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 Israel Koschitzky z"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Shiur #63:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS**

**Introduction and Overview**

Over the past six chapters, we have seen Amos utilize numerous and varied tools of his rhetorical palette to try to persuade the aristocracy and leadership of the Northern Kingdom to right their societal ship. These tools include feigned audiences, cosmic metaphors, and earthly similes, as well as numerous philological and thematic allusions to earlier books in *Tanakh*. The one prophetic tool that we have not yet encountered is likely the most common, at least in the public imagination – the vision.

In the famous scene in which God lambasts Miriam and Aharon for thinking themselves to be equal to Moshe in prophetic prowess, He defines the method of prophecy for all prophets besides Moshe:

He said, “Hear now my words. If there is a prophet among you, I *Hashem* will make myself known to him in a vision. I will speak with him in a dream.” (*Bamidbar* 12:6)

The “vision” mentioned here is called *mar’eh*, which implies that the prophet actually envisions some image or form, which may be static or active. That vision ostensibly contains a message that the prophet is then to communicate to his audience. Although this vehicle may have been actively used by God to communicate to His prophets from time immemorial, until this point, we have no record of a prophet *describing* one and then presenting its interpretation.

Until now, we have not heard Amos recount something he envisioned and then translate it into a message; it has been straight rhetoric, presumably all flowing from the roar of God’s voice, which is his anthemic opening (1:2).

From this point on, however, visions inform the rest of the book. Amos has four or five visions, depending on how we understand the relationship of the beginning of chapter 9 to the earlier sections. These visions are organized as follows:

The first three visions are contiguously presented and comprise the first nine verses of chapter 7. Each vision is three verses long and follows a consistent pattern. The rest of chapter 7 is made up of the one narrative in the book, detailing Amos’s interaction with the High Priest at the Royal Sanctuary at Beit El. The next vision is at the beginning of chapter 8 and, like each of the first three, is three verses in length. The rest of chapter 8 reverts back to Amos’s earlier form and, indeed, recalls some of his earlier rebukes. One more vision, which may be the fifth of this series or an independent vision, appears at the beginning of chapter 9 and seems to be twice as long as the others (six verses), which leads to the coda and then epilogue of the book. It is not only the excessive length that calls into question the inclusion of this “fifth” vision in the series; it is also the style and lack of loyalty to the pattern established by the first four visions.

Even though the visions are not presented uninterruptedly, there is a sequence to be found there which itself may be a part of the underlying message. We will assay this sequence further below. First, a few words about visions in general and their types.

**VISIONS: A PROPOSED TAXONOMY**

A survey of prophetic visions – meaning, when the prophet reports seeing an image or series of images as a Divine message – will present us with various types of images. We could categorize and sub-categorize visions *ad infinitum* to the point that each vision would be its own category, but that is of no use to us if we wish to understand vision *types* and the reason that a particular vision is of type A and not, say, type B.

Reading through the various books of *Tanakh*, we first notice that numerous prophets never have “visions” – at least, not as reported to us. It may very well be that each prophetic utterance is generated by a vision, but there is no way for us to know without the prophet telling us. With the exception of Amos and Zekharya, it is difficult to pinpoint a *mar’eh* in the prophecies of any of the other of the *Trei Asar*. We might posit that Yoel’s great imagery of the “day of judgement” was generated by a vision, and much the same could be said about Nachum’s words about Assyria – but they are not reported as such. To be sure, *Yeshayahu*, *Yirmiyahu* and *Yechezkel* – the three “independent” books of prophecy – are rife with images.

Note to the reader: I would recommend reading through *Zekharya* 1-6 before continuing, as a number of the references in this presentation point to his sequence of seven visions, which all took place in one night, as reported there. They begin in *Zekharya* 1:7.

**VISIONS: STATIC OR DYNAMIC?**

First, we must distinguish between static visions and animated or dynamic visions. A static vision, such as the “almond staff” that Yirmiyahu sees (*Yirmiyahu* 1:11), is a single thing; its identity carries the message (*makel shaked 🡪 shoked ani al devari*). The next vision that Yirmiyahu has is a “seething pot, and its face is from the north” (1:13). Does he see the pot actually seething (dynamic), or just a single image of a pot that has seething food in it? It is unclear from the context, since the dynamism is unnecessary for the message (“The troubles will begin from the north” – 1:14).

