than two verses (and one is only one verse).

In this *shiur,* we will analyze the two-verse hymn which interrupts the rebuke. After assessing the words and internal logic of the hymn, we will suggest a rationale for its odd placement.

**THE TEXT**

**VERSE 8: DIVINE POWER**

*Osei Khima u-Khesil*

He Who formed Pleiades and Orion

The constellation pair of Pleiades (*Kima*) and Orion *(Kesil*) is attested in two passages in *Iyov*:

*Oseh Ash, Kesil ve-Khima ve-chadrei Teiman*

He Who formed the Bear (Ursa Major?), Pleiades and Orion and the chambers of the south (9:9)

*Hatkasher ma'adanot Kima o moshekhot Kesil tefatei’ach*

Are you able to bind the chains of Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion? (38:31)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Outside of those passages, however, the only mention of either of these star-clusters is in *Yeshayahu* 13:10, where *Khesileihem* ("their Orions") seems to be referring to several star-clusters. In all of the creation epics in *Tanakh*, in *Yeshayahu* (e.g. Ch. 40), *Tehillim* (e.g. Ch. 104) and others, these constellations do not appear. Even in *Tehillim* 148, which praises God in "the heavens, and the heavens above the heavens," no star-clusters or groups are mentioned.

Indeed, the only other constellation to be (evidently) identified by name is *Ash* ("The Bear") which, besides the mention in *Iyov* 9 (above) also appears in the verse following our "Pleiades-Orion" verse in *Iyov* 38 (“*ve-Ayish al baneha tanchem”*). We may conclude that although star-groups, forming recognizable and consistent images (with the aid of a healthy dose of imagination) were known in the ancient world dating millennia before Amos's time of the First Commonwealth,[[2]](#footnote-2) they held little significance to our prophetic tradition. Surrounding cultures believed not only in the significance of the astral patterns; they also, in some cases, credited these lights with control of man's destiny. This became part of the *kulturkampf* of the Prophets of Israel; the passage in *Yirmeyahu* indicates an ongoing polemic against those who would attribute deterministic purview to the stars:

*Ko amar Hashem: El derekh ha-goyim al tilmadu*

Thus says the Lord: Do not learn from the ways of the nations

*U-mei'otot ha-shamayim al teichatu*

Nor be terrified from the signs of the heavens

*Ki yeichatu ha-goyim mei-heima*

For the nations are afraid of them (*Yirmeyahu* 10:2)

It is prudent to note that both the universal relationship to astral influences as well as the proper Jewish attitude towards them has long been subject to vibrant debate.

Witness the range of approaches to interpreting the pregnant phrase in *Devarim* 4:19

…*asher chalak Hashem Elokekha otam le-khol ha-amim tachat kol ha-shamayim*

[Lest you cast your eyes heavenward and see the sun, the moon, the stars and all the hosts of heaven and be driven to bow to them and worship them;] things which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

Some (e.g. Rashbam) read this verse as granting tacit permission for the nations of the world to worship the stars; others, perhaps motivated by the report of the modifications made by the seventy elders in translating the Torah into Greek (the Septuagint) in BT *Megilla* 9a, read it as “the Lord your God has allotted t**o illuminate** for all the peoples…" and understand that ideally, no nation should worship the stars and view them as independent powers.

This divide is also felt in rabbinic literature regarding the Jewish attitude towards the impact of astral bodies on human fate and fortune — and specifically regarding that of Jews — in the debate recorded in BT *Shabbat* (156a-b) as to whether *mazal,* astrological signs, are relevant for the Jewish people or individual Jews.

It may be that the instinctive reticence to grant any glory to the stars, specifically in their more "personalized" form (e.g. named constellations with "personalities") is the reason behind the near-total omission from the canon.

Nonetheless, God's glorious world includes these majestic, distant worlds which light up ours and which He has designed to appear to us in these picturesque forms — and so they become part of the "creation epic" of Iyov. They also make infrequent appearances in prophetic rhetoric when describing God's ultimate power over the most majestic and sublime of His creatures. This explains their appearance here (and in *Yeshayahu*). We will attend to the import of this mention below.

