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 #54**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**Rejection of the *Avoda***

**Part III**

We are partway through our study of the text of the last passage in Chapter 5, comprising seven verses (21-27). In the previous *shiur*, we covered the text of verse 24, which, as we will see in the next *shiur*, is the pivot verse of the passage. We focused on the idiomatic pair *mishpat u-tzdaka*, how it is used throughout *Tanakh* and its likely import here. We will now continue and study the final three verses of the section over the course of this *shiur*. In the fourth and final *shiur*, we will present a broader analysis of the passage and its place within the canon, along with an assessment of the structure and subtle message of the passage.

**THE TEXT:**

**VERSE 25**

*Ha-zevachim u-mincha higashtem li ba-midbar arba'im shana, Beit Yisrael*

Did you bring me sacrifices and offering during the forty years in the wilderness, O House of Yisrael?

The opening *hei* is rhetorical *hei*, turning the entire statement into a question. What is unclear from this question (reminiscent of God’s response to David’s request to build a Temple; see below), is whether He is stating that Israel did not **offer** these in the desert, or that He did not **command** them to be brought? If the former, the import of the statement is a bit odd: how would His not having demanded offerings in the desert mean anything to the audience in Shomeron? If, on the other hand, it means that He did not command such offerings, then we understand the message (offerings are not the vital component of the relationship) but this doesn’t mesh well with the words. If that were the case, it should be read in a similar fashion to God’s response to David’s request to build a House for God:

Thus says the Lord: “Shall you build Me a house for Me to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the day that I brought up the Israelites out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. In all places wherein I have walked among all the Israelites, spoke I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed My people Israel, saying: Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?” (*II Shemuel* 7:5-7)

It seems that this is the same “message” as that of Amos: that God does not desire this thing (a House, offerings); or at least, they are not crucial for His Presence to be manifest among the people. The unusual style of our verse might be read as follows: Since your ancestors did not offer *zevachim and menachot* to Me in the desert**, yet they benefited from an unshakeable and protective Presence**, it must be clear that these things are not central to the relationship. This is not to say, of course, that God does not desire the offerings (approximately a quarter or more of the commandments in the Torah directly relate to the Temple practice), but to say that they do not have **intrinsic** value and, brought by people whose society does not reflect the sanctity He commands, are neither desired nor accepted.

This sentiment is expressed approximately 300 years before Amos by Shemuel — and again by Yirmeyahu, nearly 200 years after Amos.

When Shaul, responding to Shemuel, tries to excuse the people’s keeping the fattened animals of Amalek alive “in order to slaughter them for Hashem, your God,” the prophet responds:

*Ha-cheifetz la-Shem be-olot u-zvachim, ki-shmoa be-kol Hashem?*

Does God desire burnt offerings and peace offerings, as much as obeying the voice of God?

*Hinei shemoa mi-zevach tov, le-hakshiv mei-cheilev eilim*

Behold obedience is greater than the offering; to heed (God’s word is more desired) than the fat of rams. (*I Shemuel* 15:22)

Half a millennium later, as the Jews of Judea prefer to believe the false prophets, who are saying that God would never destroy His house, Yirmeyahu intones:

*…oloteikhem sefu al zivcheikhem ve-ikhlu vasar*

…add your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh.

*Ki lo dibarti et avoteikhem ve-lo tzivitim be-yom hotzi’i otam mei-eretz Mitzrayim al-divrei ola va-zavach*

For I spoke not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices;

*Ki im et ha-davar ha-zeh tziviti otam l-eimor: shimu ve-koli vehayiti lakhem l-Eilokim ve-atem tihyu li le-am va-halakhtem be-khol ha-derekh asher atzaveh etkhem lema’an yitav lakhem*

But this thing I commanded them, saying: “Hearken unto My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people; and walk you in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.” (*Yirmeyahu* 7:21-23)

Many commentators read Amos along the Shemuel-Yirmeyahu continuum, expressing a core value of the prophets, that it is obeisance to God and the establishment of a just society that fulfills God’s will, not the mere offering of sacrifices.

