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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #61**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**The Illusions of Power**

**Part I**

In the previous *shiurim*, we studied the *hoi* rebuke of the wealthy of Shomron and their hedonistic lifestyle (*Amos* 6:1-7), followed by the Divine oath of the impending punishment that awaits them (ibid. verses 8-11). As we come to the end of this chapter, Amos delivers a stinging critique at the illusory power held by the Northern Kingdom. In this *shiur*, we will study the first verse, and we will conclude this section in the next *shiur*.

**THE TEXT**

*Ha-yerutzun ba-sela susim*

Do horses run upon the rock?

The rhetorical question-couplet with which Amos opens reminds us of his series of causal relationships invoked in chapter 3, which concludes with God’s message inevitably being broadcast by His prophets. This couplet is taken from a world familiar to both speaker as well as his audience.

We were introduced to Amos as a *noked*, a herdsman, and then, in the mini-narrative of chapter 7, Amos describes himself as a *boker* (verse 14), a “cowboy.” He is also a “dresser of sycamores” (*boles shikemim*) – which means that the cattle, both as possessions and as assistants in the field, are familiar to him.

The Northern Kingdom, during the middle of the 8th century BCE, had enjoyed several decades of military success and ascendancy. Unlike the battles during the time of Yehoshua and even the Davidic battles, by the 9th century BCE, horses had been put to use in Israelite war campaigns and, as such, represented military prowess and success.

**A BIT ABOUT HORSES**

To be sure, horses had already played a significant role in David’s house. Both Avshalom and Adoniyahu launched their attempted *coups d’etat* with horse-led chariots (*Shmuel II* 15:1; *Melakhim I* 1:5). Shlomo (per *Melakhim I* 5:6) famously built and “manned” 40,000[[1]](#footnote-1) *urvot susim* (stables? Or possibly this is an enumeration of his horses; see BDB, “*urya*”). We do not, however, find horses used by the Israelite armies in war itself until the middle of the 9th century, when Achav employed horse-driven chariots in his second war against Aram. When Yehoshaphat agrees to unite the kingdoms (temporarily) to battle Damascus, he avers:

*Kamoni khamokha, ke-ami ke-amekha,* ***ke-susai ke-susekha***

I am as you are, my army is as your army, and **my horses are as your horses** (*Melakhim I* 22:4)

Although it is clear that the first war that Achav fought against Aram involved horse-driven chariots, this is evidently only on the Aramean side; there is no mention of chariots or riders in the Israelite army.

An important footnote to that first war is in place here. At the end of the miraculous campaign against the mightier (and better equipped) army of Damascus, Achav surprisingly extends an “olive branch” to Ben-Hadad, not only sparing him but restoring Aramean dominion over the territory won in a war fought by his father Omri (*Melakhim* *I* 20:34). For this apparently treacherous action, he is cursed by a prophet. But religious sentiments aside, what could have been Achav’s motivation?

The answer lies in the large looming threat from the east that both Aram and Yisrael (as well as everyone else in the region) was preparing to face. The Assyrian empire was preparing to invade and conquer the western Levant and, to that end, former (and future) enemies Yisrael and Aram (along with a host of other regional monarchies) allied to fight the Assyrian Empire’s armies. In the great battle that took place at Qarqar (in what is now northwest Syria) in 853 BCE, the alliance was able to stave off the mightier army, and the Assyrians were kept from conquering the territory, although this empire would eventually conquer much of the region, including Shomron, in the last third of the 8th century, approximately 130 years later. Evidently, Achav’s overtures to the defeated Ben-Hadad were part of this treaty-building, which was, from a geopolitical perspective, a sage move. (It was clearly not seen that way from a “religious” angle, as attested by the fact that God sent the prophet to curse Achav.)

For our purposes, what is critical is what the alliance encountered in the battle of Qarqar. The Assyrians were the first Mesopotamian army to utilize and incorporate horse-driven chariots and riders. Even though the Shomroni kingdom knew of cavalry from their battles with Aram, they likely never saw anything so mighty or numerous as the Assyrian chariots, and (evidently) at a pretty quick clip, they developed this second flank of attack in anticipation of their impending battle with Shalmaneser III. In the famous Kurkh stela, discovered in 1861 (in Kurkh, in modern-day Turkey), one of the monoliths describes the battle and lists an army of 10,000 infantrymen as well as 2,000 chariots in Achav’s army. This seems to be the first time that any Israelite army had employed horses for any military use.

As such, horses were not only a relatively recent “upgrade” for the Shomroni army, but a source of pride and, perhaps, national arrogance.

*Im yaharosh ba-bekarim*

Does one plow there with oxen?

