YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #55**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**Rejection of the *Avoda***

**Part IV**

We have completed our study of the seven verses that make up the end of Chapter 5, after devoting three *shiurim* to the language, imagery and possible import of the specific phrases. To conclude, as promised, we will take a wider view of the entire passage, looking at its structure and its overall message. When we resume our *shiurim* after the *chagim*, we will begin our study of the next oracle, beginning at *Amos* 6:1.

In order to get a handle on the structure, we will reproduce the text of the seven verses in English.

**THE TEXT**

I hate *(sanei****ti****)*, I despise *(ma’as****ti****)* your feasts (*chage****ikhem*)**

And I will take no delight (***a****riach)* in your solemn assemblies (*atzerote****ikhem****)*

Yea, though you offer Me *(****li****)* burnt-offerings and your flour-offerings, (*minchote****ikhem****)*

I will not accept *(****e****rtzeh)* them,

Neither will I regard *(****a****bit)* the peace-offerings of your fat beasts (*shelem meri’ei****khem****)*

Take you away from Me *(mei-al****ai****)* the noise of your songs (*shire****kha****)*

And let Me not hear *(****e****shma)* the melody of your psalteries (*nevale****kha****)*

But let justice roll down like the waters

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream

Did you bring Me (***li***) sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness

O House of Yisrael?

You will bear Sikkut your king (*malke****khem****)*

And Kiyun your images (*tzalmei****khem****)*

Your star-gods (*elohei****khem****)*

Which you have fashioned for yourselves (*la****khem****)*

I will exile *(vehiglei****ti****)* you *(et****khem****)* beyond Damascus

Says Hashem, Whose Name is the God of hosts.

THE STRUCTURE

As can be seen from the graphic presentation, these seven verses are arranged as a chiasmus, with the pivot verse (“But let justice roll down like the waters / And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”) squarely in the middle. The components of the structure are not as neatly laid out as we would instinctively like them to be. The concluding verse seems to be unmatched in the first half.

In addition, the first half (until the pivot verse) is fully devoted to a rejection of the sacrificial practices brought (ostensibly) to God, whereas the second half (after the pivot verse) apparently has three distinct messages; first (v. 25) a somewhat familiar rebuke regarding the (errantly) assumed centrality of offerings to the relationship with God; then (v. 26) the hard-to-decipher invoking of the people’s (imagined?) engagement with Assyrian deities; finally (v. 27), the punishment, evocative of the oracles against the nations that open the book.

Note that in the translation above I have transliterated twenty words, eleven of which have the second person pronominal suffix -***khem***(plural) or -***kha***(singular). The other nine all have first person prefixes or suffixes, either as conjugated verbs (e.g. *ma’asti)* or, as nouns, in the accusative case *(mei-alai, li)*. This interplay between “Me” and “you” (or “you all”) may hold the key to understanding the structural wisdom and the underlying message of the passage. It may also help to resolve some of the difficulties we raised in the previous *shiur* regarding the inclusion of Sikkut and Kiyun in this passage.

WORSHIP AND DEVOTION: A VITAL TANGENT

Even before the Jewish people become a nation at the Exodus, they engage in worship-acts, specifically revolving around animal offerings. Before leaving Egypt, they are commanded to purchase, prepare, slaughter, roast and eat the *korban pesach* — defined as an act of *avoda,* worship. Upon arriving at Sinai (or soon after), Moshe builds an altar and offers up *olot* and *zevachim,* as detailed in *Shemot* 24.

In the next chapter, the Israelites are commanded to construct a *Mishkan.* While this Tabernacle has other functions — such as serving as a vehicle for continued revelation, a “portable Mt. Sinai” to borrow from Ramban’s imagery, an abode for God’s Presence — it is the exclusive locus for offerings. As to how frequently this purpose is realized during the wilderness years, this is the subject of a spirited debate in the Gemara (see *inter alii*, BT *Chagiga* 6).

In any case, there is no question that the Israelites are commanded to offer up *korbanot* on specific occasions, as acts of thanksgiving or as acts of expiation or atonement along with the regular public offerings (*korbanot tzibbur*).

