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**

"א-ל נא, רפא נא לה";  בתוך שאר חולי ישראל.

**Shiur #53**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**Rejection of the *Avoda***

**Part II**

We are midway through our study of the text of the last passage in Chapter 5, comprising seven verses (21-27). In the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-52-prophecies-amos-rejection-avoda-part-i), we covered the text of verses 21-23, which, as we will see in the next *shiur*, is one leg of the structure of the entire passage. We will now continue and study the final four verses of the section over the course of this and the next *shiur*. This *shiur* will be devoted to the oft-quoted (and as oft misrepresented) verse 24, and in the next *shiur* we will complete our study of the text of these seven verses.In the fourth *shiur*, we will present a broader analysis of the passage and its place within the canon. In the final *shiur* of this section, we will assess the structure and subtle message of the passage.

**THE TEXT:**

**Verse 24**

***Ve-yigal ka-mayim mishpat***

**But let justice roll down like water[[1]](#footnote-1)**

As we’ve discussed several times, the prefix letter *vav* takes on various meanings. We might be tempted, at first glance, to interpret a *vav* preceding a verb as “*vav* consecutive,” commonly known as *vav ha-hippukh*, which changes the tense of the verb, in this case, from future to past. However, two things militate against this — first of all, the *vav* is vocalized with a *sheva*; *vav* consecutive is vocalized with *patach*. Secondly, the whole point of the prophecy is what ought to happen, in the future.

As such, we would naturally read it as *vav* conjunctive, to wit: “**And** justice shall roll…” This, however, is also unlikely, as it doesn’t follow the three lines preceding it (which were the focus of the last *shiur*); rather, it presents the alternative, **ideal** picture which should be happening. Therefore, we will translate it as *vav* disjunctive or *vav ha-niggud*: **“But** justice should roll down like water.” Our verse serves as a pivot in the oracle, turning from what **is**to what **ought to be**.This understanding of the function of the *vav* is common throughout **most**of the commentaries[[2]](#footnote-2), but we will see two surprising alternate readings among the Rishonim.

We have accepted the common translation of *ve-yigal* as “roll,” although, as we will see below, not all Rishonim read it this way.All of the standard English translations, beginning with KJV, have “roll” (or some variant).

The verb *galol,[[3]](#footnote-3)* which appears in its varied conjugations in only eighteen places in the canon, is generally associated (in narrative) with rocks. In nearly all of its instances outside of wisdom literature (*Tehillim*, *Mishlei* and *Iyov*), it is used literally, with a range of applications referring to “rolling around,” such as “*Va-Amasa* ***mitgolel*** *ba-dam,”* “Amasa was wallowing in his blood” (*II Shemuel* 20:12).It is prudent to note that a subsidiary noun, *gal*, which primarily means “pile of rocks” (that have been **rolled** together), also refers to waves in the sea (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 48:18, 51:15 [and the related *Yirmeyahu* 31:34]; *Yechezkel* 26:3; *Zekharya* 10:11 — BDB renders these “rollers”). The word *gal* is used in Tannaitic Hebrew to refer to both a pile of rocks (e.g. Mishna, *Eiruvin* 3:4) and a wave (Mishna, *Mikvaot* 5:6). However, all water references, outside of ours, are nominal, “waves.”

The verb appears here in the passive *nifal* form, “justice shall roll,” as opposed to identifying the putative agents that will generate this justice.

We have also used the common translation of *mishpat* (here) as “justice” and *tzedaka* (in the second stich) as “righteousness,” but these translations, as well, are not the only (or necessarily the best) way to read the paired phrase. We will address the meaning of *mishpat* here in our analysis of the second half of the stich with our discussion about *tzedaka*.

At this point, we have a few questions about the opening of this verse: Why does Amos use this unusual word, which rarely appears in verbal form and even less frequently in a metaphorical sense? Why does he use the passive voice, as opposed to something like: and you shall roll justice down like water? A larger question, beyond the syntax and translation considerations, cuts to the import of the verse itself: What does the metaphor **mean**? How does justice roll down like water?

We will address all of these when we’ve completed our phrase-by-phrase analysis of the verse; first let’s see how the Rishonim interpret it.

