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**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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In memory of David Yehuda Ben Shaul z”l (Mr. David Goldstein)

whose *shloshim* fell this week

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**Shiur #56:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**Rebuke of the “Smug of Shomron”**

**Part I**

We are beginning our third year of the study of prophetic rhetoric, and with that concluding the study of the prophecies of Amos of Tekoa. The first oracle we will discuss comprises the first seven verses of chapter 6. As we can see from the text, the common theme of lambasting the wealthy aristocracy of Shomron for their hedonistic life (which, as we saw earlier, was enabled by their abuse of the poor) is again the focal point of the diatribe. Although numerous familiar tropes will appear here, a few new ones will emerge, and we will take those up after reviewing the text and commenting on the phrases and lexicon of the passage.

In the first two *shiurim*, we will review the text and comment on it; in the third, we will discuss the structure and message of the rebuke.

**THE TEXT**

*Hoi, ha-sha’ananim be-Tziyon*

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion,

*ve-habot’chim be-Har Shomron*

And to them that are secure in the mountain of Samaria

I have included both phrases here before comment, as they operate in *tikbolet* (parallelism) and, as will be shown below, it is misleading to interpret the first clause without keeping the second in mind.

The opening word, *hoi*, appears in 51 places in *Tanakh*, all but one in the works of the literary prophets. *Yeshaya* alone has 21 instances of this word. *Hoi* usually appears at the beginning of a verse as a vocative. A mild variation of this pattern is when it is introduced by a “messenger formula” (e.g. *ko amar Hashem*).

These instances hold to this pattern when *hoi* is used in its more common, yet, we will contend, “applied” meaning. The word *hoi* seems to have started out as a word of woe and as part of a specific and terse mourning formula – *hoi achi*,[[1]](#footnote-2) *hoi achot*,[[2]](#footnote-3) *hoi adon*[[3]](#footnote-4)(for a king), *ve-hoi hodo.*[[4]](#footnote-5) There are only a handful of usages of this sort in the canon, and all of them are referents – i.e. the prophet foretelling that a king will die and will be mourned with that formula, or that he *won’t* be mourned. The overwhelming majority of instances are used to introduce a rebuke of a particular sort. In nearly all of the cases, the prophet is rebuking the people for chasing the very opposite of what they ought to be seeking, emphasizing that they will be punished in kind, receiving the opposite of what they errantly tried to build for themselves.

Perhaps the *locus classicus* and, perhaps, the verse that signals the switch or expansion of usage from dirge to rebuke,[[5]](#footnote-6) is *Yeshayahu* 5:20. In a lengthy *“hoi”* piece, that word is used to begin each segment of the rebuke (vv. 8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) and, again, appears as the first word in each of those verses. In verse 20, Yeshayahu rebukes:

*Hoi ha-omrim la-ra tov ve-latov ra, samim choshekh le-or ve-or le-choshekh, samim mar le-matok u-matok le-mar.*

Woe to those who call evil “good” and good “evil,” present darkness as light and light as darkness, present the bitter as sweet and the sweet as bitter.

At the end of that rebuke (v. 23), Yeshayahu explains how this happens:

*Matzdikei rasha ekev shochad, ve-tzidkat tzaddikim yasiru mimenu.*

They find the guilty innocent on account of bribery, and they remove the innocence of the righteous from him.

Amos uses *hoi* twice. We have already studied the first instance in chapter 5 (in his exhortation against those who yearn for “the day of the Lord”), and this one is the only other instance. This usage, however, fits the “you’ve got it all wrong” meaning proposed above, as we can see by reading through the rebuke.

*Shaanan* is a rare word and appears only 15 times in *Tanakh*; most of them seem to take the meaning of “at rest,” but not all are praiseworthy. Of the 11 mentions in prophetic rhetoric (including 1 in *Melakhim II*; see below), 9 clearly mean “at rest.” Of these, 3 in *Yeshayahu* (32:9, 11, 18), as well as our instance (all adjectival), are paralleled by *bote’ach* (secure), and all three in *Yirmiyahu* (30:10, 46:27, 48:11 – all in verbal form) are paralleled with *shaket* (quiet). The mentions in *Zekharia* 1:15 and *Yeshahayu* 33:20 (both adjectival) contextually indicate the same sense.

The two other instances in the prophetic canon, which are really one and the same (*Melakhim II* 19:28; *Yeshayahu* 37:29), are generally interpreted as rooted in *sha’on* – i.e. a chaotic noisy tumult.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Oddly, Amos addresses his self-satisfied, smug audience as being “at rest” in Tziyon. Is he addressing a southern audience, which would counter his opening anthemic line (1:2) of bringing the roaring voice of God *from* Tziyon to the north? The classical commentators, as well as the moderns,[[7]](#footnote-8) read the verse as such and associated it with the inclusion of Yehuda in the oracles against the nations (2:4-5). In our discussion there, we proposed a specific strategy to understand the rebuke against Yehuda in that sequence, a strategy that would be hard-pressed to invoke here.

