YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #62:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**The Illusions of Power**

**Part II**

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 the previous *shiur*, we studied the opening verse of this rebuke. In this *shiur*, we will conclude our study of this section.

**THE TEXT (6:13-14)**

**Background**

As reported in *Melakhim* II 14:25, the military and political influence of the Northern Kingdom was restored and enlarged under the rule of Yerovam II:

He restored the border [i.e. reestablished Israelite dominion] of Yisrael from the entrance of Chamat until the sea of the Arava.

This success had assuredly generated a sense of arrogance and invincibility among the leadership. As is often the case – both in the Biblical eras of prophecy as well as ever since the cessation of God’s word being delivered directly to the people – this national hubris brings several consequential attitudinal shifts that carry the seeds of catastrophe. First of all, the army tends to get overly confident and lax; we have seen this in our own lifetime – at least those of us old enough to remember the dramatic difference between 1967 and 1973. In addition, messages of caution, prophetic warnings, and the like are readily ignored; a careful read of *Yirmiyahu* 34 provides a clear example of this socio-religious phenomenon.

In this rebuke, and specifically in these two verses, Amos takes direct aim at the source of this cockiness in the hope to shake the leadership into a greater sense of wariness.

*Ha-semeichim le-lo davar*

You that rejoice in a thing of nought

This is a clever play on words. The town of *Lo-devar* (documented as the town where Meriv-Baal[[1]](#footnote-1) was living when David brought him to Yerushalayim to join the royal house, *Shmuel II* 9:4-5, 17:27) is located in the northwest of modern-day Jordan. (It may be the *lidevir* of *Yehoshua* 13:26; some suggest that the vocalization there should be *lodvar.*) Some have identified it as the location of “Um A-Dabr.” The phrase *lo davar*, however, means something close to the translation used here – “nothing,” “no matter.” The prophet here is pointing to the people’s rejoicing over their reconquest of *Lo-devar*, but, in reality, their celebration is much ado about nothing.

The *Rishonim*, focusing on the customary meaning of *lo davar*, are divided as to the meaning of the phrase. Rashi understands that *lo davar* means “illusory,” meaning that the people are rejoicing over an imagined status of powerful victors, which will not last. Radak (and, it seems, ibn Ezra) takes the same approach.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency has an insightful variation on this perspective. His interpretation might render the phrase as “presumptuous” – they are rejoicing over a victory that they credit to their own power, *kochi ve-otzem yadi*, but which was not of their making. This reading, while difficult within this stich, has strong support from the rest of the couplet, as we will see below.

R. Joseph Kara presents an innovative interpretation here. He reads *lo davar* as *le-lo devar Hashem* and turns the cause of their rejoicing inside out. Instead of their rejoicing over their victory or the status it granted them, they rejoice over their not having to listen to the word of God. This turns the entire rebuke in a different direction; instead of it being about their hubris in the aftermath of the expanded border, it is a diatribe against the people’s willful rejection of *devar* *Hashem.*[[2]](#footnote-2) They are happy to do without “the Word.” In that light, R. Kara interprets the previous verse (see the previous *shiur*) as meaning that “just as a horse cannot run on rocks and an oxen cannot plow on rocks, similarly, you (the audience) are incapable of following the path of God.” I omitted this commentary in the previous *shiur*, as it seems far from the straightforward meaning (and is surprising, coming from the school of Rashi), as is his interpretation of this verse. His approach is intriguing enough that it bears mentioning, however.

The one point of commonality between Kara’s approach and that of R. Eliezer is that they point to the people’s focusing away from God as the vital force behind their national weal.

One note about the syntax of this phrase. The predicate *samo’ach*, when followed with the prepositional prefix *le-*, often is understood as “mock” or “laugh *at.*” However, that is true when the object is an individual (e.g. *Tehillim* 38:17) or a group (e.g. *Ovadia* verse 12). Here, where the object is an event (the conquest of the town), the verb takes its usual meaning of “rejoice” and the prefix points to the occasion of the happiness. Examples of this can be found in *Mishlei* 17:5, *same’ach le-eid*, and *Iyov* 3:22*,* *ha-semeichim elei gil yasisu ki yimtze’u kaver*. Note that both of these verses speak of inappropriate causes for rejoicing – the misfortune of one’s fellow (*Mishlei*) or seeking death (in Iyov’s opening soliloquy). It is also worth noting that the both of these (presumably later) authors of wisdom literature also borrowed from Amos’s style, a phenomenon we have seen regularly throughout our study.

