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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**Shiur #57:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**Rebuke of the Smug of Shomron**

**Part II**

In the [previous shiur](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-56-prophecies-amos-rebuke-%E2%80%9Csmug-shomron%E2%80%9D-part-i), we began our study of the first oracle in the 6th chapter of *Amos*. This oracle is made up of 7 verses – or, more accurately, the segment of the oracle that sets up the anticipated punishment is made up of a septad. We studied the first three verses in the last *shiur*, focusing on the text and the use of unusual words (e.g. *hoi*, *sha’anan*, *menadim*) and trying to establish the identity of the equivocal referents of the speech.

In this *shiur*, we will complete our study of these seven verses. In the next *shiur*, we will take a broader look at the section, proposing a solution to its structure and, ultimately, its message.

First, we’ll continue with the text. A brief recap of the first three verses:

1. The prophet addresses the smug and comfortable residents of Shomron and Tziyon (!) with a word of warning (“*hoi”*), identifying them as people of note/renown to whom the folk of Yisrael come. (This is one of several ways to read the second half of the verse.)
2. He encourages the people to visit the northeastern city-states of Kalnei and Greater Chammat, as well as the southwestern Gat of the Philistines, and see if their kingdoms are greater than the Israelite kingdoms or if their borders are greater than that of the Shomroni monarchy. (Again, the second half of this verse has numerous possible readings.)
3. Amos then identifies the Shomroni audience as imagining that they are successfully delaying the “evil day” (of reckoning), while they continue to engage in their unethical behavior, which will surely bring that day closer. (Once again, as we discussed in the last *shiur*, this verse can be read in nearly diametrically opposite ways; much depends on the meaning of the *vav* that connects the two stichs of the verse).

**THE TEXT**

*Ha-shokhevim al-mitot shein*

That lie upon beds of ivory

From this point on, the prophetic diatribe seems to be refocused on the Shomroni audience, which may have implications for our interpretation of the previous verse.

The word *shein*, which in most instances means “tooth” (e.g. “*shein tachat shein*,” “a tooth for a tooth”; *Shemot* 21:24) occasionally takes the meaning of “ivory,” as it does here. For instance, Shlomo is recorded as having built an ivory throne, “*kisei shein*” (*Melakhim I* 10:18 = *Divrei Ha-Yamim II* 9:17); Achav built an ivory palace (*Melakhim I* 22:39), and one of the psalms includes “ivory mansions” as part of the its description of a royal wedding (*Tehillim* 45:9).

In his prophecy of doom against Tyre, Yechezkel makes mention of Tyrian traders engaged in selling ivory tusks (27:15) and notes their ivory-inlaid boats (ibid v. 6). Besides two mentions in *Shir Ha-Shirim* (one used as a metaphor for the king/shepherd’s body [5:14], the other in his description of his beloved’s neck [7:5]), the only other mention of *shein* as “ivory” is earlier in *Amos*. At the end of his “call” to the surrounding kingdoms to come and witness the evil of Shomron and the consequential punishment, Amos prognosticates the destruction, among others, of the “*batei ha-shein*,” ivory homes.

These ten instances include 3 references to building adornments, 2 metaphoric uses, 2 references to Shlomo’s throne, and one to an item of commerce. The two remaining mentions relate to an ivory-inlaid boat and “ivory beds.” This last one – our instance – is surely the strangest, as no one would want to lie on a bed of such hard material!

We can gain a better understanding on the “ivory bed” from Sennacherib’s boastful comments after his conquest of Judea. Engraved on the famous Prism (both Oriental Institute as well as Taylor), as reproduced by Pritchard,[[1]](#footnote-1) we find the following report of the tribute that the Assyrian emperor claimed from Judea:[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hezekiah himself, whom the terror-inspiring splendor of my lordship had overwhelmed and whose irregular and elite troops which he and brought in Jerusalem, his royal residence, in order to strengthen (it), had deserted him, did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, antinomy, large cuts of red stone, **couches (inlaid) with ivory,[[3]](#footnote-3) *nimedu*-chairs (inlaid) with ivory**, elephant-hides, ebony-wood, boxwood (and) all kinds of valuable treasures, his (own) daughters, concubines, male and female musicians.

