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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #60: The Prophecies of Amos:**

**On The Heels of *Hoi***

**Part II**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-59-prophecies-amos-heels-hoi-part-i), we began our study of the Divine oath that comprises the consequential punishment in response to the *hoi* rebuke (6:1-7). We studied the first two verses, noting the intensity of the oath (God swearing *be-nafsho*) and the extensive use of God’s Names (*Hashem, Elokei Tzevaot*), as well as in-depth discussions of some of the more difficult words (*ta’ev, ge’on Yaakov, hasger*) and the implications of the dire threats uttered by Amos. We now turn our attention to the second half of the oath, which, as noted at the end of the previous *shiur*, continues by describing the destroyed homes that will mark the landscape of Shomron.

**THE TEXT (verses 10-11)**

The oath picks up as the prophet details what will happen in the houses: Even if ten men are found in a house, none will survive, as they will all die…

*U-nesa’o dodo u-mesarfo*

And when a man's uncle shall take him up, even he that burns(?) him

This clause is beset with at least two linguistic difficulties.

First of all, the word *u-nesa’o* translates as, “he will lift him,” in the singular. But reading the subject of the clause as one individual is not at all clear and depends on how we interpret the *vav* before *u-mesarfo*. If it is read as a *vav ha-chibur* (conjunctive *vav*), then we have two characters here – *dodo* (his uncle, perhaps [see below]) and *mesarfo* (meaning unclear) – who are doing the “lifting.” That would leave us with the expectation of a plural verb. Indeed, some recommend emending the text to read *ve-nas’u*, “they will lift.” This is based, among other considerations, on the Septuagint’s version (see below), but even a cursory look at that version indicates quite a distance from our Masoretic text in the rendering there. In addition, *ve-amar* later in our verse refers to our subject, and that is most certainly in the singular.

If we wish to read the *vav* as *vav ha-biur* (*vav* explicative), such that the word following the *vav* serves to explain an earlier word or phrase, we remain with the singular: *dodo=mesarfo*, and the reference is to one person. Why, however, would one person be described in two ways here?

Before we move on to the second problem, we must note that the word *dod* has two distinct yet related meanings in *Tanakh*. It often means “uncle,” but specifically the father’s brother; in numerous other places (notably *Shir Ha-Shirim*) it means “beloved.” The meanings are inextricably tied together. Besides the anthrophological-sociological reality of uncles marrying young (especially orphaned) nieces[[1]](#footnote-1) (and that, only the daughters of their brothers), there is also the responsibility of the father’s brother to redeem the family’s land (*Vayikra* 25:25) or family members who were sold as slaves (ibid. v. 49). A “compound translation” of *dod* would be “beloved relative who takes responsibility for the welfare of the family.”

The second, more challenging difficulty is the word *mesarfo*.[[2]](#footnote-2) The most likely root would seem to be *s-r-f*, to burn, but that is difficult on three counts. First, *s-r-f* is consistently written with *sin*, never with *samekh*. Second, *sarof* never appears in anything but the *kal* form, and this word is in the intensive *piel* form. Third, what would this mean in our context? If the genitive suffix belongs to the house that is being “burned,” then how does a house have a *dod* (uncle)? If, on the other hand, the referent is a person (the last survivor in the house?), then why would anyone be called “his burner”? The resolutions to these problems are inter-dependent.

Let’s see how the classical commentators address these issues.

**The *Rishonim***

Rashi cites the Targum Yonatan: *Ve-yatilinei karivei mi-yakida*, “his relative will pull him out of the fire.” According to this reading, there is only one person here, who is called *dodo* (as above); *mesarfo* is read, somehow, as *mi-sereifa* (from the fire). This does solve the *u-nesa’o* problem – there is only one person here, who is described as “his relative” – but this depends on a creative and unattested solution to *mesarfo*. Even though Rashi restates this reading as *kerovo ve-ohavo* – his relative and dear friend – he anchors it explicitly in the treatment of the Targum, and we suspect that these two words in Rashi are his take on *dodo*. Rashi here is “*leshitato*” (i.e. consistent), as he interpreted the last verse as “those who were not killed by the sword or plague will be killed by fire.” (See the previous *shiur* for the survey of approaches to that verse.)

