YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #65:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS**

**VISION #1 (7:1-3) THE LOCUST PLAGUE**

**PART 2**

In the previous *shiur*, we began our analysis of the first of Amos’s five visions, which may be a series (although the last one may sit outside of the sequence). We focused on the repeated refrain of *ko hirani Ado-nai Elokim* and the repeated use of this Divine Name-combination, which Amos employs eight times in the context of these visions. We will now address the remainder of the first vision – the “locusts” – which includes Amos’s successful entreaty on behalf of the people.

**VISION #1: AMOS 7:1-3**

**THE TEXT (continued)**

In verse 1, we were told of Amos’s vision of God forming locusts and sending them to swarm and devour at the beginning of the late blooming crops, thus devastating the entire year’s yield.

*Ve-haya im kila le-ekhol et esev ha-aretz*

And if it had come to pass, that when they made an end of eating the grass of the land

The translation here, taken from the JPS (1917), is a bit odd. Even though the conditional *im* is used here, the *Rishonim* unanimously point out that the phrase *ve-haya im* sometimes – and certainly in this case – means “when,” not “if.” As Radak (ad loc.) notes, it is similar to the phrase

*Ve-haya im ba el eshet achiv ve-shicheit artza*

And it came to pass **when** he [Onan] went in unto his [deceased] brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground. (*Bereishit* 38:9, from the same JPS edition)

Given the vision, this phrase most certainly must be rendered “when,” as the complete devouring of the year’s yield is the point of the locust-vision.

The terms used here are evocative – and, we will argue, deliberately so – of the locust plague in Egypt.

In contradistinction to the locust plague (real or metaphoric?) in *Yoel*, where the plague is, at least partially, a fait accompli and no prayer is in place, save to spare the crops that are left (see *Yoel* 2:14), this plague has not yet happened, and the prophet, within the context of the vision (see *shiur* #63), prays for the reversal of the decree. In this sense, the locust plague in *Yoel* is similar to that of Egypt, while our passage stands apart from them.

However, the phrases used here mimic those in the Egyptian plague-narrative, besides the overt parallel of a warning issued before the onset of the plague (which is missing in *Yoel*):

*Hashem* said to Moshe, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come up on the land of Egypt **and eat every herb of the land** (*ve-yokhal et kol esev ha-aretz*), even all that the hail has left.” (*Shemot* 10:12)

For they covered the surface of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened, **and they ate every herb of the land** (*va-yokhal et kol esev ha-aretz*) and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left. **There remained nothing green, either tree or herb of the field, through all the land of Egypt.** (ibid. verse 15)

This last phrase is roughly parallel to *kila le-ekhol* – complete and utter destruction of the herbs (grasses) of the ground.

The story of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, as we have pointed out in earlier *shiurim*, was well-known to the citizens of Shomron and, as has been demonstrated by both modern and traditional commentators, held a central place in the autobiographical history of the people. As such, invoking a plague of this magnitude as a threat carried multiple messages, easy to read and terrifying to hear.

First of all, it meant that God was turning His anger on the people as He would towards an enemy. The plagues-cycle in *Shemot* chapters 7-11 (and later recounted in *Yehoshua* 24, *Shmuel* I 12, *Tehillim* 78, and elsewhere in the canon) is described as a war – a war that culminated at the sea, where God was feted as “Man of war” (*Shemot* 15:3). To have the same Divine “military tactics” used against His own people is assuredly a frightening prospect.

Beyond that, the reason that the locust plague was the *coup de gras* in the “attack” mode of the plagues (all that followed was darkness, much more of a nuisance than an attack, and then the slaying of the *bekhorot*, which stands apart from the rest of the plagues[[1]](#footnote-1)) was because of the complete agricultural and agronomic devastation that it caused. As the text testifies:

And [the locusts] shall cover the surface of the earth, so that one will not be able to see the earth. **They shall eat the residue of that which has escaped**, which remains to you from the hail, and shall eat every tree which grows for you out of the field. (*Shemot* 10:5).

The promise that “everything that was spared from the hail will be destroyed” was fulfilled:

For they covered the surface of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened, and they ate every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees **which the hail had left**. There remained nothing green, either tree or herb of the field, through all the land of Egypt. (ibid. verse 15)

To be threatened with such complete ruin should have been sufficient to stir the populace to reflect and repent. That is likely why the prophet chose words that evoke the Egyptian story, in the hope that it would move his audience and soften their hearts and open their ears. This was, of course, not to be.

*Va-omar Adonai (A-D-N-Y) Elokim (Y-H-V-H)*

I said: “Lord God,

As pointed out in the introductory *shiur* to this section (#63), the use of this Divine name combination is frequented only by Amos and Yeshayahu. As we saw, the first to use it was Avraham, then Moshe, then Yehoshua – all in the context of petitionary prayer, with ultimate concerns at risk. Until Amos, the most frequent use was David’s, in his prayer relating to the establishment of his dynasty and God’s refusal to allow him to build the *Mikdash* (*Shmuel* II 7).