*VEYIGAL —* THE RISHONIM

Before addressing the meaning of the verb, we should note two Rishonim who read the opening *vav* as *vav* conjunctive.

R. Yosef Kara (ad loc.) comments as follows:

*Ve-yigal ka-mayim mishpat*: like water which passes through temporarily; similarly, their judgments are rushed through.

Ibn Ezra (second commentary, see below), seems to turn away from his first interpretation:

*Ve-yigal ka-mayim mishpat*: the meaning of *ve-yigal* is similar to “Roll a rock towards me” (*I Shemuel* 14:33); and this is that the prophet states: regarding judgment, you did not stand it upright and look at it carefully, in order to extract the truth from it; rather, you would process it quickly.

According to these two interpretations, our verse does not stand in apposition to the foregoing but is a continuation of the indictment. We will follow their interpretive stream and see how they work with the rest of the passage.

As mentioned above, the broad mainstream of interpretation is to read the *vav* as disjunctive and therefore to understand the entire verse as presenting the ideal as opposed to the rejected reality.

Rashi, following Targum Yonatan, interprets *ve-yigal* as the abbreviated form of *yigaleh*, it shall be revealed. He comments:

This is what you ought to do and I will favor you; the justice that you buried and hid should become revealed and flood among you like e’er-sprouting water.

Although not stated explicitly, this seems to be R. Eliezer of Beaugency’s understanding as well:

*Ve-yigal ka-mayim*: that go out to the outskirts and city squares; through this you will be spared.

Of significance is that Jerome’s translation (in the Vulgate) goes in this direction as well:

*Et revelabitur quasi aqua judicium*

Let justice be **disclosed** like water

Beginning with ibn Ezra’s first commentary, however, the mainstream interpretive approach is as we have presented: to see *ve-yigal* as a form of *galol*.

In his first commentary (we have two extant commentaries of ibn Ezra on Amos; his second commentary to this verse was referenced above), he associates *ve-yigal* with the *gulot* (wells) which Kalev grants to his daughter, Akhsa, when she complains that she has been given a parched land (*Yehoshua* 15:19 and *Shoftim* 1:15). This is an unusual interpretation, as it takes a word that functions as a noun (*gulot*) and assumes it to operate as a verb too, “to well” (?).

Radak amplifies ibn Ezra (version #1), associating the verb with *gulot mayim*, and then explains that based on the vocalization of the word, the root is *galol.* He then goes on to explain the meaning: justice should move like water; in explaining the next phrase, he adumbrates: that justice and righteousness should move and not be stopped.

Both Paul[[4]](#footnote-4) and Hakham[[5]](#footnote-5) understand that the imagery is more than prescriptive. The land without water is sere and nothing can grow; in the same way, the justice and righteousness **will be water** that nurtures society. In other words, instead of reading the passage as telling the people that justice **ought to** roll down like water (again, whatever that may mean), Amos is saying that *mishpat* and *tzedaka* **will roll** like water — if allowed to function in the society. Both of them seem to be intrigued by the unusual imagery, as are we, and therefore read the water reference as not merely a metaphor for **how** justice should be made manifest; the metaphor is stronger and speaks to the function of justice and righteousness in Shomeron.

***U-tzdaka ke-nachal eitan***

**And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream**

These twinned concepts of *mishpat u-tzdaka* first appear in the Divine explanation for His selection of Avraham:

*Ki yedativ lema’an asher yetzaveh et banav ve-et beito acharav,*

*veshameru derekh Hashem*

*La-asot* ***tzedaka u-mishpat***

For I know, regarding him (Avraham) that he will command his sons and his household after him, that they will guard the path of Hashem,

Doing acts of righteousness and justice. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

Note that *tzedaka u-mishpat* is defined here as *derekh Hashem,* the path of God. Surprisingly, the pairing of *tzedaka u-mishpat* (in either order) is uncommon throughout the first nine books of *Tanakh* (Torah and the historiography of the conquest, settlement and First Commonwealth, commonly called *Nevi’im Rishonim,* from *Yehoshua* through *Melakhim*); it only appears four times (besides the aforementioned instance in *Bereishit*). Moshe invokes it in his blessing of Gad, referring (apparently) to his own burial spot:

*Vayar reishit lo, ki sham chelkat mechokeik safun vayeiteh roshei am*

***Tzidkat*** *Hashem asa, u-****mishpatav*** *im Yisrael*

He provided the first part for himself, for there was the lawgiver’s portion reserved. He came with the heads of the people.