I would like to suggest two alternative interpretations here.

First, it may be that this phrase, *sha’ananim be-Tziyon u-bot’chim be-Har Shomron*, was a common phrase, used during the period of the split monarchy to depict the two capitals. It is not uncommon, as we have discussed in earlier *shiurim*, to find common aphorisms or idioms that are then used by the prophets as part of their rhetorical strategies.

Alternatively, Amos may be referring to the aristocracy in Shomron as if they were in Tziyon – that is, they have appropriated for themselves a sense of centrality and certainly independence from the *Mikdash* and center in Yerushalayaim, such that the reference to Tziyon here is sardonic.

*Nekuvei reishit ha-goyim*

The notable men of the first of the nations,

*u-va’u lahem Beit Yisrael*

To whom the house of Israel come!

This clause is a challenging one, and the commentators take it in various directions. The opening word, *nekuvei*, seems to be an abbreviated form of *nekuv be-shem* (as in *Bamidbar* 1:17; *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 12:32, 16:41; *Divrei Ha-Yamim II* 28:15, 31:19) – i.e. designated by name. This phrase seems to point to people who are important and whose names have *gravitas*. Amos is aiming these words at his audience, who consider themselves (from his prophetic perch) as “important names,” who are leaders among nations, such that the people come to them (for judgment? for assistance/salvation?). This seems to be the source of their self-driven sense of importance.

*Ivru Kalneh u-re’u*

Pass ye unto Calneh, and see

*U-lekhu mi-sham Chammat Rabbah*

And from thence go you to Chamat the great;

*U-redu Gat-Pelishtim ha-tovim min ha-mamlakhot ha-eleh*

Then go down to Gat of the Philistines. Are they better than these kingdoms?

*Im rav gevulam mi-gevulkhem*

Or is their border greater than your border?

Again, this passage has the commentators scrambling. Are these city-states currently in ruins? Or are they enjoying success that the prophet informs us will be short-lived? What is the purpose of pointing us to these three specific places?

Some moderns have suggested that the reference is to the incursion by Tiglath-Pileser (III) in the 6th decade of the 8th c. BCE, when he destroyed these cities. This is an odd proposal, since this defeat of the indigenous peoples happened after Amos’s career, which would mean that this passage is a later interpolation – and to what end? In addition, by that time, the Shomroni aristocracy was no longer sovereign; rather, Samaria was a vassal state of Assyria and Hoshea had already been installed as a “puppet king” by the Assyrians. There would be no point in any of this rebuke.

We are left with seeing at as a period piece, at a time when these kingdoms were at rest and secure. Kalnei (also mentioned in *Yeshayahu* 10:9) was a neo-Hittite capital in northern Syria, and Greater Chammat is likely al-Hama, on the banks of the Orontes River in central Syria. Gat-Pelishtim (as opposed to other cities known as Gat, such as Gat Ha-Chefer) is likely located near Tel as-Safi, a few miles northwest of Beit Guvrin (in the Lakhish area). As he did in his first series of oracles (chapters 1-2), Amos is creating a geographical sandwich, identifying powers to the northeast and one to the southwest – both of which presently stand secure.

This is not the only place where a prophet summons the people to (virtually) visit other nations to see how they honor their ancestral gods and the like (and to contrast that with *Am Yisrael*’s penchant for seeking out “new” deities to worship).

Yirmiyahu adjures his audience:

For pass over to the isles of the Kittites, and see, and send unto Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, which yet are no gods? But My people has changed its glory for that which does not profit. (*Yirmiyahu* 2:10-11)

Here, however, it is a bit unclear what the purpose of this theoretical visit might be. Some of the *Rishonim* suggest that *Am Yisrael* has been yearning after these city-states and deigning to appropriate their deities for themselves. R. Eliezer of Beaugency interprets it as follows:

“Are they better…?” than these two kingdoms, i.e. Tziyon and Shomeron. You should have worshipped Me and followed My path upon the good and broad land that I gave you.

“Is their border larger than your border?” that you would be able to claim that their gods are greater and stronger than I, to benefit to their worshippers more than I can, and that is why you worship their gods?

On the other hand, there is room to read the penultimate line as directed to Tziyon and Shomeron to wit:: “Are your kingdoms better than these kingdoms?”, meaning, “Is your current status more secure than theirs?” in spite of the fact that, as the text continues, your border is greater (i.e. your land is broader) than theirs? In other words, the amount of land you hold will not determine your future wealth and security.

