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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #47**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**The Fall of Israel**

We are nearing the conclusion of our study of the dirge-"seek"-rebuke-hymn-rebuke-"seek"-dirge sequence which comprises the first seventeen verses of Chapter 5. In our recent *shiur*, we analyzed the two-verse hymn which "interrupts" the rebuke and proposed an explanation for its inclusion at this odd juncture.

In this *shiur,* we will analyze the two-verse *dirshu* (“seek”) section (verses 14-15) which responds to the earlier "do not seek" segment (vv. 4-6). After presenting an analysis of the text, we will discuss the rhetorical logic of the segment's inclusion here as well as its parallelistic role in relation to the first *dirshu* section.

**THE TEXT**

**VERSE 14: "SEEK THE GOOD"**

*Dirshu tov ve-al ra*

Seek the good and not the bad

The prophet's exhortation to "seek [the?] good" may be understood in several ways.

First of all, we need to determine if "good" here is an elusive adjective (an adjective with the attendant noun missing but assumed), an elusive noun (with a missing verb) or a simple, all-inclusive noun, as we have rendered it in the title above. To wit — is it "seek the good [thing],” "seek to do good" or "seek the good"?

**Views of the Commentators**

Ibn Ezra proposes either the first or third of these, leaving it as an open question. *Targum Yonatan* reads it (as do *Metzudot*, Hakham[[1]](#footnote-1) and Paul[[2]](#footnote-2)) as "to do the good,” i.e. the elusive noun.

Malbim has an innovative approach here: he reads *tov* as being synonymous with God, such that "seek good" is another way of saying "seek God"; *ra* therefore would be a reference to Beit El, Gilgal and Be'er Sheva, those places that he adjures his audience not to seek. He then softens this idea by suggesting that **by** seeking the good — per one of the three meanings proposed above — the listeners will be virtually seeking God.

Reasonably, we would interpret the *ra* here as the opposite of the *tov*, regardless of which meaning we take. So it might be read: "Seek the good things and not the bad things.” Alternatively if may mean "Seek to do good and not to do evil;" or it may mean "seek the good and not the bad.”

Resolving this seemingly trivial question will have a surprising impact on the larger message here.

**What Is *Derisha*?**

A second consideration is how to interpret the directive to "seek" here. This may, to some extent, depend on our resolution of the meaning of *tov*. Does *dirshu* mean "look for,” "yearn for" or "try to accomplish"? Each of these meanings is attested in *Tanakh*.

In *Devarim* 13:15, *vedarashta* clearly means to seek (information). We may suggest that the meaning in *Devarim* 12:5 is something else. According to many Rishonim, we are obligated to ask "where is the House of God" (see, inter alii, Ramban ad loc.); yet R. David Tzvi Hoffmann's approach (at 12:4) is intriguing.[[3]](#footnote-3) He states that *li-drosh,* when used with the prepositions *el* or *le* means "to look for." This doesn't mean that information is missing; we know where the place is, but may not know how to get there. Alternatively, it means "to yearn for,” which has nothing to do with external information the *doresh* (seeker) is trying to ascertain, but rather with a state of mind that turns one from a neutral visitor to a *doresh*.

When describing God's actions, *doresh* can mean "care for,” as in *Devarim* 11:12, or "demand" as in *Bereishit* 9:5. These meanings are, occasionally, ascribed to humans as well. For instance, “*Tziyon hi, doresh ein lah”* (*Yirmeyahu* 30:17) seems to mean that no person is caring for her, i.e. seeking her welfare. In *Mishlei* 31:11, the woman of valor *daresha tzemer u-fishtim,” “*she acquires wool and linen,” which is closest in meaning to "demand" above.

So, how do we understand the exhortation to "seek" here? Is Amos telling his audience that they ought to inquire as to what "the good" is or how to get to "the good place" (per Malbim); or is he adjuring them to attach themselves, to yearn for the good (things) rather than the evil (things)? The notion of "demanding" or "caring" here wouldn't seem to fit. Or is he challenging them to desire to do good and to not desire to do evil?

We will address this opening aphorism and its likely meaning after completing our analysis of the constituent phrases below.

Note that this brief stich utilizes forward gapping to keep the message compact. Instead of *dirshu tov ve-al* ***tidreshu*** *ra*, the word *tidreshu* is "gapped" from the first clause to the second and assumed there. This preserves the meter and allows this four-word phrase to become, if needed, an aphorism which easily rolls off the tongue.