Nonetheless, there has always been a marked and palpable tension between “worship” and “devotion.” Is the major focus the worship-act or the devotional-mindset? Is the main goal to perform the ritual, commanded acts or is it to inculcate and intensify spiritual, ethical and charitable attitudes? The confusion between worship (the ritual act) and devotion (an internal, all-encompassing — one might almost say obsessive — desire to cleave to God and to shape values and acts per His will) should not exist, yet these ideas have always been in tension.

Arguably, the first example of this phenomenon (and one of the worst) is the actions of the deputy *kohanim*, the sons of Eli, whose behavior towards people coming to the *Mishkan* in Shilo is so horrendous that they make God’s offering an offensive thing to people (see *I Shemuel* 2). People keep coming to Shilo as they feel that their worship-duties obligate them to do so, yet those officiants who act on their behalf surely fail to exhibit any sense of devotion to God.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this tension — and, if push comes to shove, which side is to be favored — is the passage we quoted in an earlier shiur. When Shaul excuses the sparing of fat Amalekite animals to Shemuel “*lema’an zevo’ach la-Shem Elokekha*,” “in order to offer them to Hashem, your God” (*I Shemuel* 15:15), Shemuel castigates him with the following powerful words:

*Ha-cheifetz la-Shem be-olot u-zevachim ki-shmoa be-kol Hashem*

Does Hashem desire burnt offerings and sacrifices, as much as obeying the voice of Hashem?

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

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,

And to hearken than the fat of rams. (ibid. v. 22)

The history of the Temple extends until (and including, and beyond) the horrific story of the two *kohanim* who run up the ramp to the top of the altar in order to be the first one there to scoop the ashes; the one who is behind draws a knife and stabs his fellow priest in the heart (!) in order to “merit the mitzva” (!) as related in BT *Yoma* 23a. What may be an even more galling example of misplaced “worship-urgency” is the father of the dying priest’s reaction, exhorting the other priests to remove the knife before it becomes ritually impure at his own son’s death(!).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Sadly, this state of affairs does not end with the destruction of the Temple. We live in a constant tension between worship and devotion, trying to do all of our commanded and customary acts correctly, while maintaining an awareness and drive as to what it’s all about. How often do we hear people loudly and rudely “correcting” a *ba’al keria* or *ba’al tefilla* (when a correction may not even be called for)? They are ready to embarrass someone publicly and disrupt the *tefilla* just to get it “right.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Examples, unfortunately, abound (but I digress).

AMOS AND THE SHOMERONI “WORSHIP”

If God is rejecting the offerings brought by Amos’s Shomeroni audience, it means that they have been offering animals, flour-offerings and the like to God; He can’t very well reject something that hasn’t been offered *to* Him. Nevertheless, as highlighted in the transliteration above, all of these offerings have been “yours,” i.e. “your *olot*” and “your *menachot*.”

It is as if God is saying: They are **your** festival offerings and **your** assemblies; **your** grain offerings and **your** fattened beasts. They are **not Mine.** In other words, you worship without devotion; you perform the ritual act but you do not have the requisite and desired motivation and sensitivity (or even sensibility).

A NEW APPROACH

With this in mind, let’s reevaluate the passage, given its structure, and see it from a new angle.

I’d like to propose a premise: that the Shomeroni audience was **never involved in Sikkut-worship or in the Kiyun-cult** and that the mention of these Assyrian gods must have surprised them. As we pointed out in the last *shiur*, Israelite involvement with these worship-forms is highly unlikely, at least at this point in time, given the contemporary state of Israelite-Assyrian interaction (pretty much nonexistent).

God is rejecting the “kosher” worship of Shomeron because the societal backdrop against which it takes place is polluted with the moral depravity of a sort that poisons the core of true “devotion”.

Correspondingly, Yeshayahu spells this out:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?

Says Hashem;

I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams,

And the fat of fed beasts;

And I delight not in the blood

Of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats.

When you come to appear before Me,

Who has required this at your hand,

To trample My courts?

Bring no more vain oblations;

It is an offering of abomination unto Me;

New moon and sabbath, the holding of convocations —

I cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly.