*Ha-omrim ha-lo be-chozkeinu lakachnu lanu karnayim*

Who say: “Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?”

Just as the opening line began with the definite article followed by a plural noun identifying the audience (*ha-semeichim*), this stich similarly addresses “those who say” – *ha-omrim*. This is a common rhetorical styling used by Amos (see, for example, 4:1: ***ha-oshkot*** *dalim,* ***ha-rotzetzot*** *evyonim,* ***ha-omrot*** *l-adoneihem…*). This is a subtle form of the vocative, in which the audience is described in the third person but understands (we hope) that the orator is addressing them (in)directly.

The sentiment that Amos is responding to is clear and is one about which we are warned in the Torah. The danger that when the Israelite armies are victorious, they will credit their success to their own prowess, strategy, and courage – and forget that it is God Who gives them the strength to fight and win – is a sub-textual theme in Moshe’s farewell speech. He explicitly references and warns against this wrong-headed attitude in *Devarim* chapter 8:[[3]](#footnote-3)

Beware lest you forget *Hashem* your God, in not keeping His commandments, and His ordinances, and His statutes, which I command you this day. Lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses, and lived therein; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget *Hashem* your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with fiery serpents and scorpions, and thirsty ground where there was no water; who brought you forth water out of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know; that He might humble you, and that He might prove you, to do you good at your latter end. And lest you say in your heart, “**My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth**.” But you shall remember *Hashem* your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that He may establish his covenant which He swore to your fathers, as at this day. (*Devarim* 8:11-18)

Note that this warning is general in nature and relates to the entire success of the national enterprise, focusing on wealth. The danger is that the people will imagine that it is their wisdom, diligence, and brute strength that has secured their wealth, forgetting one of the core lessons of the Exodus – that it is God whose power determines the fate of nations.

This lesson equally – and, in a sense, with greater urgency as well as prominence – applies to military success. Whereas at the dawn of our national existence, *Am Yisrael* declared that *Hashem Ish Milchama* – God is the Master of War – they may forget this truth as well and begin believing in their own might as the exclusive cause of their victories.

Indeed, elsewhere in his “charge to the troops,” Moshe commands that they remember:

Hear, Israel, you draw near this day to battle against your enemies. Do not let your heart faint; do not be afraid, nor tremble, neither be scared of them; **for *Hashem* your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you**. (*Devarim* 20:3-4)

The dangerous attitude of attributing military success exclusively to the army, understandable and deep-rooted though it may be, carries with it the potential to unravel the entire spiritual fabric of the society. There may be no more clear expression of this wrong-headed pride as this phrase (with a translation modified somewhat from above):

*Ha-lo be-chozkeinu*: Is it not true that with our own might…?

*Lakahnu lanu*: we ourselves took

*Karnayim*: horns

*Lakahnu lanu*, which was translated above as “we took for ourselves”[[4]](#footnote-4) – such that the *lamed* prefix is a *lamed* of purpose – may also be understood as I modified here, “we ourselves took,” in which the word *lanu* is a stress word, underscoring that we ourselves took it, without outside (or Divine) help.

The *karnayim* mentioned here, as is the case with *lo-davar*, may also be a clever word play originally referencing a town that was restored to Israelite control by Yerovam II. Two adjacent cities (from the archaeological evidence, approximately 4 kilometers apart) – one called Ashterot[[5]](#footnote-5) and the other Karnayim –are found in the Bashan, near the headwaters of the middle fork of the Yarmukh. These two towns are mentioned together in the story of the “four kings” in *Bereishit* 14:

In the fourteenth year, Khedorlaomer came, and the kings who were with him, and struck the Refaim in **Ashterot Karnaim**, and the Zuzim in Cham, and the Emim in Shaveh Kiryata’im.

A *keren* is also a horn and is used throughout *Tanakh* to symbolize power, such as in psalm 75:

I say unto the arrogant, “Deal not arrogantly”; and to the wicked, “Lift not up the **horn**.” Lift not up your **horn** on high; speak not insolence with a haughty neck. For neither from the east, nor from the west, nor yet from the wilderness, comes lifting up. For God is judge; He puts down one and lifts up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, with foaming wine, full of mixture, and He pours out of the same; surely the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth, shall drain them and drink them. But as for me, I will declare forever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob. All the **horns** of the wicked also will I cut off; but the **horns** of the righteous shall be lifted up. (*Tehillim* 75: 5-11).