*Ve-hofeikh la-boker tzalmavet*

Who turns deepest darkness into morning

This phrase is an inversion (according to most commentators) of the parallel in the earlier hymn (4:13), *“Oseh shachar eifa*.” Most exegetes explained the phrase to mean that God turns the morning (*shachar*) into darkness (*eifa*). We noted ([*Shiur* #41](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-41-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence-crescendo-and-coda)) that ibn Janah reads that phrase in the opposite fashion, interpreting *shachar* as "blackness" (dark) and *eifa* as "glowing.” According to that reading, our passage is a poetic variation of 4:13; again, most commentators will read ours as an inversion. There is little doubt as to the intent of our phrase: He turns *tzalmavet* into morning.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The word *tzalmavet* is one of the most popular words in *Tanakh* to be possibly mistranslated. Its popularity chiefly derives from its presence in the ubiquitous *Tehillim* 23:

*Gam ki eileikh be-gei tzalmavet…*

Yes, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death…

This common translation is based on reading the word *tzalmavet* as if it were a compound of *tzel* (shadow) and *mavet* (death). Indeed, BDB suggests this meaning, although it mentions a more recent trend to interpret it as meaning “deep shadows," having nothing to do etymologically with *mavet* (although in *Iyov*, death is described as a place of *tzalmavet*, e.g. 10:21-22). In this understanding, the word is read as if it were pronounced *tzalamut*, an intense form of *tzel/ tzelem*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Two final notes about *boker*. First of all, the word *boker* is associated, etymologically, with investigation, *bikoret*, (*Vayikra* 19:20; see ibn Ezra's comments, *Bereishit* 1:5). The bright, sunny morning (after sunrise) is called *boker* because that is a time when things can be easily investigated. The deep shadows of *tzalamut/ tzalmavet* turn to the bright, clear sunshine of *boker*. The choice of *boker* instead of *shachar* or even *yom* seems to point to this sharp contrast.

Secondly, the undefined *tzalmavet* turns to *ha-boker* (*la-boker* is a contracted form of *le-haboker*), using the definite article. In other words, "He turns dark shadows into **the** morning", again emphasizing the polar difference between the murky, frightening shadows and the clear, defined daylight. God not only turns one atmospheric experience into its opposite, He also radically changes the entire environment around that experience.

*Ve-yom laila hechshikh*

And darkens the day into night

This phrase is, unlike its parallel in the previous hymn, transparent and clear as to its meaning. It is not uncommon in biblical poetry to use flexible syntax, here putting the object (*yom*) before the subject (*laila*), both followed by the predicate (*hechshikh*): the night comes and darkens the day. This can be read as part of the natural progression: the day is clear and bright, and then night comes and darkens the sky, reducing visibility as the light dwindles to nothing. One argument in favor of this reading is the absence of God's direct involvement in this change. Unlike the other four verbs in the verse, which directly ascribe the impact on the environment to God (*oseh, hofeikh, korei, yishpokh*), in this case, the night itself is the subject that acts on the day, darkening it.

On the other hand, following the sense of the hymn, it is God Who causes the night to darken the day. Does this refer to a divine intervention into the natural order of things, such as an eclipse (or *choshekh Mitzrayim*)? Hakham suggests that perhaps the phrase ought to be read *ve-yom le-leil hechshikh,* reading the *hei* at the end of *laila* as locative, to wit "to night," in which case the subject is no longer the night, but God Himself.

Broadly, these passages may be praising God for His establishing and maintaining the natural order, or for His ability and readiness to step in and subvert the natural order. Resolving that may depend on how we understand the "interjection" of this ode in the middle of Amos's rebuke. We will address this after our analysis of the phrases (below).

*Ha-korei le-mei ha-yam vayishpekheim al penei ha-aretz*

He Who summons the waters of the sea and pours them onto the surface of the earth

This next description of God's power appears to speak to His intervening in nature in a destructive fashion, and what is portrayed here seems to be a tidal wave or even a tsunami. On the other hand, this could yet be another facet of God's constant and consistent control of the natural world that He established. Describing the regular movement of the waves that are "summoned" to the earth and spill their waters there in this fashion heightens the sensitivity to God's constant hand in creation, however the theologians wish to define it.

*Hashem Shemo*

The Lord is His Name

This signature seems to indicate an end to the hymn, following the style of the one-verse hymn at the end of Chapter 4. There is a rhetorical surprise when the prophet continues his hymn (for one more verse), and we suspect that the continued hymn has veered into a different laudatory direction. In other words, anticipatory listening (and, for us, the detached audience, anticipatory reading) misdirects us twice. First, we expect a return to rebuke and for the focus of the next utterance to be the nation and its behavior — or the consequences awaiting it. Instead, we hear more praise of God. That is the first misdirection. Then, we anticipate praise in the same mode as we just heard and are again surprised to hear praise of a different flavor.

SUMMING UP VERSE 8

In sum, the first verse of the hymn praises God for His role as Master over Creation. It may point to divine intervention, subverting the natural order of things and having a destructive purpose. Alternatively, it may be focused on the "hidden" divine hand in the constant ebb and flow of creation: the movement of the stars, day to night, night to day, and waves which cover the land and then recede. Depending which of these approaches we take, the element of surprise in verse 9 will be milder or more severe.