The translation of this passage is challenging. It is clearly a parallel to the first passage, but the missing pairing is with *sela* (rock). To wit, where is the ox (not) plowing?

The simple and straightforward read here employs a poetic technique that we introduced in earlier *shiurim* – “forward gapping.” Keeping in mind that the most significant component of symmetry in Biblical poetry is not rhyming but meter, a word from one of the stichs will often be omitted and assumed in the other stich. For instance, in Psalm 92:2:

*Tov lehodot le-Hashem U-le-zamer le-shimkha elyon*

It is good to give thanks to God and to sing to Your Supernal Name

The word *tov* (good) is left out of the second stich, which should read “*ve-tov* (or some synonym) *le-zamer le-shimkha elyon*.” It is omitted because including it would complicate the meter. When the word is omitted from the first stich, this is called “backward gapping.”

Using forward gapping here, we would understand that:

Just as a horse cannot run on rocks,

So too, oxen cannot plow (on rocks)

This is the general consensus among *Rishonim* as to the intent of the clause.

However, bothered by the lack of complete parallelism in the couplet, Johann David Michaelis suggested reading the word *ba-bekarim* as two words – *babakar yam* – meaning, “Is it possible to plow **the sea** with oxen?”[[2]](#footnote-2) This (minor?) emendation was discussed by text critics in the 19th and 20th centuries and, by and large, accepted by them. Besides the missing parallel to *sela*, Michaelis was also bothered by the use of the plural *bekarim*, which is virtually unmatched in *Tanakh*; the usual method for referring to oxen is either *shor* or *bakar* (both in the collective singular) or *benei bakar* (as is found throughout the rules of offerings, e.g. *Bamidbar* 28-29).

The general rule of textual emendations should be that they are viewed as a last resort. In other words, when the word as presented in the Masoretic text (MT) is simply indecipherable without exegetical/homiletical gymnastics and a minor modification makes the phrase understandable, then we might suggest such a change. This is especially true if we have witnesses to support it, such as the Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls or early Targumim. In our case, however, the phrase as presented in MT is easy to explain, as we have done above. Addressing the issue of the unusual form *bekarim*, Hakham suggests that the entire couplet was a folk saying that Amos integrated into his oratory, and that the epigram used this rare form (which may not even have been rare in the common colloquy).[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Ki hafakhtem le-rosh mishpat*

That you have turned justice into gall,

*U-feri tzedaka le-la’ana*

And the fruit of righteousness into wormwood

The opening word, *ki*, introduces the explanation of the use of the epigram: In what way are the people acting as foolishly as one who would try to run his horses or plow his oxen on rocks?

The *la'ana*, translated here as "wormwood," is a bitter and potentially poisonous plant that is often matched, as it is here, with *rosh*. Its identity is subject to some scholarly debate. The broad consensus is that it is the absinthe; the absinthe, however, is not native to the Land of Israel. It is thus more likely that the Biblical *la'ana* is artemisia, which is native to Israel and similar, both in character and impact (bitter, possibly poisonous) to the absinthe. In 5 of its 8 mentions in *Tanakh*, including ours, it is matched with *rosh* or the "juice" of that root, known as *mei rosh* (see e.g. *Yirmiyah* 9:18; 23:15). It is not surprising to find Yirmiyah referencing the *la’ana* (with *mei rosh*) twice, along with two mentions in the autobiographical chapter of *Eikha* (3:15, 19) – once again, we see Yirmiyah picking up on images used by Amos.

It is notable that the use of the *la'ana* as a metaphor for bitterness and punishment (it seems, from those two mentions in Yirmiyahu, that it was "force-fed" punitively) first appears in the covenant at Arvot Mo'av, as a bitter and poisonous growth of rebellion and apostasy of which to be wary (*Devarim* 29:17). Amos uses it here matched with *rosh*, and, as he did back in 5:7, to describe the warping of justice.

The irony of using an image of punitive poison as the outcome of perverted justice is powerful and ought to be noted. That same bitter pill that violators are forced to swallow is now the symbol of warped justice – when the innocent are subjected to the fate rightfully meant for their oppressors.

Note that this second half of the verse is presented in chiastic fashion, again using forward gapping, in this case of the predicate *hafakhtem*. Here is a schematic presentation to illustrate the structure:

*Ki hafakhtem*

*le-rosh*

*mishpat*

*U-feri tzedaka*

*le-la’ana*

The poisonous plants, which themselves operate metaphorically (discussion below), are at the extremes of the chiasmus, and the ideals which have been perverted sit at its middle.