We understand that an “ivory bed,” just like the “ivory boat,” means that there was ivory inlaid – or, in the case of the bed, the frame of the (wooden?) bed was inlaid with ivory. As we see from Sennacherib’s report, this was considered to be a valuable item, one held by royalty and the wealthy.

Tangentially, Amos’s identifying “ivory houses” and “ivory beds” indicates that there was some significant trade between the Shomroni kingdom and Africa (cf. *Melakhim I* 5:14, 9:26-28, and ch. 10).

*U-seruchim al-arsotam*

And stretch themselves upon their couches

The root *s\*r\*ch* in almost all Biblical instances means “stretch out” or “overhang.” Perhaps most famously, the cover of the *Mishkan* is described as

***ve-serach*** *ha-odef be-yeriyot ha-ohel, chatzi ha-yeriaya ha-odefet* ***tisrach*** *al achorei ha-Mishkan.*

The **overhanging** part that remains of the curtains of the tent, the half-curtain that remains, shall **hang over** the back of the Tabernacle.

This root may be related to *sin, resh, ayin*; the letters *sin* and *samekh* are often interchangeable, as in the word *ka’as*, spelled either way, and the relationship between *chet* and *ayin* is also attested. This root took on a different meaning in the rabbinic period, one that is the more common usage today – “stench.” As is their style,[[4]](#footnote-4) *Chazal* eisegetically read their meaning of *saruach* into the verse:

R. Yosi b. Chanina says that this refers to people who would urinate naked before their couches. R. Abbahu cursed this interpretation: Is that why it states [that their punishment would be] “Therefore, they shall be exiled at the head of all exiles”?! Rather, R. Abbahu explained that it refers to men who eat and drink with each other and attach their beds together and exchange their wives with each other and pollute their beds with semen that is not theirs. (BT *Kiddushin* 71b)

Odious as this image may be – and we pull no punches when accusing the sinning kingdom that is Amos’s target – it is far from the straightforward meaning of the verse (see Rashi ad loc.). Again, the word *saruach* does not have that meaning in *Tanakh.* (Although Klein suggests that *Yirmiyahu* 49:7 is a *hapax legomenon* and carries the meaning of “stench,” this is not generally accepted.)

The parallel of *mita::eres* is well attested in *Tanakh*[[5]](#footnote-5) and is used here in classic *tikbolet* (parallelism), thus supporting the meaning of *seruchim* as essentially the same as *shokhevim*.

*Ve-okhlim karim mitzon*

And eat the lambs out of the flock

*Va-agalim mitokh marbek*

And the calves out of the midst of the stall

*Karim* (*Devarim* 32:14 and 9 other places in *Tanakh*, besides ours) and the singular *kar* (*Yeshayahu* 16:1) refer to the choicest he-lamb, in some cases, the one that is so strong that he could have military use as a “battering ram.” (Yes, that is the provenance of that odd phrase; the earliest battering rams used to breach fortifications were shaped like a ram’s head.) These wealthy folks, stretched out on their fancy and ivory-inlaid beds, would eat the fattest lambs.

They would also take the calves from the middle of the stall – known as the *marbek* (where the name *Rivka* comes from; see *Eruvin* 2:1). *Marbek* appears four times in *Tanakh*, always as a modifier for a calf, an *egel marbek* (*Shmuel I* 28:24, *Yirmiyahu* 46:21, *Malakhi* 3:20, and our verse). Such a calf is considered the choicest of the herd for sumptuous eating.

There doesn’t seem to be any crime here. The wealthy are not accused of eating these choice meats at the expense of the poor (as we did see in the description of the “cows of the Bashan” in 4:1 above); there just seems to be a general critique of their pampered hedonistic lifestyle.

*Ha-poretim al-pi ha-nevel*

That thrum on the psaltery

*ke-David hashevu lahem kelei-shir*

That devise for themselves instruments of music, like David

The verb used here to describe the musicianship, *poretim*, is a *hapax legomenon* and can be interpreted from either the root (*p\*r\*t)* or the context. Rashi, citing Menachem’s “*machberet*,” reads it as associated with the only other instance of that root in *Tanakh*, as a noun, in *Vayikra* 19:10 – “*peret karmekha*,” meaning individual grapes. Hence:

One who sings with an accompanying musical instrument sounds out the words in singular tones, per the beauty of the sound, going higher or lower.