**VERSE 9: DIVINE DESTRUCTION**

*Ha-mavlig shod al az*

He Who makes destruction flash forth against the strong

The root *balag* appears only four times (including this one) in the canon; in the other three locations, it seems to mean "shine" or "gleam" which is how BDB renders it, based on a similar Arabic cognate (= "smile"). Rashi, R. Yosef Kara and R. Eliezer of Beaugency all render it "strengthen," such that God strengthens the pillagers in their destruction of the fortressed city. Paul[[5]](#footnote-5) points out that given the context here it seems to be a parallel with *bo* (as in *mevi*, the causative form of *bo*). Therefore, he suggests that we read it as "brings.” In any case, the description here is of God wreaking destruction on the "strong.” This undefined object is explicated in the second bi-colon as *mivtzar*, a fortress or walled city. To wit, God brings destruction — seemingly through human agents (hence *shod*) — on the strong, fortressed city.

*Ve-shod al mivtzar yavo*

Such that destruction comes to the fortress

Note the chiasmus, with *mavlig* and *yavo* operating as an *inclusio*, with the pillaged city at the focal point.

WHY THE HYMN, WHY HERE?

At the outset of this shiur, we posed the following inevitable question: why interrupt the rebuke with this hymn? R. Yosef Kara suggests that the hymn, which starts out with a description of God as "overturning" (*hofeikh),* is a response to the sins mentioned in verse 7 (see our previous *shiur* for a treatment of that phrase):

*Ha-hofekhim le-la'ana mishpat*

Those who pervert justice into absinthe

To those who *hofeikh* justice into poisonous weed, God also *hofeikh* day into night etc. In this reading, the descriptions of God's actions in v. 8 are destructive (which leaves the first two — creating the constellations and turning dark shadows into morning — a bit puzzling).

I believe that there is another way to read the hymn as well as to explain its inclusion here. The hymn begins (verse 8) with praise for God and His constant hand in guiding the world along regular and reliable rhythms. Whether these rhythms are associated with astral bodies (as many in the ancient world would have it) or whether the astral movements themselves are part of that grand design is irrelevant to us from an exegetical perspective.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is in direct opposition to the behavior of Amos's audience, who subverts God's justice and uses the bounty with which He has blessed them to oppress the downtrodden and exploit the vulnerable members of society. Thus, the hymn begins with its own *hefekh*: God's trustworthy caretaking of His universe is the *hefekh* of those who are *hofekhim le-la’ana mishpat*.

At that point, the hymn seems to conclude, with both the signature form *Hashem shemo* as well as a *parasha setuma* (in some manuscripts).

In the surprising denouement of the hymn, God Himself is "overturned" and is *hofeikh* from reliable Master of His Creation to destroying pillager Who enables the otherwise weak attacker to lay waste to the fortressed city.

The rhetorical effect is startling, as well as potentially impactful (the elusive goal of every prophet's speech). Verse 8 could have left the audience with a sense of complacency, bordering on the cavalier. No matter what we do, God will always keep His world turning in accord with the plan of Creation. This hardly inspires fear; perhaps awe would be the most to hope for. But then, in the surprising twist of verse 9, the prophet reminds the people that God's Mastery over His Creation is not to be seen as simply the motor that runs the machine. As He creates, He also destroys. As His might drives the reliable rhythms of the world, His power can also turn those rhythms inside out and can devastate fortresses assumed to be unassailable.

It is with this turn that Amos hopes to wake his audience up and ramp up the awe inspired by verse 8 to abject fear of God. The ultimate fate of Shomeron, sadly, tells us just how successful this brilliant rhetorical strategy turns out to be.

In the next *shiur*, we will address the second "seek" section (verses 14-15), after which we will conclude this segment with an analysis of the final "dirge" section.

1. This passage is included in God's "speech from the whirlwind", in which He challenges Iyov as to his self-claimed knowledge of the world and the way that it works (such that he and his friends can intelligently debate the thorny issue of theodicy); some of the most elegant and poetic descriptions of creation are found in these chapters [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to German archaeoastronomer Michael Rappenglück (cited, *inter alia,* in Graham Hancock's "Magicians of the Gods"), paintings found in the Hall of Bulls in Lascaux Cave in France dating back more than 17,000 years indicate an awareness of the night sky and have a clear depiction of Taurus. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the earlier-cited *shiur* for a broader discussion of this motif in prophetic writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra* on *Tehillim*, Vol. 1, p. 125; the word *tzalmavet* is related to similar words in Ugaritic, Akkadian and Arabic, all meaning "deep darkness." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mikra Le-Yisrael: Yoel Ve-Amos*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The question is highly significant from a cosmological-theological perspective, but that is not our concern in this forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)