Amos doesn’t just pray here to God; he informs his audience that he did so, in order that they understand the existential threat that they faced and concerning which he was pleading with God. This is reminiscent of Moshe’s relating to the people that he begged God to allow him to see the Land:

*Va-etchanan el Hashem ba-et ha-hi leimor: A-D-N-Y Elokim, atah hachilota le-harot et avdekha et godlekha ve-et yadkha ha-chazaka…e’ebra na ve-ereh et ha-aretz ha-tova asher be-ever ha-Yarden, ha-har ha-tov ha-zeh ve-ha-Levanon…*

I begged Hashem at that time, saying, “***A-D-N-Y Elokim***, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand: for what god is there in heaven or in earth, that can do according to your works, and according to your mighty acts? Please let me go over and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon.” (*Devarim* 3:23-25)

Note that Moshe shared not only the contents of his petition (and of God’s refusal) with the people, but also his phrasing, including the salutatory ***A-D-N-Y Elokim***. He does this yet again regarding his prayer following the sin of the golden calf:

*Va-etnapal lifnei Hashem, et arba’im ha-yom ve-et arba’im ha-layla asher hitnapalti, ki amar Hashem le-hashmid etkhem. Va-etpalel el Hashem va-omar:* ***A-D-N-Y Elokim*** *al-tashcheit amkha ve-nachalatkha asher padita be-godlekha asher hotzeita mi-Mitzrayim be-yad chazaka…*

So I fell down before *Hashem* the forty days and forty nights that I fell down, because *Hashem* had said He would destroy you. I prayed to *Hashem* and said, “***A-D-N-Y Elokim***, do not destroy your people and your inheritance, that you have redeemed through your greatness, that you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand…” (ibid. 9:25-26)

(Parenthetically, this may shed some light on how deeply Moshe felt about the decree that prevented him from entering the Land. It is most telling that he uses the same devotional terminology when praying regarding his own permission to see the Land as when the entire nation’s very existence is at stake.)

I would like to suggest that perhaps Amos took a page from Moshe Rabbenu’s playbook, sharing the words of his prayer with his audience to impress upon them the **personal** depths at which he felt the threat. There is, of course, a critical difference between the two scenes quoted above from *Devarim* and our scene. In *Devarim*, Moshe was recounting a personal prayer that he expressed to God; the prayer had been uttered earlier (in the case of *va-etchanan*, within the past year; in the case of *va-etnapal*, nearly forty years back). In Amos’s case, on the other hand, the prayers were part of the visions that he was currently sharing. In other words, he was not telling his audience of a past prayer that he had once said; rather, the contemporary scene was the setting of that prayer in its first expression.

*Selach na*

“forgive, I beg of You;

Before addressing the meaning of *selach* and its role in this vision-prayer, we ought to address the meaning of *na* and the translation provided here. The word *na* appears 383 times in *Tanakh* and it seems, contextually, to have a range of meanings. Sometimes, it is commonly understood as an entreaty (“please”), such as, *Ana Hashem hoshia* ***na****…* (*Tehillim* 118:25). Other times, it cannot take that meaning, such as the command regarding *Korban Pesach* *al tokhlu mimenu* ***na*** (*Shemot* 12:9), which is generally (and halakhically) translated as “do not eat of it **raw**.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ibn Ezra, in numerous places in his commentary,[[3]](#footnote-3) suggests that *na* **always** means “now,” although he would have to admit that it is often used in dialogue where urgency seems to be at play – as if to say, “I beg of you, **right now**…” Even in the context of the *Korban Pesach*, he interprets *na* as “now”:

The word “like” is missing, as if it said: “Do not eat it as it is now.” For the meaning of *na* throughout Scripture is “now,” in my opinion. If it were a word of entreaty, why would it say, *daber* ***na*** *be-oznei ha-am* or *shema* ***na*** *ben Achituv*… and many others like this [i.e. phrases where *na* appears and cannot reasonably mean “please”]. (Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 12:9; however, in his “long” commentary on *Shemot* [ad loc.], he mentions this approach and rejects it, stating that this instance is unique)

As such, we prefer to translate the word here as *selach na*, “forgive **now.**” The sense of impending punishment and potential destruction occasions the urgency of “now.”

Amos’s request/demand that God “forgive” (*selach)* should not be misunderstood. He is not asking God to simply delay or even cancel the punishment. He is instead asking God to forgive the people for their grievous sin – whichever sin it may be that sealed their fate with this horrific sentence. The word *selach* throughout *Tanakh* has this meaning, as opposed to other words of “waiving a punishment,” such as *m-ch-hh* (which in rabbinic Hebrew and liturgy becomes *m-ch-l*):

*Haster panekha mechata’ai, ve-khol avonotai* ***mechei***

Hide Your face from my sins and **blot out** all my iniquities. (*Tehillim* 51:11)

It is clear from this context that the petitioner (in this case, David in his post-Bat-Sheva plea for forgiveness) is aware that he has sins and that the stain is not going to be removed; he isn’t asking for that. He is asking for God to “look away” – that is, not to punish him as a guilty party, even though he is, indeed, guilty.

As we will soon see, God’s answer is encouraging…for now. First, Amos has to back up his request with an argument.