Although Rashi’s comment is a bit opaque, he seems to mean that *ha-poretim* refers to those who sing along with the psalter.

R. Yosef Kara reads the word in a similar way (citing Dunash instead), but adds that they modify their voices to adjust to the sounds of the psalter.

Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, understands *poretim* as describing a form of improvisational composition, referring not to their musical ability but to their poetic range and talent.

However we read the phrase, the prophet is accusing these wannabe musicians of seeing themselves as far more talented than they are. They consider themselves to be “the next David” – whether this refers to David’s compositional abilities (ibn Ezra, possibly), his musical virtuosity (see Radak, ad loc.), or his ability to fashion instruments (see *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 23:5 and, more explicitly, the apocryphal Psalm CLI from Qumran, lines 4-5.[[6]](#footnote-6) See also Rashi ad loc. for an interesting variation on this approach).

The spelling of David here raises a few eyebrows. We typically understand that *matres lectiones* (using Hebrew letters as vowels, what we refer to as “*ketiv malei*” or “plene spelling”) is a Second Temple phenomenon that may have its roots at the end of the First Commonwealth period. Indeed, with few exceptions, David’s name is spelled *DVD* until we get to Second Temple-era books, such as *Zekharia* (e.g. 13:1), *Ezra/Nechemia* (e.g. *Ezra* 3:10), and, most notably, *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (e.g. *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 29:10 and another 260 times), where his name is spelled *DVYD*. The appearance of the *yod* in his name in our context caused numerous modern critics to assume that the mention of David at all was a late interpolation into the text. Whether the verse would read smoothly with the word missing is unclear – I’ll leave that to the reader – but I think that for purposes of intellectual integrity, we’d prefer to wrestle with the unusual orthography than to simply consign the word to a later editor – a simple and rather lazy solution, to be sure.

Significantly, Hoshea, prophesizing in the same period a*s* Amos*,* also uses the spelling *DVYD* in the one instance (3:5) where he invokes the eponymous founder of the monarchic dynasty. Amos himself mentions David one more time (9:11) in his famous prophecy of raising the fallen “*Sukka* of David” – and there, again, he spells it *DVYD*.

This may mean that we have to rethink our assumptions about the introduction of *matres lectiones*; alternatively, perhaps the king’s name got this “royal” treatment in order to distinguish it from the word *dod* (beloved), also spelled *DVD* (compare *Shir Ha-Shirim* 7:12 with *Shmuel I* 20:11!).

*Ha-shotim be-mizrekei yayin*

Who drink wine in bowls

*Ve-reishit shemanim yimshachu*

And anoint themselves with the chief ointments;

The use of *mizrakim* here is not incidental (and certainly not accidental), and neither is the deliberate wording of the second clause. A *mazrek* is a vessel used for “throwing” blood on the altar after it has been collected from the animal. The usual word used for a drinking cup is *gavia* or *kos* (both of which are used in the Yosef narrative); as Radak points out (ad loc.), both of those are smaller and used for the customary amount of wine, whereas a *mazrek* contains much more liquid. Regardless of the “anti-hedones” message being continued here, Amos is **also** taking aim at the use of cultic vessels and materials for the people’s own pleasure. Not only are they living self-indulgent lives, but they are devoting as much energy to fulfilling their desires as one ought to be devoting to the *Mikdash*.

Wine and oil are the two liquids brought to the altar that may also be ingested by people (unlike blood). They are also the only two materials brought to the altar that are consumable **as is** by humans as well. Instead of their bowls of wine being used to libate on the altar and their finest oils being used to anoint *Kohanim Gedolim* and vessels (the word *resishit* has all sorts of *Mikdash*-associations; see, *inter alia*, *Devarim* 26:2 and *Vayikra* 2:12), they are being used to anoint their own bodies.

*Ve-lo nechelu al-shever Yosef*

But they are not grieved for the hurt of Joseph.