Rashbam takes a similar approach, but instead of seeing the beloved relative as saving a dead body from the fire, he reads it as the “uncle” saving one (of the ten) from the fire – thus continuing his approach of reading this as a fulfillment of the “10% curse” from *Amos* 5:3.

R. Joseph Kara also reads *dodo u-mesarfo* as referring to one person, but he understands *mesarfo* as “the one who embalms him.” He anchors this in several mentions of *misrefot melakhim* (e.g. *Yirmiyahu* 34:5), which, he maintains, cannot mean a funeral pyre, but rather has a secondary meaning of sealing up the body to keep it from smelling bad. This significantly impacts our understanding of the previous verse. Was the house destroyed by fire or in some other manner? (See our discussion in the previous *shiur*). If it was not destroyed by fire, “burning” is *not* part of this passage, and we have to consider some other meaning to *mesarfo*.

Ibn Ezra points out that *mesarfo* is a *hapax legomenon*. He then quotes ibn Kuraish,[[3]](#footnote-3) who proposes that *dodo umesarfo* are a pair of (symmetrical) relatives. *Dod* (as noted above) is the father’s brother; he suggests that *mesarfo* is mother’s brother. Ibn Ezra rejects this as being without foundation. He then quotes the commentators – whom we have already encountered – who understood it as “the one who burns,” and he raises the objections we already cited (the unattested *samekh/sin* transposition and the use of the root in the intensive *piel*). He then proposes his own take on the phrase, in which he evidently understands *mesarfo* as some sort of an undertaker[[4]](#footnote-4) or funerary officiant.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ibn Ezra paints the scene for us:

That people will enter the house to see who died in the plague, or had the house fall on them, that there was an earthquake… Then the uncle of one of the people who died in the house will enter in order to take the dead bodies out of the house in order to bury them and to take out anyone still alive…

Radak cites R. Yehuda ibn Kuraish’s explanation as well as the “mainstream” interpretation of “burning,” and, citing his father, he explains as follows:

That friend (“beloved one”) that came to burn up the flesh of his dead relative due to the stench and to remove the bones from the house…

In other words, Radak’s father read the *vav* before *u-mesarfo* as a *vav ha-biur*, meaning “his relative, *that is* the one who will burn him.”

In a footnote at the beginning of our discussion here (n. 2), I mentioned ibn Kaspi’s animadversion regarding *mesarfo*. Here is the full comment:

*Dodo* – Not necessarily his father’s brother or [even] his mother’s brother; rather [it could mean simply] his relative, as in, “My beloved is to me” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:3) (?!)

*U-mesarfo* – **Or** *mesarfo*. As for me, what can I do if not all of the holy tongue is not fully accessible to us. But, in any case, this (*mesarfo)* is one of the close relatives.

He clearly favors the general direction that Yehuda ibn Kuraish proposed – that *mesarfo* is an alternative word to *dodo* and another relative – but he discounts the specificity that ibn Kuraish assigns to it.

**A “Hybrid” Solution**

Paul rejects the interpretation of *mesarfo* as “one who burns,” raising the objections we saw above.[[6]](#footnote-6) He does favor, however, the re-pointing of the first word from *u-nesa’o* to *ve-nas’u*, based on the Septuagint. Anchoring his interpretation in late Hebrew and Aramaic, he proposes that *mesarfo* was the person with the job of anointing dead bodies in preparation for burial – a not-uncommon practice in the Near East.

I would like to suggest a modified read of several of these proposals. Keeping the vocalization as we have it,[[7]](#footnote-7) there is only one person described here. In order to leave it *u-nesa’o* and have *dodo* a distinct person from *mesarfo*, we would then have to read the *vav* of *u-mesarfo* as disjunctive *vav* – “or.” But this is not a common use of *vav* in this type of context (two alternate subjects with one predicate). Building on Paul’s suggestion of a “perfumer of the dead,” I prefer to read it as *dodo (she-hu) mesarfo* – his close relative (per ibn Kaspi) *who is* the one who performs the funerary rites. In other words, the *vav* of *u-mesarfo* is *vav ha-biur* – *vav* explicative – where the *vav* precedes a word/phrase that explicates the antecedent word/phrase.

One last point: Why would the text use this *hapax legomenon* instead of a well-known word like *sakh* (rub oil) or *mashach* (anoint)? Presuming Rashi’s interpretation, that the people in the house are burned up, it is likely that the text is deliberately “teasing” the reader into creating an association with a fire by using this rare word, which sounds like a “fire.”