However, when we compare these three passages, we note a significant difference between Shemuel’s rebuke of Shaul and Yirmeyahu’s words to the Judeans on the one hand, and Amos’s oratory to the Shomeroni audience on the other.

Shemuel seems to take aim at the entire enterprise of offerings, including sin offerings, and Yirmeyahu explicitly mentions *olot* along with *zevachim*. It is curious that Amos mentions *zevachim* and *menachot*, but omits *olot*. A *zevach*, which literally means “slaughtered offering” and thus could refer to any mammal brought as a *korban*, typically refers to *shelamim*, the peace offering, which is shared by the altar, the priests and the donor (and his or her party). A *mincha*, which translates to “tribute” (see, *inter alia*, *Shoftim* 3:15, 17-18), when used within the context of Temple offerings, refers to a grain (or “cereal”) offering, the simplest and least expensive (see *Vayikra* 5:11) one that may be brought. In other words, it is even those offerings which either bring greatest benefit to the donor (*shelamim*) or else cost the donor the least (*mincha*) that Amos is highlighting. This may be interpreted in two nearly opposite ways.

On the one hand, the audience may hear a rebuke that their offerings, which are self-serving (pun intended), are not desired by God; if they were to offer *olot*, God would be pleased. This is, as seen above, not in line with either Shemuel’s message nor is it consistent with Yirmeyahu’s words. That is not, in and of itself, enough of a reason to interpret Amos differently, but it does somewhat sever his message from the other two. On the other hand, he may be addressing the *chomer (*less obvious) and leaving the *kal* (more obvious) message to the audience’s own imagination. He may be saying that **even** those offerings which involve the donor or cost little are not what God desires; certainly not an expensive *ola* which would be completely burned on the altar and brings no (immediate material) benefit to the people.

In any case, the message here is broadly consistent with the prophetic tradition and fits perfectly after verse 24, with its call for both justice and *tzedaka*. It is vital to note that, unlike the excessive manner in which these passages were read (and utilized) by 19th and 20th-century reformers, it is not a **rejection** of the sacrificial order per se, but rather a **contextualization**of worship which demands that acceptable offerings are those which are accompanied by a broken spirit, which are purchased with honestly gotten gains and which reflect the sentiments of a just society that wishes to enshrine the focal point of its value system in the Divine.

**VERSE 26**

These two verses, which conclude our septad, reorient us towards the punishment awaiting the Shomeroni society. Verse 26 is, perhaps, the most inscrutable verse in the entire book.

*U-nsatem et Sikkut malkekhem*

You will bear Sikkut your king

This is the only place where Amos refers explicitly to idolatrous practices (as opposed to referencing the cult-sites of the northern kingdom which were, by and large, used for Divine worship, albeit wrongly). The gods mentioned here, Sikkut and Kiyun, are not mentioned elsewhere in the canon, although in the list of foreign gods worshipped by Sancheiriv’s exiles in the Shomeron (*II Melakhim* 17), there is a mention of Sukkot Benot, which may, in part, refer to the same god.

Most scholars believe that Sikkut is a Hebraization (and deliberate mangling; see below) of Sag-kud, an Assyrian deity known from several cuneiform tablets. As ibn Ezra (ad loc.) points out, the star of this god is Saturn. Although several scholars suggested that the text is either a later interpolation or references something else, since Amos’s career ends before the Assyrian conquest, Paul defends the integrity of the text, noting the scope of the expansion by Yerovam II, the king during Amos’s tenure:

During the period that Amos prophesized, Yerovam II expanded the borders of his rule to Damascus and Hama in northern Syria (*II Melakhim* 14:28) and, thus, the Israelites came into contact with the Mesopotamian culture, which had left its impact on Aramean areas; here, there is an echo of Mesopotamian worship which infiltrated Israel via Aram.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The first thing which strikes us is that, on the heels of a prophecy condemning the improper offering of sacrifices to God, comes a bold ridiculing of the idolatrous worship in which the people have engaged. Does this mean that there are different groups in the northern aristocracy — one that brings improper offerings to God and another that out-and-out commits apostasy and shows devotion to foreign gods? Or is this all the same group, which, in true syncretistic fashion, attempts to “cover all bases” by bringing offerings to its ancestral God as well as the regional gods of whom it has learned? (See *I Melakhim* 18:21.) The simple reading of our text bears out the latter understanding, which puts their offerings into an even starker context — not only are they acting unethically, but their devotional record is equally stained.