This unclarity as to the referents of the “good kingdoms” here impacts on how we read the next line. Is this referring to the aforementioned kingdoms, or to the audience?

*Ha-menadim le-yom ra*

You that put far away the evil day

The opening word *ha-menadim*, is a rare word in *Tanakh.* It appears (in verbal form) only one other time, in *Yeshayahu*:

*Shimu devar Hashem ha-charedim el devaro, amru acheikhem son’eikhem* ***menadeikhem****, lema’an shemi yikhbad Hashem ve-nir’eh be-simchatkhem ve-heim yevoshu.*

Hear the word of the Lord, you that tremble at His word: Your brethren that hate you, **that cast you out** for My name's sake, have said: “Let the Lord be glorified, that we may gaze upon your joy,” but they shall be ashamed. (*Yeshayahu* 66:5)

The root is *n\*d\*h* (same as the nominal form *nidda*), which also gives us the post-Biblical word *nidui* (excommunication).

The translation presented here (“You that put far away…”) renders it as referring to the audience, but the most straightforward reading of the flow of the rhetoric has the verb *ha-menadim* as referring to the proximate subject – those kingdoms. The argument for reading it as being about Tziyon and Shomron works its way back to the opening word – *hoi* – and the verbal form that typically follows that vocative call, as we will discuss in the third (and final) installment of this section. In the meantime, we will explore both possibilities.

If the referent is the other nations (as ibn Ezra and R. Eliezer of Beaugency read it), then it seems that they are successful in pushing away a day of reckoning, evidently by correcting their ethical behavior (Malbim), or they *imagine* that they have pushed it off (R. Eliezer). The difference between these two will be the referent of the next clause – who is it who is causing “the seat of violence” to be active? If the other nations, it is because they are operating under the illusion that some other behavior or merit of theirs is keeping punishment at the door. If it is *Am Yisrael* (Malbim), then the contrast is stark: The other nations are correcting their behavior and, in spite of their smaller borders and weaker kingdoms, will outlast Tziyon and Shomron, who are encouraging violence and theft.

If, on the other hand, those who “push off the evil day” refers to the audience, then we have left the rhetorical context of these neighboring nations and have returned to the opening framework of direct rebuke of the Shomroni (and Judean?) aristocracy. In that case, we are almost coerced to read the verb *menadim* as illusory – that the Shomroni audience imagines that they are pushing off the evil day (of reckoning), while simultaneously behaving in ways that actually bring it closer to realization.

Some of this *parshanut* will depend on how we read the *vav* of *va-tagishun*, which we will discuss forthwith.

*Va-tagishun shevet chamas*

And cause the seat of violence to come near

If the *vav* opening this clause is *vav explicative*, then this clause is explaining the previous one. In other words, both clauses are directed to – or referencing – the same group. We may read it all as aimed at the Shomroni audience, who imagine that they have put the day of evil off, while engaging in behavior that ensures its (more) immediate arrival. Conversely, it may all relate to the other nations, which would put the audience in an unusual perch, watching other nations sitting comfortably (in their smaller and inferior borders?) while they don’t know the destruction that awaits them! As pointed out above, this would be odd and hardly effective rhetoric, considering that there would be no way for the audience to know that their day of reckoning is nigh. Hence, if we read both clauses as aimed at a single audience, it stands to reason that that audience is the Shomroni (and Tziyoni?) group.

If, on the other hand, we read the *vav* of *va-tagishun* as *vav ha-nigud* (disjunctive *vav*), then the two clauses are, by definition, referencing two different groups that are being contrasted. There would be only one reasonable way to follow this reading – that the surrounding nations have successfully warded off the day of evil by behaving well (as Malbim maintains), *whereas* Shomron is institutionalizing and enabling the seat of violence, which will ensure a swift and terrible “day of evil” in their near future.

In the next shiur, we will complete our study of the text of this oracle.

**For Further Study:**

Wittenberg, G. H. “Amos 6:1-7: ‘They Dismiss the Day of Disaster but You Bring near the Rule of Violence.’” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, vol. 58 (Mar. 1987), pp. 57–69.

1. *Melakhim I* 13:30, the one appearance outside of the literary prophets. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Yirmiyahu* 22:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Yirmiyahu* ibid. and 34:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Yirmiyahu* 22 ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The reasoning behind reading the etymology in this sequence is as follows: The word is onomatopoetic and sounds like a sighing word upon receiving news of a loss, such as a death. The rather more complex meaning of “woe [to those who turn things inside out and upside down]” seems to be an appropriation by the prophets of that original sigh of mourning. It is not likely that the word began as a formal rhetorical term with very specific use and from there was adopted by the people as a sigh of mourning. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. But see Radak, *Melakhim II* ibid., at the end of his comment, where he proposes a possible association with *sha’anan.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See, *inter alia*, Paul’s comments in *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)