Parenthetically, Paul’s explanation may shed light on the mention of *misrefot avotekha* from *Yirmiyahu* 34 (cited above). Perhaps it doesn’t mean “funerary fire granted to your ancestors,”[[8]](#footnote-8) but rather refers to the oils rubbed onto the dead body to remove the smell. If we were to follow that suggestion, we would have to countenance a *samekh/sin* transposition in the opposite direction.

*Le-hotzi atzamim min ha-bayit*

to bring out the bones out of the house

Why would the bones be brought out of the house? Based on our understanding of the cause of death, which is disputed among the *Rishonim* in their comments on verse 10 (see previous *shiur*), this will parse out two different ways.

If we understand that the men in the house sought refuge (together – ten men in one house) after a military defeat and then the plague caught up with them and killed them in the house, then the *dod/mesaref* is coming to the house a significant time later, after the bodies killed by plague have decomposed and all that is left is bones. If, on the other hand, they sought refuge from the defeat *and* the plague and then the fire consumed them in the house, then we understand why there are only bones left to take out, even if the above-mentioned relative appears immediately. This, along with our last comment regarding *mesarfo*, may make Rashi’s understanding of the envisioned calamities more compelling.

*Ve-amar la-asher be-yarketei ha-bayit*

and shall say unto him that is in the innermost parts of the house

As pointed out above, only one person is speaking here, apparently to one other person who is in the inner part of the house – again supporting the Masoretic pointing of *u-nesa’o*.

The image here is one person who has gone into the inner recesses of the house to find human remains for burial, and another – the relative/perfumer of one of the dead – comes in from the outside and calls out to him.

The phrase *yarketei ha-bayit* (innermost area of the house) appears in only two other places in *Tanakh*. In describing the construction of the *Mikdash*, the text (*Melakhim* I 6:15) states that Shlomo built “twenty cubits of the innermost area of the house with cedar planks…” However, it seems a bit of a stretch to suggest that Amos was attempting to create an allusion to the *Mikdash* here.

In *Tehillim* 128:3, the “happy man” is described as having his wife “as a fruitful vine on the hinder parts of your house…” (*be-yarketei veitekha*). This may prove to be a more fruitful avenue of inquiry, as Amos is contrasting the robust growth of a family anchored in the innermost part of the house against the fruitless search for survivors in the innermost recesses of the destroyed house.[[9]](#footnote-9) In addition, the psalm in question is clearly Jerusalem-centered. It concludes, in a beautiful blessing for children: “May Hashem bless you from **Tziyon** and may you see the goodness of **Yerushalayim** all the days of your life. And may you see children of your children, with peace over Yisrael.” As we argued in earlier *shiurim*, this *hoi* rebuke and its subsequent oath of punishment (the focus of the current study) carry a sub-textual rejection of the Northern Kingdom’s assuming at least equal footing with Yerushalayim.

The word *yarketei* and its singular, non-possessive form, *yereikha*, appear a total of 30 times in the entire *Tanakh*. Outside of the context of the *Mishkan*, its common referent is the side of a mountain (e.g. *Tehillim* 48:3; *Yechezkel* 38:6, 15). The use here – when the text could just as easily have said *la-asher be-****tokh*** *ha-bayit –* may be alluding to the story of David and his men, hiding *be-yarketei ha-me’ara*, in the innermost room of the cave, when Shaul, who was chasing David, came in to the cave to relieve himself. In that story (*Shmuel* I 24), David’s men encourage him to slay the unsuspecting Shaul, but David refuses on the grounds that no one can slay the anointed one of God and be cleansed. In our passage, instead of the innermost room being a place where people wrestle with issues of “kill or be killed,” all that remains are dead bodies and all that can be asked is whether there are any more bones to bring out. This serves to increase the sadness and hopelessness of the scenario.

*“Ha-od imakh”?*

“Is there yet any with you?”

Notice that the one on the outside does not specify what he is looking for. He doesn’t ask, *ha-od* ***atzamot*** *imakh?* – as if the scene is too terrible to describe explicitly.

We have described the scene following ibn Ezra and others. Rashi reads there as being only one rescuer here, and he calls out to the one survivor he finds in the house: “Are there any more (survivors) with you”?