He did the **righteousness** **of** Hashem, **His laws** with Israel (*Devarim* 33:21)

It is unclear whether this verse presents a similar pairing as ours, as *mishpatav* is correctly rendered “His laws”; as opposed to the **concept** of law, which refers to the specific legal framework given through Moshe, the *mechokeik*. In order to see whether the parallel here is the same, we will have to get a better grasp on the twinned mention of *mishpat u-tzdaka* in our passage.

The other three times are in the early days of the monarchy. First there is *I Shemuel* 12:7:

Now therefore stand still, that I may plead with you (*ishafeta*) before Hashem concerning all the righteous acts (*tzidkot*) of Hashem, which He did to you and to your fathers.

Admittedly, this is not a classic pairing of *mishpat u-tzdaka*; rather, the verse utilizes the passive verb *ishafeta,* and the issue regarding which he will plead is the list of God’s *tzedakot*.

The other two mentions are much closer to the trope which originates with Avraham:

And David reigned over all Israel; and David did justice and righteousness (*mishpat u-tzdaka*) unto all his people. (*II Shemuel* 8:15, cf. *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 18:14)

Similarly, when the Queen of Sheva, in her amazement at Shelomo’s court, exclaims:

Blessed be Hashem your God, who delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel; because Hashem loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness (*mishpat u-tzdaka*). (*I Melakhim* 10:9; cf. *II Divrei* *Ha-yamim* 9:8)

*MISHPAT* AND *TZEDAKA* IN PROPHETIC ORATORY

*Yeshayahu*

The paired phrase appears numerous times (twenty-five, by my count) in Prophetic rhetoric, including in our verse. In most of them, *mishpat* is presented in parallel **but not synonymously** with *tzedaka*. For instance, the first mention in the prophetic canon is the famous line in Yeshayahu’s opening prophecy (1:27):

*Tziyon be-****mishpat*** *tipadeh*

*Ve-shaveha bi-****tzdaka***

Zion will be redeemed through *mishpat*

And her returnees with *tzedaka*

In this passage, *mishpat* is not **equated** to *tzedaka*; rather, the implementation of each as a necessary corrective will effect a different component of salvation.

The same may be said about Yeshayahu’s next (in the sequence of chapters as canonized) mention (5:7):

*Vaykav le-****mishpat*** *ve-hinei mispach*

*Li-****tzdaka*** *ve-hinei tze’aka*

He looked for *mishpat* but behold it was violence (*mispach*)

[He looked] for *tzedaka* but behold it was an outcry (*tze’aka*)

In this dirge over the fouled “vineyard of Israel,” Yeshayahu engages in some of his clever wordplay, contrasting the desired but unrealized *mishpat* with the similar-sounding and ubiquitous *mispach* (violence) and the elusive *tzedaka* with the painful outcry (*tze’aka*), the result, presumably, of **not finding** *tzedaka*. It seems that, again, the two terms are not synonymous but are rather parallel, desired components of the leadership which are painfully absent.

The Divine response to this lacuna (5:16) bears this out:

*Vayigbah Hashem Tzevaot ba-****mishpat***

*Ve-ha’El ha-kadosh nikdash bi-****tzdaka***

But Hashem of hosts is exalted through *mishpat*,

And God the Holy One is sanctified through *tzedaka*

The same is true for nearly every other mention in *Yeshayahu*, including the famous (56:1)

*Shimru* ***mishpat*** *va-asu* ***tzedaka***[[6]](#footnote-6)

Guard *mishpat* and do *tzedaka*

The two exceptions are notable:

That the government may be increased, and of peace there be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it through justice and through righteousness (*be-mishpat u-vitzdaka*), from henceforth even forever… (9:6)

Hashem is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness (*mishpat u-tzdaka*). (33:15)

*Yirmeyahu*

The first two mentions in *Yirmeyahu* (4:2 and 9:23) both describe God as “living in” or “doing” (c*hesed) mishpat u-tzdaka*.