We have two methodological issues to address regarding this phrase. The first relates to the significance of a chiastic structure and how it informs us of the message subsumed under the rhetoric. The second issue is the *mashal-nimshal* (parable-lesson) relationship within the verse, which is complex and textured.

As we have discussed several times in our series, narrative as well as poetic rhetoric in *Tanakh* is presented in a structure we refer to as a chiasmus, named for the Greek letter “chi” (which looks like an X). The basic form has a theme (“A”) at the beginning of the passage, a second theme (“B”) and, for example, a third theme (“C”). At that point, a variation on “B” may appear, followed by a variation of “A.” This could be represented by the figure ABCBA, where C operates as the fulcrum or axis of the passage. Alternatively, the structure may be ABCCBA, in which C, like the other two themes, is presented in two varied forms.

An example of the first is *Esther* 2:7 (for our purposes, representing the text in translation alone will suffice):

A: And he [Mordekhai] brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter;

B: for she had neither father nor mother,

C: and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look on

B1: and when her father and mother were dead

A1: Mordekhai took her for his own daughter.

An example of the second type, one of hundreds of examples, is found at the beginning of *Sefer Shmuel*:

(And he [Elkana] had two wives)

A: One was named Chana

B: The other was named Penina

B1: Penina had children

A1: But Chana had no children

The purpose of a chiastic structure, beyond its rhetorical elegance, is to focus on the middle. In the first example from *Megillat Esther*, it was Esther’s beauty the was the most important piece of information, as the reader, following from earlier in that chapter, knows that the king has ordered his officers to collect all of the beautiful maidens in the kingdom. In the second example, it is Penina’s motherhood that is the vital fact of the exposition of the story, intensifying Chana’s pain and leading to her heartfelt prayer at the *Mishkan*.

In our case, the focal point is not the example of the “bad weeds,” but rather the justice and the giant chasm between its ideal manifestation and the reality of the Shomroni courts at the time. Hence, *mishpat* and *peri tzedaka* are at the center of the phrase.

One note about the unmatched phrase *peri tzedaka.* (The closest to it is *peri tzadik* in *Mishlei* 11:30, but they are not at all the same.) Since the metaphor used here is *rosh* and *la’ana*, bitter grasses, the prophet embellished the desired *tzedaka* (already addressed in 5:7) as a plant, which ideally should produce righteousness in the society.

The second methodological issue that we must address is the interwoven metaphors in this one verse. First, the prophet asks two rhetorical questions that highlight the futility of using animals for their natural purpose but in an inhospitable or unworkable environment. A horse cannot run on a round boulder, nor can an ox plow there. If we take a deeper look at the imagery, however, we see an imperfect parallel here. A horse *can* run on rocks, but it won’t do so willingly or with great success, and it may endanger itself as a result. On the other hand, an ox *cannot* plow rock (or, per Michaelis and those who follow his suggested emendation, water). Even if this began as a folk saying, Amos quite possibly rearranged it or edited it to suit his rhetorical aim – first to present something that is inefficient and non-productive and then something that is inherently impossible.

With the bridge word *ki*, Amos telegraphs his intent in the opening adage to explain his meaning and to identify the lesson. However, the moral doesn’t seem to fit the metaphor. It is not about doing inefficient or impossible things, but rather about doing unethical and immoral things. It isn’t about, say, a procedural roadblock in the court that keeps the system from moving (albeit oppressively and in a corrupt manner). Rather, it is about the essential dysfunction of the court system, in which that justice that ought to bear sweet and nutritious fruit for the society is, instead, nurturing bitter and poisonous results.

I suggest that we need to take one step deeper to understand the prophet’s message. He is not speaking to the perversion of justice – as he already did in the previous chapter – but rather about the essential unworkability of the system and its inevitable implosion, which will take society with it. In other words, just as trying to make the best use of a horse or ox is not realized by working them in an unsuitable environment, similarly, trying to keep a society functioning and productive – or even “afloat” – when at the base there is the rot of corruption is doomed to failure. Amos is speaking here to the practical side, rather than the ethical side, of the results of judicial corruption.

In the next *shiur*, we will see how Amos fills out this message and addresses the arrogance of Shomroni society as one of its deepest and most poisonous ills.

**For Further Reading:**

Use of Horses in War:

*The Military History of Eretz Yisrael*, ed. Jacob Livor, IDF 1977 p. 242-250, 323.

1. In *Divrei Ha-Yamim II* 9:25, the number is given at 4,000. See the commentaries on *Melakhim* ad loc. for various resolutions to this discrepancy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Deutsche Überssetzung des Alten Testaments,* vol 1, Göttingen. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Da’at Mikra, Amos*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)