That argument could be one of justice – to wit, the people aren’t really as guilty as accused or there were some other mitigating circumstances. Alternatively, he could fall back on Divine compassion, which doesn’t really cohere well with a request for *selicha*.

*Mi yakum Yaakov*

“How shall Yaakov stand?

Here is Amos’s argument: The Northern Kingdom will not be able to withstand the locust attack, for they are “small.” He refers to Shomron as “Yaakov,” as he did in 3:13.

The use of *mi* here is unusual. To translate it as “who” is strained, although R. Joseph Kara does so. Here is his comment:

…If I [Amos] do not pray on their behalf, who (*mi*) among them will stand up to help and to stand before You to plead that on his behalf the decree should be annulled, for the righteous of the generation have become few. [This is his interpretation of *katon* in the next clause].

Ibn Ezra also reads *mi* as “who,” but interprets it differently:

Who among them would be able to stand up in the face of this catastrophe?

However, there are occasions where *mi* is used to introduce a rhetorical question meaning “how,” such as *Yeshayahu* 51:19. See also Radak here:

For he is small, and how could he possibly stand with all of these decrees as he is small [=few] and only a few are left of the many.

*Ki katon hu*

“for he is small.”

This is the crux of Amos’s argument: Yaakov is “small” (or “few”) and cannot stand up to these decrees. As alluded to above, this is a weak argument for *selicha*, as it does nothing to explain why God should cleanse “Yaakov’s” record. Perhaps Amos uses this argument and shares it with his audience – the object and focal point of this prayer – because he knows that, surprisingly, they will be forgiven.

There seems to be another rhetorical-suasive move at play here. If Amos’s entire argument, which (temporarily) spares Shomron, is that they are *katon*, what does that say to the haughty aristocracy of Yisrael? Along with demonstrating God’s abiding interest in forgiving them and renewing the relationship as of old, it also reminds them that they are really quite small and insignificant and that all of their noise about their power and such is just that – “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Along with the innovative explanations of *katon* mentioned above, this is perhaps the most powerful, as it presents the case before God for ultimate compassion due to the insignificance of the defendant while at the same time serving to force the defendant to face his own inadequacies.

*Nicham Hashem al zot*

The Lord repented concerning this;

This is the good news; God has *nicham*. This is a word with a troubled career, insofar as God is concerned. It first appears as the meaning of Noach’s name:

*Zeh ye****nachameinu*** *mi-ma’aseinu…*

This [child] will bring us comfort from our labor…(*Bereishit* 5:29)

But it is first used in the sense of “regret” at the cusp of the flood narrative:

***Va-yinachem*** *Hashem ki asah et ha-adam ba-aretz va-yit’atzev el libo.*

*Hashem* **regretted** that He had made man on the earth, and He was saddened in His heart.

The difficulty with this word in the context of God’s response to events is most glaring in *Shmuel I* 15. In the aftermath of Shaul’s failure to properly execute God’s commands regarding Amalek, God informs the prophet that:

***Nichamti*** *ki himlakhti et Shaul le-melekh*

I **regret** that I set Shaul up as king. (v. 11)

According to this phrase, God is capable of regret, of recognizing that a decision was an error. Yet, further on in that same chapter, Shmuel informs Shaul that he is finished, because:

*Netzach Yisrael lo yeshaker ve-lo* ***yinachem****, ki lo adam hu* ***le-hinachem***

And also the Glory of Israel will not lie nor **repent**;

for He is not a man, that He should repent.

So does God “change His mind” or not? The commentators grapple with this problem there; it is beyond the scope of our *shiur* to do more than point out the issue. In our case, however, the news is all good – God has repented from His decision to destroy His people (or the northern kingdom of His people). This is not, however, the same as being forgiven, which was Amos’s request/demand. God has annulled (temporarily?) the decree, but the guilt is still there.

We get a sense that this is a move that Amos could make once or twice – but, at some point, the guilt accumulates and the punishment will not be forestalled anymore. This evokes the beginning of the book, with the repeated refrain of *al sheloshah pish’ei…* For the three sins…

*Lo tihyeh*

“It shall not be”,

Again, it is the punishment that will “not be” – or are we reading too optimistically? Perhaps buried under Amos’s words there is a greater threat lurking – an iron fist in a velvet glove. What if *nicham* is not about the punishment, but about the people – evoking the antediluvian Divine regret? And what if *lo tihyeh* should be read in the 2nd person – “Yaakov, you will no longer be”? Amos’s words are hopeful, but we need to keep the alternate reading in mind as a possibility – as this is what finally plays out a few decades later.

*Amar Hashem*

says the Lord.

This is Amos’s familiar signature form, which seals the prophecy and gives it the Divine imprimatur to his audience – and indicates a literary marker, to us, the distant audience.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will begin our study of the second vision.

1. See Yitzchak Etshalom, *Between the Lines of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2012), chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BDB regards this as a singular occurrence and unrelated to other instances of *na*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. *Bereishit* 12:11, 27:2; *Bamidbar* 10:31, 12:11-12; *Yeshayahu* 5:1; *Tehillim* 80:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)