*Ve-amar “afes”*

and he shall say, “No”

The other rescuer (or, per Rashi, the lone survivor) will use a brief word to indicate that there are no others. The word *efes*, which appears 44 times in *Tanakh*, usually indicates some form of negation, although the semantic use is broad – hence, the furthest reaches of the land are called *afsei aretz*. In any case, here, the respondent is clearly answering in the negative.

*Ve-amar “has*

then shall he say, “Hold your peace

This rare onomatopoetic word *has* appears only 8 times in *Tanakh* – and only Amos uses it more than once. Perhaps its most famous appearance is in the verb describing Kalev’s first response to Moshe in opposition to the other scouts – *va-yahas Kalev*, Kalev silenced the people (*Bamidbar* 13:30). 5 of the 8 occurrences are in the imperative (ours is one of them); it seems like a perfectly suited word to silence people, a Biblical form of “hush.” (Indeed, some of the more creative etymologists will claim “hush” as having developed from *has.*)

*Ki lo le-hazkir be-shem Hashem”*

for we must not make mention of the name of the Lord.”

What exactly is the problem here? Why does the rescuer want his fellow to be silent, and what does that have to do with mentioning God’s Name?

Ibn Kaspi makes an innovative suggestion here. He argues that, based on the parsing, the verse should be understood as “*has be-shem Hashem, ki lo le-hazkir”* – i.e. it is appropriate to be silent in God’s Name (akin to Aharon’s silence in the presence of his deceased sons [*Vayikra* 10:3] or God’s command to Yechezkel to remain silent in the aftermath of his wife’s sudden passing [*Yechezkel* 24:17]).

*Ki hinei Hashem metzaveh*

For, behold, the Lord commands,

The use of *metzaveh* here indicates that God is directing an earthquake that will bring the great houses (palaces?) and the small houses (residences?) down. Is this the earthquake mentioned in *Amos* 1:1 that looms over the entire book, as Amos’s agency began two years before it? Something to mull over as we continue our study of *Amos*.

Conversely, God may be directing the enemy to come into Shomron and wreak destruction, utterly obliterating the houses – the *ir u-melo’ah* mentioned just before the oath.

*Ve-hikah ha-bayit ha-gadol resisim*

And the great house shall be smitten into splinters

*Ve-habayit ha-katon beki’im*

And the little house into chips

The parallelism here is clear and would argue, as does Rashi, that *beki’im* are smaller (parts of the “small house”) than *resisim* (parts of the “big house”).

We have concluded our study of the oath; in next week’s *shiur*, we will look at the final segment of chapter 6 (vv. 12-14), which contains a new rebuke, addressed at the pride and arrogance of the people in light of their military prowess.

**For Further Study:**

Noble, Paul R. “A Note on Ûneśāʼô Dôdô Ûmeśārepô (*Amos* 6:10).” Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 111, no. 3, 1999, pp. 419–422.

Pinker, Aron. “Reconstruction of the Destruction in Amos 6:10.” Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 115, no. 3, 2003, pp. 423–427.

1. See *Bereishit* 11:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word is so challenging that R. Yosef ibn Kaspi (Provence 13-14th century) comments (ad loc.): “As for me, what can I do if the Holy tongue is not fully accessible to us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Judah ibn Kuraish was a 9th-century Algerian Hebrew philologist and grammarian, something of a pioneer in the study of Hebrew grammar, a discipline that ibn Ezra held to be vital for successful understanding of the Biblical text. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this vein, see Noble’s article in the “for further study” section. I believe that his numerous emendations go too far, and his reconstruction of the verse, while insightful and clever, relies on too many scribal errors or “modifications.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Similarly, see Hakham in *Da’at Mikra*,p. 52, although he suggests that the person in charge of this funeral practice was a relative, somewhat combining the “alternate relative” meaning first proposed by ibn Kuraish. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is certainly possible that the LXX had a different vorlage – or that, as happened not infrequently, the authors/translators made “improvements” to the Biblical text as they saw fit. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is one mention in *Tanakh* of actually burning the dead – the case of the loyal people of Yavesh Gilad burning the bodies of Shaul and Yonatan after the Pelishtim decapitated them and publicly shamed them (*Shmuel* I 31:12) – but as context indicates, that was an extraordinary case that sheds little light on regular funerary practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See ibn Kaspi here, who uses the verse in *Tehillim* to explain our verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)