On the other hand, there are numerous visions in the prophetic canon that are decidedly animated, and the message stems from the activity in that vision. For example, Yeshayahu’s inauguration vision (*Yeshayahu* 6) is a clear “vision-prophecy.” It begins with *va-ereh* (“and I saw” – 6:1) and it is decidedly dynamic:

In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim; each one had six wings: with twain he covered his face and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one called unto another, and said: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.” And the posts of the door were moved at the voice of them that called, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I: “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Then flew unto me one of the seraphim, with a glowing stone in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Lo, this has touched your lips, and your iniquity is taken away and your sin expiated.” And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said: “Here am I; send me.”

The movement of the angels’ wings (“with two he did fly”) as well as the antiphonal praise (“one called to another…”) are dynamic. The act of Yeshayahu’s “purification,” as it were, is part of the animated vision. The particular vision also has two elements that are not found in every vision; we will reference them in our next stage of the taxonomy of visions.

**DYNAMIC VISIONS: IS GOD PART OF THE VISION?**

In the above-cited vision of Yeshayahu’s inauguration, the animated scene involves God Himself, presented in a royal setting. In every prophetic vision in which God is presented as part of the vision, there is no description of God per se, but rather of what He is doing, where He is sitting, etc. Does this mean that the prophet only perceives God’s Presence and cannot be more specific, or that he deliberately withholds this more esoteric wisdom from his audience? We have no way to determine the answer, even if we were to assume a consistent answer in all cases.

There are, however, other dynamic visions that do not directly have God playing a “present” role. The seven visions of Zekharya (*Zekharya* 1-6) – of the horses, the smiths and horns, the measure, the *menora*, the flying scroll, the flying basket, and the chariots and horses – are all dynamic, yet in none of them is God portrayed as being “in” the vision.

**DYNAMIC VISIONS: IS THE PROPHET ACTIVE OR PASSIVE?**

Even those visions that are dynamic and include God’s presence “on stage,” so to speak, are not monolithic. In some of these visions, the prophet is also an active player;[[1]](#footnote-1) in others, he merely envisions God acting (or not – see below), but is utterly outside of the “action” and only reports to us what he sees. This taxonomy is not telescopic. There are visions in which the prophet *is* present, but God *is not* part of the “on-stage” scene. For example, Zekharya, in his seven visions (referenced above), sees himself interacting with an interpreting angel – *ha-malakh ha-dover bi* – who explains the meaning of his visions, but God is only present insofar as the prophet’s reaction to each of the messages is to call out to God, beseeching Him to respond to this vision.

In contrast, there are visions in which God is central to the scene, yet the prophet is merely the passive viewer. Depending on how we understand the vision of the Celestial Chariot (*ma’aseh ha-merkavah* – *Yechezkel* 1), the prophet is watching this dynamic scene, which involves God and His “entourage,” but the prophet is only a reporter here.

**THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET – DIALOGUE WITH GOD OR MERE REPORTER?**

One other distinction we ought to note – as it will play a critical role in our assessment of Amos’s visions – is the role played by the prophet in the vision itself. Whether or not God and/or the prophet are part of the “on-stage” scene, there are visions in which the prophet and God are engaged in dialogue either about the meaning of the vision or about the impact of that meaning.

For instance, throughout Zekharya’s visions (chapters 1-6), the prophet, once he understands the message behind the vision, calls out to God, beseeching Him to act favorably towards His people. Closer to Amos’s era, when Yeshayahu experiences his inauguration prophecy (*Yeshayahu* 6), he at first refuses the mission to be God’s agent, as he is “impure, living among an impure people.” God’s response is to send one of the seraphim with a hot coal, which he touches on the prophet’s lips, purifying him and readying him to accept God’s agency. This even occurs in static prophecies, such as God’s engaging Yirmiyahu when he is shown the two baskets of figs (*Yirmiyahu* 24). As presented here, we see that the dialogue around the vision can happen when the vision is static or dynamic, when God is present (as in *Yeshayahu* 6) or absent (as in *Zekharya*), and whether or not the prophet is part of the drama (as in *Zekharya*) or not (as in *Yirmiyahu* 24). The dialogue may be about the meaning of the vision (such as *Yirmiyahu* 1:11, 13-14) or the prophet’s response to the vision and his consequential prayer (such as Zekharya’s).