In Chapter 22, a prophecy that Yirmeyahu is to deliver to Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, he adjures the king:

Thus says Hashem: Do justice and righteousness (*mishpat u-tzdaka*). (v. 3)

Further on in that same speech, we find:

Shalt you reign, because you strive to excel in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness (*mishpat u-tzdaka*)? Then it was well with him. (v. 15)

In an eschatological prophecy, Yirmeyahu foretells, regarding a scion of the Davidic line:

Behold, the days come, says Hashem, that I will raise unto David a righteous shoot, and he shall reign as king and prosper, and shall do justice and righteousness (*mishpat u-tzdaka*) in the land.

This prophecy repeats, with slight variations but including the mention of *mishpat u-tzdaka*, in 33:15.

*Yechezkel* and *Trei Asar*

Yechezkel invokes the paired phrase twice in his revolutionary declaration regarding personal accountability (Ch. 18), in each case speaking about a theoretical saintly person who

*Asa* ***mishpat u-tzdaka***

He invokes it again, in the exact same context, three times in the parallel prophecy (Ch. 33).

The final mention in *Yechezkel* is a departure from this context:

Thus says Hashem God: Let it suffice you, O princes of Israel; remove violence and spoil, and do justice and righteousness; take away your exactions from My people, says Hashem God. (45:9)

With the exception of the three mentions of *tzedaka* in proximity to *mishpat* in *Amos*, this completes our study of *mishpat* with *tzedaka* in the canonized collection of Prophetic rhetoric; Amos is the only one of the dozen “minor” prophets who uses the phrase at all.[[7]](#footnote-7) One of them appears earlier in our chapter (5:7) and one in the next chapter (6:12), which we will analyze when we get there in our course of study. There is, of course, our verse, which is the catalyst for this analysis.

As we will see, all three occurrences in *Amos* fall in the line with the majority of mentions in Prophetic rhetoric and present *mishpat* and *tzedaka* as **parallel** praiseworthy and desired characteristics, but **not** in a compound phrase.

*Ketuvim*

In *Ketuvim*, the pair appears exclusively in *Tehillim* and *Mishlei*. In some of these instances, the words are clearly presented as varied positive characteristics or events (e.g. *Mishlei* 8:2, 16:8; *Tehillim* 106:3). In the others, the text either describes the ideal man (*Mishlei* 21:3) — much like the first five selections from *Yechezkel* — or else it describes God, Who “does” ***mishpat u-tzdaka*** (99:4) and, curiously, favors (or loves) ***tzedaka u-mishpat*** (back to the Avraham sequence of *Bereishit* 18).

*Tehillim* does have several other verses (e.g. 36:7, 72:1) which mention *tzedaka* and *mishpat*, but they aren’t close enough or bonded by a single verb (such as *“asot”*) to be included in our survey.

After we have fairly comprehensively surveyed these instances, we will now turn our attention to trying to decipher what it all means.

A PROPOSAL

As even a cursory read through *Tanakh* makes clear, *tzedaka* (and its related *tzedek)* is a mindset, an approach, a priority system which informs behavior. Whether it involves going the extra mile to help the poor debtor (*Devarim* 24:13), extending excessive trust in one (or One) who is deserving of that credibility (*Bereishit* 15:6; see Rashi vs. ibn Ezra *et alii* ad loc.) Perhaps R. David Tzvi Hoffmann’s definition (at *Bereishit* 15:6) sums it up most adroitly:

***Tzedaka***: that is to say, the merit of intent and action which are upstanding before Him is considered for him (Avraham) to be a merit.

*Mishpat*, which has several related meanings (including “normal custom,” as well as “ordinance”), in our context means “judicial process.” *Tzedaka/ tzedek* and *mishpat* cannot be synonymous as they aren’t even in the same semantic field. One refers to proper attitudes while the other indicates a particular process.