*Nechelu*, from the root *ch\*l\*h* (sick), implies a deliberate move to make oneself sick, to take someone else’s pain so much to heart that it hurts (see, e.g., *Shmuel I* 22:8).

The *shever Yosef*, on the face of it, seems to be alluding to the impending disaster about to befall the Northern Kingdom, which is usually called Ephraim (=Yosef). Yet the use of *shever* here seems to point to a meaning only attested to in *Bereishit*, once more in *Amos*, and one time in *Ezra/Nechemia*. In *Bereishit*, *shever* is the corn (grain) that Yosef’s brothers purchased in Egypt, brought back to Canaan, and so on. While the other mentions in *Amos* (8:5) as well as in *Nechemia* (10:22) both relate to people selling grain (either on Shabbat or waiting for Shabbat to end so that they can resume selling), all of the mentions in *Bereishit* are in the context of the Yosef story. Thus, Amos cleverly uses *shever* as an equivoke – both meaning “tragedy” as well as alluding to the grain story.

This takes us back to the original “split” of the brothers, which took place near Shekhem, the spot where the Northern Kingdom split off from Judea (*Melakhim I* 12). According to the *midrash*,this split has its roots in the sale of Yosef by his brothers – so, indeed, the people here are living the high life, not attending to the terrible tragedy that is at the root of their entire separated existence and which, therefore, is doomed to destruction.

*Lakhen atah yiglu be-rosh golim*

Therefore, now shall they go captive at the head of those that go captive

As we will discuss in greater detail in the next *shiur*, this line is a direct about-face to the opening line. Whereas the people thought of themselves as “the highest of the nations,” now they will be the lead exiles to the other nations. The opening *lakhen* indicates that this is the punishment accorded to the above-mentioned crimes or errant way of life and attitudes. These aristocratic wealthy leaders of the Northern Kingdom will be led out as the first – just as they imagined themselves to be (using ***reishit*** *shemanim*). But they will be the first exiles, publicly shamed and having their illusory grand life shown to be just that – an illusion.

*Ve-sar mirzach seruchim*

And the revelry of those that stretched themselves shall pass away.

The unusual word *mirzach* only appears in *Yirmiyahu* 16:5, and there it seems to refer to a meal taken by mourners. From numerous external evidence, it seems that *mirzach* is some form of a feast. It is attested to in Phoenician, Punic, Nabatean, and other texts over the span of hundreds of years. It even appears in the Medeba map (4th c. CE) as the name of the Pe’or mountain where *Bnei* *Yisrael* sinned with the daughters of Moav. Thus, the final line, before we get to God’s terrifying oath (v. 8 ff.), is that all of this feasting will come to an end as the people will be led out as into captivity and exile.

In the next *shiur*, we will take a panoramic look at these seven verses and propose an understanding of the structure as well as the message in anticipation of the Divine oath of destruction, which will comprise the next four verses.

**For Further Study:**

*Mirzach:* Yoseph Braslavi, “*Al Tavo Beit-Marze’ach*” (Jer. 16:5), “*Ve-Sar Mirzach Seruchim*” (Amos 6:7), *Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World* 17 (1971), pp. 5–16.

1. James Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts as Relating to the Old Testament (“ANET”)* (3rd edition, Princeton, 1969), p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although the references to ivory are but a small part of the list, the emperor’s boasts are illuminative as to how the ancients recorded history – and more than a bit entertaining; cf. *Melakhim II* 19 and *Yeshayahu* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “*Ershu-shinni*” in the original Akkadian. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Rabbis were aware that Biblical Hebrew was of a different idiom than Rabbinic Hebrew. For example, R. Yochanan states: "The terminology of the Bible is not the same as the terminology employed by the Sages” (BT *Avoda Zara* 58b). Yet for homiletic purposes, they were ready to see them as one and the same. A startling example is R. Yochanan’s homily about God “enwrapping Himself as a *shaliach tzibbur*” (BT *Rosh Hashana* 17b). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As we had earlier in 3:12, *Tehillim* 6:7, 41:4, and *Iyov* 7:13 (the latter two with *mishkav* in place of *mita*). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. JA Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca, 1967), pp. 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)