**SUMMARY**

In this brief introduction to prophetic visions – and we have omitted far more than we have included (so far) – we have suggested a categorical framework that depends on four variables:

1) Is the vision static or dynamic? In other words, does the prophet report an image or an action?

2) Is God present in the vision? This may impact on how easily the vision may be interpreted – surely God’s presence in the vision should make the picture more accessible as to its meaning.

3) Is the prophet himself present in the scene, or is he merely the one viewing and reporting it? If he is active, do his actions (as reported by himself!) reflect something about the meaning of the vision?

4) Is there a dialogue – of any sort – between the prophet and God around the vision? (By “around the vision” I mean that it is *about* the vision or its implications, not *part* of the vision.)

Over the course of the next sequence of *shiurim*, we will explore more facets of “visions.”

**AMOS’S VISIONS**

As mentioned above, Amos has four or five visions, which cover the first half of chapter 7 (three of them in consecutive order), the first segment of chapter 8 (the fourth), and (possibly) the beginning of chapter 9 (the fifth).

The first two visions (6:1-3, 4-6) follow a consistent pattern and are clearly related to each other. They are each introduced with the phrase *ko hirani Adonai Elokim* (thus the Lord God showed me), followed by the prepositional *ve-hinei*, “and behold,” which introduces the vision. In the second verse, the prophet is already in dialogue with God, begging Him to forgive the people and cancel the punishment implicit in the vision. The argument is *mi yakum Yaakov, ki katan hu* – “Can Yaakov withstand this? He is quite small!”

In each case, God’s favorable response is *nicham Hashem al zot*,“God has repented from this,” and, in the case of the second vision, the added *gam hi,* “this also” – which clearly associates the second vision sequentially to the first – *lo tihyeh*, “it will not come to pass.” In each of these two visions, the promise of forgiveness is completed with a Divine signature – *amar Hashem* (or, in the second, *amar Adonai Elokim*).

These first two visions portend attacks on the resources of the Land, akin to some of the plagues of Egypt – we will detail them in the next few *shiurim*.

The third vision is something of a departure from the pattern, as God is moved from the role of creator of the vision (*hirani Hashem*) to player (*hirani, ve-hinei Adonai…*). While God is now “on stage” in this vision, He also engages Amos in dialogue, at first in a manner reminiscent of His interactions with Yirmiyahu: *Mah atah ro’eh*? “What do you see?” Amos answers, and from that point on, we only hear God’s voice, thundering out the punishment that will befall Yisrael. There is no opportunity for Amos to beg for forgiveness for the people, and he is silent.

The fourth vision begins as something of a hybrid between the first two and the third. On the one hand, God is again the One who shows the vision; He is not part of the vision. This is similar to the first two. On the other hand, God engages Amos, asking him, *Mah atah ro’eh*, Amos again answers to the point, identifying the object that he is shown, and then God declares the punishment that is coming. Again, there is no room for beseeching; all there is, is silence (*has*). All in all, the fourth vision seems to be of a kind with the third, establishing two pairs of visions (much like the two dreams of Yosef, the two dreams of his wards in prison and, ultimately, the paired dreams of Pharaoh.[[2]](#footnote-2))

Some modern commentators (those who engage in structural analysis) suggest that the vision recorded at the beginning of chapter 9 is part of this series (e.g. Shalom Paul). Others do not include it in the series (e.g. Amos Hakham). When we get to chapter 9 and analyze the text, we will present both arguments and come to our own conclusions. In the meantime, just a few *a priori* observations about that passage. On the one hand, it is most decidedly a vision:

I saw the Lord standing atop the altar…

On the other hand, the introductory formula used in the first four –

*Ko hirani* – He showed me thus…

is missing. So this is definitely a vision, and only the fifth (and final one) in Amos – but is it of a piece with the four that are our main focus here? We will take that up as we make our way through the text.