*Lema'an tichyu*

In order that you shall live

This phrase, *lema'an tichyu*, is taken (we would presume) directly from *Sefer* *Devarim*, where it appears in three instances:

*Ve-ata Yisrael shema el ha-chukim ve-el ha-mishpatim asher anokhi melamed etkhem la'asot* **lema'an tichyu *uvatem viyrishtem et ha-aretz asher Hashem Elokei avoteikhem notein lakhem.***

And now, Yisrael, heed the statutes and the laws that I am teaching you to do, ***in order that you shall live*** and will enter and inherit the land that Hashem the God of your ancestors is giving to you. (4:1)

*Be-khol ha-derekh asher tziva Hashem Elokeikhem teileikhu* **lema'an tichyun** *ve-tov lakhem veha'arakhtem yamim ba-aretz asher tirashun.*

You shall walk in all the way which Hashem your God has commanded you, ***in order that you may live***, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land which you shall possess. (5:29)

*Kol ha-mitzva asher anokhi metzavekha ha-yom tishmerun la-asot* **lema'an tichyun** *urvitem uvatem viyrishtem et ha-aretz asher nishba Hashem la-avoteikhem.*

All the commandment which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which Hashem swore to give to your fathers. (8:1)

Note that all three instances of *lema'an tichyu(n)* in *Devarim* relate not just to survival, but to a successful conquest of the Land and robust longevity there. To the Shomeroni audience, this phrase likely evokes associations with the promises in Moshe Rabbenu's farewell speech, which included great weal in the Land if they are but loyal to God's commands.

Amos seems, at first blush, to be directing them to right the ship of state and steer its course back to obeisance of God's laws, that their continued presence in the Land be assured. This warning is certainly (as is the case with most prophetic exhortations) an uphill challenge. At this point in time, in the mid-8th century BCE, the Shomeroni kingdom is experiencing a (possibly) unprecedented era of material and political-military success; Ashur has yet to (re)rear it ugly head with its voracious appetite for conquest (that is a few decades away) and Aram is tending to its own issues, not having attacked Yisrael since the days of Elisha's prophetic ministry (approximately half a century earlier). Nonetheless, as prophets are wont to do, Amos persists with his message, dipping into the well of national historic consciousness and utilizing phrasing which, under other external circumstances, might have motivated the people to correct their ways.

*Vi-yhi khein Hashem Elokei Tzevaot itekhem*

And thus will Hashem, Lord of Hosts be with you

This phrasing raises a glaring theological problem — is God not **with us** when we are sinning? If we read this clause as a consequence of the former clause, then we run smack into that conundrum. Alternatively, we may read it as: “**If** you seek the good, eschew the bad” (or however we render it), “**then** God will be with you.”

According to this reading, there seems to be no way around the frightening conclusion: that God is not with the people when they are embracing evil. This is not only a linear question — how far along the route of sinning does God stay with the people and at what point does He absent Himself from them? — it also leads to something of a theological stalemate. If we posit that God's continued presence among the people is what keeps them alive, sustains them and so forth, then how can anyone claim that God is absent?

The classic commentaries read the verse as we have rendered it and then suggest that the people are claiming that God is with them in all of their actions — including the dastardly ones.[[4]](#footnote-4) The evidence to which they point is their current prosperity. The prophet is correcting them such that they should understand that God is**not**with them **in these endeavors**; but, of course, He is "with them" in a broader sense. Paul[[5]](#footnote-5) and Hakham[[6]](#footnote-6) seems to take similar approaches to the passage. They all seem to build their approach (some explicitly so) on the next phrase, *ka-asher amartem*. We will address this below.

Before leaving this phrase, we ought to note the use of an "expanded" Name for God here — *Hashem, Elokei Tzevaot* — Hashem, Lord of Hosts. This is a *kinui* (cognomen) that Amos uses frequently (eight times, nine if we count *Hashem Elokim Ha-Tzevaot* in Chapter 9). This of a total of approximately fifty uses in all of Prophetic rhetoric. It should not surprise us that Yirmeyahu uses this "nickname" nearly forty times, as we have seen how much Yirmeyahu borrows from Amos's rhetorical style. As to the specific meaning of this Name and why it figures so prominently in Amos's (and Yirmeyahu's) speech, we will leave that for our analysis at the end of this chapter. This cognomen is used four times just in this chapter, of which our verse is the first instance.