In the many places in *Tanakh* where a person is praised for practicing each of these things (or is encouraged to do so, e.g. *Yeshayahu* 56:1, “*Shimru mishpat va-asu tzedaka”)*, it means that one is being exhorted to both internalize and actualize proper attitudes towards others, as well as enabling and promoting proper judicial procedure.This is the meaning of the split *mishpat* and *tzedaka* in our verse, which we will address below.

When these two essentially unrelated terms are joined together, as in the report of David’s rule *(II Shemuel* 8, *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 18) and in the praise for God (in *Yirmeyahu* and *Tehillim*), I would like to propose that we should read it as a hendiadys, “two that are one.” A hendiadys is identified when there are two nouns and we understand that the second is really an adjective. For instance, in *Tehillim* 115:1, “*Lo lanu…al* ***chasdekha*** *al* ***amitekha*,”** “Not for us… for **Your kindness,** for **Your truth.”** For what are we praying? God’s kindness or His truth? Rather, the phrase is to be read as “the truth of Your kindness” where *emet* modifies c*hesed*.

In the same way, when the *Tanakh* speaks of *mishpat u-tzdaka*, it should be understood as *tzidkat mishpat*, or, perhaps more elegantly, *mishpat shel tzedek*, righteous justice. Note that this hendiadys only appears in the context of a king or the King of kings (or in describing a theoretical person, as in *Mishlei*). The king, who is seen (throughout *Tanakh*) as the one responsible for the justice system, is the only one who can ensure that the process (*mishpat*) is accomplished based on the proper underlying value system and attitude (*tzedaka*). This is why Yirmeyahu can make such a demand of Yehoyakim and invoke Yoshiyahu’s proper leadership. This may be the undercurrent of meaning in *Tehillim* 72:1, where the psalmist prays that God grants His *mishpatim* to the king and His *tzedaka* to the crown prince.

BACK TO OUR PASSAGE

Now that we have distinguished between the two — a just and compassionate attitude towards others as distinct from the proper procedure in court — let’s return to our verse.Following the mainstream approach that the prophet is describing what **ought to be,** he exhorts us to have *mishpat* — i.e. the proper legal procedure for all, with no favoritism shown to anyone — roll down like water. Following Paul and Hakham’s suggestions, the notion is that the society will not flourish without enabling full access for all to legal recourse and relief. This is a limited demand with clear lines to it, just as a *gal* of water, great though it may be, is a single “roll” of water. He then takes his demand further and envisions a sea-change (pun intended) in the prevailing attitude towards the underdog and the disenfranchised which will rush, like a torrent in a mighty stream. The *nachal eitan*, the powerful stream, is limited by the canyon walls that border it; but it is capable of allowing an enormous amount of water, rushing at whatever speed is generated by its source.

This is the vision that Amos sees for the people, the preferred mode of worship of God, as opposed to the rejected offerings and hymns (of the previous three verses).

In the next *shiur*, we will complete our study of these seven verses.

**For Further Study:**

Hendiadys:

Yitzhak Avishur: “Pairs of Synonymous Words in the Construct State (and in Appositional Hendiadys*)* in Biblical Hebrew,” Semitics 2 (1971–1972), pp. 17-81.

1. This verse is famous in Christian homiletics; perhaps the most well-known modern use of it is in Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in 1963. It was a staple in the oratory of the civil rights movement in 1960s America. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NLT goes so far as to translate: “Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Verbs that follow the form *palol,* i.e.where the second and third radicals are the same consonant, may also be represented with a *lamed-hei* form, that is where the final radical becomes a *hei*. For instance, *kalol* (to curse) is related to *kalo* (to treat “lightly”). This is, in turn, related to the complex verb *kalkel*, where the two distinct consonants are repeated. In our case, the verb *galol*, to roll, is also presented as a *lamed-hei* form, for instance in our word, in which the final *lamed* is absent. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Da’at Mikra*, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In 32:16 and 59:14, the two seem to be part of a single phrase, but *mishpat* is marked with a pause and the two are, again, presented in parallel but not as a compound phrase. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One may argue for *Mikha* 7:9, but I don’t believe that it qualifies for our study. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)