In the next two *shiurim*, we will analyze the first vision and see how it fits within the larger scope of prophetic visions in *Tanakh*.

**For Further Study:**

Dreams: Yitzchak Etshalom, *Between the Lines of the Bible, volume 1* (Jerusalem, 2015), chapter 21.

**Appendix A: Pharaoh’s Dreams Resolved**

**A Man of Wisdom and Discernment:**

**Deciphering Yosef’s Solution to Pharaoh’s Dream(s)**

By Yitzchak Etshalom

At the beginning of *Parashat Miketz*, Pharaoh experiences two famous dreams. Seven fat cows emerge from the Nile. These are followed by seven emaciated cows who eat the fat cows. He subsequently sees seven healthy stalks come out of the ground, followed by seven sickly stalks. The latter devour the former, and at that point, Pharaoh awakens and is sorely troubled by what he has seen. His court wizards are incapable of explaining his dreams. His chief butler speaks up, mentioning the Hebrew slave who served him while in the royal prison. This slave accurately explained the butler’s (and baker’s) dreams. Pharaoh has Yosef brought before him to help him with the dreams.

All of this is well-known and understood – but it is at this point that clarity and simplicity take leave and we are left with a confusing and enigmatic narrative.

Yosef’s “big news” is that Pharaoh’s two dreams are really one. We conventionally understand this to mean that the two dreams have the same message – plenty being swallowed by hunger. But this doesn’t impress us much. After all, the dreams, as presented by the text, seem to be obviously a parallel message. We are surprised that no one else in Pharaoh’s court could figure that part out! We are equally surprised at how impressed Pharaoh and his courtiers are with Yosef’s “insight.”

R. Saadia Ga’on (Baghdad, 882-942), arguably the first systematic commentator on *Tanakh*, makes a brief observation in his commentary to *Mishlei* (1:5-6) that opens up a novel understanding here.

Commenting on the word *melitza*, he states: “Just as Yosef explained Pharaoh’s dream of the seven cows and seven stalks, as he deconstructed it and re-ordered it and said that the seven healthy cows were eating the seven healthy stalks, which portends fat and plenty, and seven emaciated cows were eating the seven poor stalks, which alludes to famine and hunger.”

The key words that drive Saadia’s innovative approach are Yosef’s first words to Pharaoh: “Pharaoh’s dream is one” – a notion he repeats throughout his explanation. Armed with a principle explicated in the *gemara* (*Berakhot* 55b) that a person never sees an impossible thing in his dreams, he reasons that Yosef calculated as follows: Since cows are herbivores and don’t eat cows – and since stalks don’t eat anything – Pharaoh must have “jumbled” his two dreams up and mixed up what happened. Yosef understood that cows eat stalks, and this is something that anyone in an agrarian society would easily dream about. The symbolism of cows and stalks was doubly meaningful in 2nd millennium BCE Egypt, as upper Egypt was a grazing land and lower Egypt was grain farmland. The Pharaohs’ sarcophagi have them holding either a cattle prod or a scythe. What was remarkable was that in one night, Pharaoh dreamt that healthy cows were eating healthy stalks and then he dreamt that sickly cows were eating sickly stalks.

Pharaoh’s wizards were unable to see the “jumble” and tried to interpret his dream(s) based on the way that he reported them. Yosef’s wisdom was, first and foremost, in his ability to reconstruct what Pharaoh *really* saw and explain the dreams that way.

1. This leaves us wondering what the prophet is envisioning and how he can distinguish between himself (*qua* prophet) as passive watcher and himself (*qua* part of the vision) as active player. These theological questions are beyond the scope of this *shiur*, but must not be completely overlooked. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although it is extremely tangential, I would like to share a brilliant insight into the solution to Pharaoh’s dreams that my teacher, Zev “Jabo” Ehrlich, shared with me a few years ago, based on a comment of R. Saadia Gaon in his commentary to *Mishlei*. It is also timely, as *Parashot Vayeshev* and *Miketz* are upon us, so I have appended it to this article as Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)