Sikkut here is vocalized (as is Kiyun) in an odd form, as the original god-name with which we are familiar would be “sakkat” or something of that nature. Commentators, both traditional as well as modern, have pointed out that *Tanakh*’s consistently acerbic style when mentioning idols serves to belittle them by altering the name. Sometimes it is an outright change of the letters — e.g. *Ba’al Zevul* (lord of the high place) becomes *Ba’al Zevuv* (lord of the flies). Other times, the vocalization is changed; in our cases, to take on the vowels of *shikkutz* (a disgusting thing, regularly used in legal, narrative and prophetic texts to refer to idols). As such, *sak-kat* becomes Sikkut and *kavanim* (perhaps, see *Yirmeyahu* 44:19; but there and in *Yirmeyahu* 7:18 it means a type of offering given to the “queen of the heavens”) becomes Kiyun.

Here, Sikkut is called “your king,” which may be interpreted in two distinct ways. It may be, as R. Yosef Kara (and others) read it, a form of *Molekh —* i.e. “your Molekh” (so too R. Eliezer of Beaugency); alternatively, it may mean “king,” and the accusation is that the people have made this god into their ruler (so Radak and ibn Ezra).

The image of the people carrying their images with them as they are exiled is beautifully portrayed in *Yeshayahu* 46:1-2, 7, where the gods are incapable of carrying the people and the people must carry them.

*Ve-et Kiyun tzalmeikhem*

And Kiyun your images

As noted above, Kiyunmay be a deliberate mis-vocalization of *kavanim*, but that is a bit difficult as *kavanim* is something (cakes?) to be brought before an idol, not the name of a god. The Rishonim have several suggestions to resolve this *hapax legomenon*.

Rashi, ever so tersely, sees Sikkut as the same as Kiyun, evidently two names for the same god. We will see a similar approach in ibn Ezra’s commentary below.

R. Yosef Kara reads Kiyun as synonymous with *tikkun*, repair — i.e. “the proper form of your images” (similarly, R. Eliezer of Beaugency). According to this reading, the passage is undoubtedly facetious.

Radak cites the *kavanim* approach, interpreting the term as referring to cakes to be left before the idol, but he prefers ibn Ezra’s view, that both Sikkut and Kiyun are gods associated with Saturn. Ibn Ezra relates this to contemporary (12th-century) Arabic usage. Both Paul[[2]](#footnote-2) and Hakham[[3]](#footnote-3) cite ibn Ezra approvingly.

*Kokhav eloheikhem*

Your star-gods

Whether we are to read this phrase as translated (so that the gods worshipped are astral) or whether the construct form means that this image is “the star of your gods,” the intent is the same. These images that the people have made for themselves and which they would (theoretically) carry with them into exile, are foreign deities associated with heavenly bodies.

The difference between *kokhav eloheikhem* (literally “the star of your gods”) and *kokheveikhem ha-elohi’im* (a made-up phrase which would translate more directly to “your star-gods”) is the emphasis placed on the image as opposed to the star that it represents.

Discussion of this essential question about the nature of pagan belief is well beyond the scope of this *shiur*. The difficulty of this phrase, however, is easy to see, as a quick perusal of the range of translations will demonstrate. Here are just a few:

But you have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which you made to yourselves. (KJV)

You also carried Sikkuth your king

And Chiun, your idols,

The star of your gods,

Which you made for yourselves. (NKJV)

No, you served your pagan gods — Sakkuth your king god and Kaiwan your star god — the images you made for yourselves. (NLT)

You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god — which you made for yourselves. (NIV)

You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; (RSV)

*U-nsatem* is rendered as “you carried”, “you will carry” or “you served.”