*Ka-asher amartem*

As you declared

What is it that the people have declared? Per the above-cited commentators, they have averred that God is with them, associated with their "brand of justice" and their worship at Beit El, Gilgal and Be'er Sheva. These commentators would render the passage as follows:

If you want Hashem to be with you in all of your endeavors so that you may live, then you must abandon the worship at Beit El… and then He will be with you as you declare.

I would like to suggest an alternate reading of the entire phrase and the intent behind it.

Instead of reading *Vi-yhi khein…* as a **consequence** of their actions, let us read it as an extension and clarification of the prophet's challenge to them. In other words, let us read it as follows:

If you seek the good and eschew the bad so that you may (truly) live, and have Hashem, Elokei Tzevaot with you as you claim…

The prophet's challenge to them is now clear: to "seek the good" is to endeavor to have Hashem with you — not in the way that you have (for self-serving reasons) defined as allowing for judicial abuse, foreign worship etc. but rather as Hashem has Himself commanded (with the three-fold allusion to *Sefer Devarim* as a pointer to the true path)…

The next verse continues Amos's clarification of the prophetic demand, with the hopeful consequence coming at the end of that verse, as we will see.

What I am suggesting is that these two verses include a complex condition and a single consequence, which only appears at the end of the second verse.

**VERSE 15**

**"JUSTICE IN THE GATES"**

*Sinu ra ve-ehevu tov*

Despise evil and love the good

The prophet now clarifies what the demand to "seek good" means. It isn't just about accomplishing that which is good, but to develop and foster an affinity for that which is good and a revulsion for its antithesis. Above, we raised a few possible meanings as to the prophet's challenge to the people, but here, it seems that he locks down a very specific and clear intent.

This specifying may be understood to be a charitable (read "easy way out") meaning, but the next line turns that assumption on its head and informs us that this is all *le-chumra* (exacting). Not only are the judges and aristocracy of Shomeron to develop a desire, a love for the good and an innate hatred of the evil, seeing it as anathema; they are also required to ensure that on a practical and consequential level, injustices are righted and the system, broken for so long, be immediately repaired. This is the intent of the next clause, which we will address below.

**Fractured Chiasmus**

Let us consider one not insignificant structural note. This clause serves as the back half of a "fractured chiasmus,” working in poetic antiphony with the previous verse:

*Seek good and not evil*

*Revile evil*

*And love the good*

The reason that I refer to this as a "fractured chiasmus" is because the composite parts of the structure are not proximate to each other. In a standard chiastic structure, we have either A-B-B-A or, with a central axis, A-B-C-B-A. There is nothing (besides incidental words, such as prepositions, names of members of the direct audience etc.) between any of the segments of the structure.

In our case, however, the second half of v. 14 "interrupts" the chiastic structure; indeed, in an elegant flourish, the second half of v. 15 echoes the second half of v. 14, as we shall see below.

Although they are unusual, there are instances of "fractured chiasmus" structures elsewhere in Prophetic rhetoric. Take, for example, Yeshayahu's opening prophecy:

*Eikha hayeta le-zona,* ***kirya******ne'emana****, melei'ati mishpat,* ***tzedek*** *yalin bah…* (1:21)

How the **faithful city** has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! **Righteousness** lodged in her….

*Ve-ashiva shofetayikh ke-varishona ve-yoatzayikh ke-vatechila, acharei khein yikarei lakh ir* ***ha-tzedek****,* ***kirya ne'emana****.* (1:26)

And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of **righteousness**, the **faithful city**.

With a full four verses intervening, the prophet creates a beautiful (and painful) picture of the Jerusalem that was, against the Jerusalem that is — and then, the Jerusalem that will/ could be. He opens by noting that Jerusalem was known as a "faithful city" and that "righteousness"[[7]](#footnote-7) lodged there; when he completes the picture, he envisions a time when "righteousness" will be its name and it will again be called "faithful city.”

In a "standard" chiasmus, we tend to see the middle (the axis, or the closest parallels) as the focal point. For instance, in *I Shemuel* 1:2, we are told that Elkana had two wives:

One named Chana and one named Penina;

Penina had children, but Chana had no children.

Penina is the focal point of the verse: she is the wife who has borne children to Elkana; and Chana, the barren wife, is the "outlier.” That is the exposition which leads to the drama of the opening story in the book.