Your new moons and your appointed seasons My soul hates;

They are a burden unto Me; I am weary to bear them.

And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide Mine eyes from you; Yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear;

**Your hands are full of blood**. (1:11-15)

Yeshayahu is addressing the worship of God at His chosen house, in Yerushalayim. God utterly rejects it and sees those who come to make a pilgrimage to His house or who come to participate in the worship as “trampling My courts.” Woe to the ears that hear such imprecations! Even though this is the “correct place” for worship (unlike the various sanctuaries in the northern kingdom, chiefly Beit El and Dan), it is rejected. Why? “Your hands are full of blood”.

As we see later in that prophecy, the way to return to a state where the offerings will no longer be considered an abomination is

Wash you, make you clean,

Put away the evil of your doings

From before Mine eyes,

Cease to do evil;

Learn to do well;

Seek justice, relieve the oppressed,

Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (ibid. vv. 16-17)

For offerings, properly brought, in the “right place” and by the “right people” to be favored and accepted by God, the mores driving that society must reflect God’s path of performing righteousness and justice, “*la-asot tzedaka u-mishpat”* (*Bereishit* 18:19).

To put it succinctly, we will cite *Mikha*:

Will Hashem be pleased with thousands of rams,

With ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,

The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

It has been told to you, O man, what is good,

And what Hashem does require of you:

Only to do justly (*asot* *mishpat*), and to love mercy (*ahavat chesed*), and to walk humbly with your God. (*Mikha* 6:7-8)

How much more so when the worship itself is done in the “wrong place,” by the “wrong people” (see *I Melakhim* 12:31-32)! Even if all else is done per the instructions of *Sefer Vayikra*, these essential elements, which are the *sine qua non* for favorable acceptance, are corrupted.

AND BACK TO “SIKKUT” AND “KIYUN”

Much as one of the central programmatic agendas of *Tanakh* is to polemicize against (and ultimately obliterate) paganism, the prophets will sometimes use pagan practices or deities as a reference point for evil. In other words, when identifying deviant behavior in society, they may mark the people as pagan worshippers even though the people have neither switched allegiances nor sworn fealty to other gods.

For instance, when the people request/ demand of Shemuel that he appoint a king, God reckons this as an expression of rebellion against Him and as another example of idolatrous behavior:

And Hashem said to Shemuel: “Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not be king over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, in that they have forsaken Me, and served other gods, so do they also unto you.” (*I Shemuel* 8:7-8).

The gist of this association seems to be as follows: If you’re going to reject Me and demand a flesh-and-blood ruler, you might as well be worshipping other gods…

I believe that this is what is happening here. Instead of reading the mentions of Sikkut and Kiyun as descriptions of foreign worship engaged in by the Shomeroni audience, Amos may be invoking not only foreign but essentially odious cults to heighten the sense of God’s rejection of their unethical judiciary and society. To wit: If you are going to treat the downtrodden as you do (see *Amos* 2:6-8), you may as well be worshipping the foreign gods of a distant empire, an empire which is taking aim at you!

REASSESSING THE STRUCTURE

We can now revisit the structure and get a better picture of the underlying message.

First, let’s reassess the ubiquitous use of “you” and “Me” in this passage. Amos’s essential message is that worship of God has to be about a relationship between “you” and “Me.” Right now, Amos is telling his audience the following on God’s behalf: You are bringing offerings for yourselves, not for Me. Furthermore, “I reject them,” “I hate them” and “I consider your songs to be just so much noise” and so on. There is no relationship here; you are “doing your thing” but it isn’t “about Me” and “I utterly reject it”.