There is, in fact, a triple-entendre in the phrase in our passage:

1. We conquered the town of Karnayim.
2. We have appropriated for ourselves immense power (sort of “*keren*-squared”).
3. (Through our own might) we have captured the great power of the enemy.

We might even suggest a fourth, more insidious intent: “We have taken Divine might for ourselves.”

*Ki hineni meikim aleikhem Beit Yisrael*

For, behold, I will raise up against you [a nation], O house of Israel

(Due to the vagaries of Biblical syntax, it isn’t possible to accurately translate this verse phrase by phrase and make any sense; I therefore added [a nation] out of its sequence in the original.)

The introductory *ki* here, unlike its use in verse 12, does not provide an explanation for the antecedent clause.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rather, it is an explanation for the general tone of mocking that the prophet intones, making fun of the rejoicing that the Israelite establishment is experiencing. The nation is elated over their victories and feels a certain invincibility that comes with an underdog’s surprising win. But they have no reason to rejoice, since that selfsame confidence that they are feeling will soon be turned on its head – and by Divine instigation, at that!

Note the powerful poetic justice here. A nation that is expected to realize that its victories are wrought by the Hand of God has taken credit for themselves. Now, God, Who has been ignored in victory, will become explicitly and immanently manifest in their defeat.

*Ne’um Hashem Tzevaot – goy*

says the Lord, the God of hosts; a nation

Amos frequently uses God’s Name to “sign” his oratorical pronouncements. Sometimes, as we have pointed out, he does this as a literary marker to identify the end of a sub-passage and the like. In our case, even though this verse is the signature of the rebuke-threat, it serves a different purpose as well. It underscores God’s role, as adumbrated above, which has been diminished and made less than peripheral in the national consciousness as it relates to their military prowess. This same God, the “Lord of Hosts” – which alludes to military power and His role as leader of the Israelite army (see, inter alia, *Shemot* 12:41, 51; *Shmuel* *I* 17:45) – has “signed off” on a decree to employ that military might *against* His nation.

*Ve-lachatzu etkhem*

and they shall afflict you

*Mi-levo Chamat*

from the entrance of Chamat

*Le-vo Chamat* (which should probably be rendered as a proper name and not as “entrance”) is in the northern half of the Beka’a valley; it was the northernmost point of Moshe’s scouts’ tour of Canaan (*Bamidbar* 13:21) and is given as the northernmost border of the Land (ibid. 34:8).

*Ad nachal ha-Arava*

unto the Brook of the Arava

This unmatched phrase likely refers to a *wadi* on the northern side of the Dead Sea. In the parallel phrase in *Melakhim*, the conquest that the people are evidently celebrating includes *yam ha-arava*.

Compare this prophecy with the historic record of Yerovam II’s conquest:

He restored the border [i.e. reestablished Israelite dominion] of Yisrael from the **entrance of Chamat** until the **sea of the Arava**.

The areas where the prophet foretells of Israelite enslavement and oppression under the thumb of the enemy are exactly those places restored to Israelite dominion – but since the victors completely misunderstood the meaning and source of their victory, those same places would become the focal points of their bitter turnaround.

This brings us to the end of this oracle. In next week’s *shiur*, we will begin studying the “visions” of chapter 7.

1. Meriv-Baal was Yonatan’s son, who was lamed at an early age. He is called Mefiboshet in *Shmuel*, but that is almost assuredly a “censored” version of his name, which *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (I 8:34, 9:40) faithfully records as Meriv-Baal. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As an aside, it is always curious to hear prophets rail against those who turn a deaf ear to the word of God – as delivered by the prophets. Who, exactly, is their audience? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is not completely tangential to note that this speech, which makes up most of *Sefer Devarim*, is at its core a charge to the army on the eve of their great battle for the Land. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Most of the translations generally render it in that spirit – that *lanu* means “for ourselves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ashterot is best known as the capital or seat of power of Og, King of Bashan. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. More accurately, in verse 12 it introduces the solution to a riddle – “in what way is our behavior/attitude akin to trying to run horses on rocks, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)