*Sikkut* might be a form of *sukka* (tabernacle). This is not only the King James reading, as the Septuagint also invokes Molekh here.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Malkekhem* is variously translated as “your king” and “your Moloch.”

*Kiyun* might be a proper name or “pedestal.”

*Kokhav eloheikhem* is either “your star-god” or “the star of your gods” (see discussion above); and these five translations do not come close to exhausting all the renditions of this complex passage.

*Asher asitem lakhem*

Which you have fashioned for yourselves

Throughout *Tanakh*, an inherent component of the polemic against idolatry is the fact that the devotee fashions his gods himself, literally “*ma’asei yedei adam,”* “the handiwork of man” (*Tehillim* 115:4).

**VERSE 27**

*Vehigleiti etkhem mei-hala le-Damasek*

I will exile you beyond Damascus

Returning us to a theme from the first of Amos’s oracles against the nations, where he threatens Aram that they will be exiled **from** Damascus (1:5), the people will be exiled past that city. Considering the likely cultural conversation between Shomeron and Aram, noted above, it is unusual that the punishment for engaging with Aramean gods (via Assyria) would be exile in that direction. Note, however, the poetic justice theme which consistently appears in *Tanakh* when the Jewish people replace God with an “other”. For instance, when the people insist on enshrining a dynastic monarchy (*I Shemuel* 8), God warns them that after the king will oppress them with his exorbitant and self-serving taxes, they will call out to God but He will not answer — as if to say: You preferred a human king, call out to him!

A more explicit expression of this Divine measure is found in *Shoftim* 10:

And the Israelites cried unto the Lord, saying: “We have sinned against You, in that we have forsaken our God, and have served the Baalim.”

And the Lord said unto the Israelites: “Did not I save you from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites, and from the Philistines? The Zidonians also, and the Amalekites, and the Maonites, did oppress you; and you cried unto Me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; wherefore I will save you no more. **Go and cry unto the gods which you have chosen**; let them save you in the time of your distress.” (*Shoftim* 10:10-14)

Perhaps this precept is at work here. If the Shomeroni aristocracy and monarchy desire such a close tie with the Aramean culture and are willing to adopt a devotion to the Assyrian gods, then let them find their future in that land (which, of course, is an experiment doomed to failure). Hence, the sentence is exile beyond (i.e. north and east of) Damascus.

There may also be another form of poetic justice at work here (*mida ke-neged mida*). At this point, the northern kingdom has conquered territory all the way to Damascus and has entered the area as victors, carrying back images of the Assyrian gods that had proliferated there. Now, they are destined to return by the same route — but as exiles, shamefully carrying those selfsame gods as a sign of defeat and shame.

*Amar Hashem Elokei Tzevaot shemo*

Says Hashem, Whose Name is the God of hosts

Amos concludes a number of his oracles (or oracle-sets) with *Amar Hashem*. At nine different points, he refers to God as *Tzevaot*, but only twice does he add *shemo —* that *Tzevaot* is a **name** of God. The other instance is in 4:13, as part of the hymn which references astral movements as they relate to morning and evening. In our case, I’d like to suggest that the mention of *Tzevaot* is in response to the identification of the foreign gods as *kokhav eloheikhem*, “the star-gods” or “the star of your gods”. All of these images, their stars and so forth, are all so much vanity and nothingness; thus says Hashem, Whose Name is “God of the [heavenly] hosts”.

In the final *shiur* of this segment (and the final *shiur* until after the *chagim*), we will take a broader view of these seven verses and assess the structure and message.

**For Further Study:**

Sikkut and Kiyun:

Stanley Gevirtz, “New Look at an Old Crux: Amos 5:26,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87:3 (September 1968), pp. 267–76.

Charles D. Isbell, “Another Look at Amos 5:26*,” Journal of Biblical Literature* 97:1 (March 1978), pp. 97–99.

1. *Mikra Le-Yisrael,* p. 100; see also the entry in *Encyclopedia Mikra’it*, Vol. 5, p. 1037. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Da’at Mikra*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For some reason LXX renders *kiyun* as “Raephan.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)