A fractured chiasmus, on the other hand, places the emphasis on the "bookends.” This is a rhetorically pragmatic variation. In a "proximate chiasmus,” the middle sections are juxtaposed and the emphasis of their near-repetition is felt. On the other hand, with a fractured chiasmus, the two middles are not near each other; and the audience does not pick up on the structure until they hear the final bookend, which draws the two passages together. As such, the speaker puts the strongest emphasis at the bookends. In the example cited above, Jerusalem has been known as a *kirya ne’emana;* one day, it will again be known by that reputation. The function of *tzedek* is a subset and consequence of the city being a faithful place. In much the same way, the critical attitude for the Shomeroni audience to adopt is loving the good, desiring that which is ethical and upright — and the attendant abhorrence of that which is immoral and unjust should be a natural consequence of that great desire.

*Ve-hatzigu va-sha’ar mishpat*

And establish justice in the gates

As I suggested above, this demand that justice be established is not some distant goal, the end result of developing a love for that which is upright. It is, rather, an immediate demand that the gates be a place of justice, where the poor and rich are dealt with equally, without prejudgment or corruption. The gates, which we have already encountered in *Amos* (above, in vv. 10 and 12), are, in the biblical period, the location of the city's court and administrative offices.

The relatively rare word *hatzigu* ("establish") appears only three times in the canon of Prophetic rhetoric (once at the beginning of *Hoshea* and once at the very end of *Yirmeyahu*). It is an unusual word which is variously rendered as "set,” "exhibit" (in *Hoshea*), or "station" (with the preposition *lifnei*). The sense here is that Amos is pushing his audience to "set justice" as a firm and permanent feature of the court, not a fleeting or ephemeral experiment.

*Ulai yechenan Hashem Elokei Tzevaot she'eirit Yosef*

Perhaps Hashem, Lord of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Yosef

Again, Amos uses the uncommon expanded cognomen for God which we saw in the previous verse. This serves as a type of epistrophe (which we have expansively discussed in earlier *shiurim*), ending this verse with a similar phrase as the previous one.

Observe how sad and threatening the phrasing is here. Even if the people are successful in turning their system and their attitudes towards justice around, they are still left with a mere hope that "perhaps Hashem, Lord of hosts, will be gracious…"

The Gemara (BT *Chagiga* 4b) lists this as an example of a verse that engendered sobbing among the Sages:

When Rabbi Asi would get to this verse, he would cry: "Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gates, **perhaps** Hashem the Lord of Hosts will be gracious…" — all this and (only) "perhaps"?

The "remnant of Yosef" here seems to refer pointedly to the northern kingdom. As Radak points out, much of the northern kingdom ("Yosef") had already been exiled by Ashur and Aram (at various times before the ascent of Yerovam II to the throne in c. 785 BCE); thus those that remain are "the remnant.” Ibn Ezra and R. Eliezer of Beaugency take a similar approach.

Rashi, on the other hand, reads this prophecy as aimed at the entire nation and suggests that the entire people are called "Yosef" since he supported them while in Egypt. He evidently gets this from Yosef's own words to his brothers, where he states that God sent him “*la-sum lakhem* ***she'eirit*** *ba-aretz,”* “to place for you a remnant in the land” (*Bereishit* 45:7). Others, noted (anonymously) by Hakham[[8]](#footnote-8), suggest that the people read *she'eirit* as "family" (as in *she'eir*, e.g. *Vayikra* 18:6), and that it doesn't mean "remnant" here. Others, he suggests, read *she'eirit* as remnant, but not referring to any earlier exile or devastation. Rather, it refers to the divine decree already in place — and the hope that, given an impending defeat, at least a remnant might remain.

In the next *shiur*, we will complete our analysis of this dirge-*dirshu*-rebuke-hymn-rebuke-*dirshu*-dirge speech, with an assessment of the "back-half" dirge section.

1. *Da'at Mikra,* p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We would be remiss if we did not note that Hoffmann, along with Shadal and other 19th-century Central European sages, were locked in a battle against the school of Higher Criticism regarding the authorship, dating and "agenda" of *Sefer Devarim* (along with numerous other battles). As such, we ought to keep in mind that there may be a polemic at work in this discussion; see Shadal’s comments at *Devarim* 12:5) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is apparently the approach taken by R. Eliezer of Beaugency and Radak ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The first king of the city that we meet has the titular name *Malki-Tzedek* (*Bereishit* 14:18); the first king of the city that we meet once we return as a nation is *Adoni-Tzedek* (*Yehoshua* 10:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Da'at Mikra* ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)