1. [UTTER REJECTION OF THE “HOLY” GATHERINGS] I hate *(sanei****ti****)*, I despise *(ma’as****ti****)* your feasts (*chage****ikhem*)**

And I will take no delight (***a****riach)* in your solemn assemblies (*atzerote****ikhem****)*

1. [SPECIFIC REJECTION OF THE OFFERINGS] Yea, though you offer me *(****li****)* burnt-offerings and your flour-offerings, (*minchote****ikhem****)* I will not accept *(****e****rtzeh)* them,

Neither will I regard *(****a****bit)* the peace-offerings of your fat beasts (*shelem meri’ei****khem****)*

1. [POINTED REJECTION OF THE VERY ACTIONS THAT SHOULD ENGENDER HARMONY] Take you away from Me *(mei-al****ai****)* the noise of your songs (*shire****kha****)*

And let Me not hear *(****e****shma)* the melody of your psalteries (*nevale****kha****)*

1. [THE PIVOT – THIS IS WHAT **SHOULD** BE TAKING PLACE] But let justice roll down like the waters

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream

1. [EVOCATION OF THE PERIOD OF TRUE HARMONY (see *Yirmeyahu* 2:1-3)] Did you bring me (***li***) sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness O House of Yisrael?
2. [EQUATING THEIR OFFERINGS WITH ODIOUS IDOLATROUS PRACTICES] You will bear Sikkut your king (*malke****khem****)*

And Kiyun your images (*tzalmei****khem****)*

Your star-gods (*elohei****khem****)*

Which you have fashioned for yourselves (*la****khem****)*

1. [UTTER REJECTION OF THE PEOPLE – EXILE AND DISPERSION] I will exile *(vehiglei****ti****)* you *(et****khem****)* beyond Damascus

Says Hashem, Whose Name is the God of hosts.

DISCUSSION

1: In the opening line, Amos expresses a broad rejection by God of the festive gatherings of the people, gatherings that were intended to be a “meeting” (akin to *Ohel Mo’ed,* the Tent of Meeting in the desert*)* between the people and God. In the final line, the exact opposite is threatened, *mida ke-neged mida* (poetic justice): You intended to gather in your central place to have a faux, “posed” holy convocation; in response, you will be dispersed (“ungathered”) and exiled from your place

2: The prophet gives voice to God’s explicit and detailed rejection of the worship, which the people are only doing for themselves. In the matching line, they are accused of raising the profile of foreign gods and of images that they have fashioned for themselves. Again, Amos tells them on God’s behalf: you do it all “for you” and not “for Me.”

3: Singing to God should be a wondrous experience of connection to the Divine, yet God wants nothing of it. These are “your songs,” not “My songs.” In the matching line, the prophet reminds the people of a simple time, without all of the pomp and circumstance, when true harmony between God and His people existed.

4: The pivot verse explains the core issue: why are these offerings considered “for you” and not “for Me”? Why does God regard these songs as cacophonous? Because of the complete lack of justice in the society. All of this could be righted, the relationship could be mended and *minchoteikhem* could be turned to *minchotai* (My flour-offerings*),* if only justice would flow like water and righteousness would surge like an ever-flowing stream.

This brings us to the conclusion of our analysis of the septad which makes up the final verses of Chapter 5. When we resume our studies after the *chagim*, we will begin studying Chapter 6; we will complete the study of *Sefer Amos* by next summer, after which we will move on to our study of Amos’s contemporary, Hoshea.

1. See Ritva, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not to say that corrections are never called for; of course that is not the case; but if there aren’t particular members (e.g. *gabba’im*) whose task it is to make sure that things run properly, then anyone else should balance the various values at play: ensuring a proper *tefilla* against needlessly shaming another in public, etc. See Tur, *OC* 142, in the name of R. Avraham b. Natan in *Sefer Ha-manhig*.

   I am reminded of a poignant story told about R. Yaakov Kamenetsky *zt”l*. It seems that one Shabbat, he was the honored guest of a *gevir* (wealthy member of the community) in a particular town, and an entourage escorted the two of them to the *gevir*’s house after *Kabbalat Shabbat*. After they knocked on the door and waited for an uncomfortably long while, the *gevir*’s wife answered the door; she had been clearly asleep, exhausted from all of the preparations for the Shabbat dinner and their important guest. When the *gevir* entered, he berated his wife in front of the guests for having forgotten to cover the *challot*. R. Yaakov was heard to later comment as to how this man had misplaced priorities, observing: “We cover the *challa* so as not to embarrass it (that we are making *Kiddush* on wine before it). And for that he’s ready to embarrass his own wife! Is he more concerned with the feelings of some bread than those of his wife?” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)