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 by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of Mrs. Miriam Wise *z"l*, Miriam bat Yitzhak ve-Rivkah, 9 Tevet. *Yehi Zikhra Barukh*

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**Shiur #66:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS**

**VISION #2 (7:4-6): THE FIRE**

**PART 1**

In the previous *shiur*, we concluded our analysis of the first of Amos’s (four or) five visions – the locust plague. We focused on Amos’s prayer to have the people’s sin forgiven and God’s response – that He would stay the punishment but not relieve their guilt. In this and the following *shiur*, we will address the second vision – the “fire” – and Amos’s second quasi-successful entreaty on behalf of “Yaakov.”

Due to the severe challenges posed by the description of the vision in verse 4, we will focus all of our attention in this *shiur* on the first half of that verse and will take this opportunity to explore a vital area of the study of *Tanakh*.

**VISION #2: AMOS 7:4-6**

**THE TEXT**

*Ko hirani A-D-N-Y Elokim*

Thus A-D-N-Y Elokim showed me:

This opening follows the pattern established in the first vision and which will be repeated in the next two visions, with the minor but significant variation in the next vision (minor in words, significant in impact). We will identify and discuss that variation when we study the third vision.

*Ve-hinei korei la-riv ba-eish A-D-N-Y Elokim*

and, behold, A-D-N-Y Elokim called to contend by fire;

As mentioned in the previous *shiur*, the word *hinei* is regularly used in *Tanakh* to introduce a dream or vision setting.

This clause has unusual syntax. We would expect:

*Ve-hinei A-D-N-Y Elokim korei la-riv ba-eish*

with the subject (God) presented before the predicate (*korei la-riv?)* and the object (*ba-eish)*. The unexpected word sequencing is part of the difficulty that this clause presents to the reader. It is possible that the two basic challenges in the clause – the strange order along with the larger problem (outlined below) – may help to explain each other.

The verb *la-riv* – “to quarrel” or, more properly, “to make a legal claim” – when followed by the prepositional prefix *be-*X, has X as the party being accused. We find this in the Torah: *Va-yichar Yaakov va-yarev be-Lavan*, “and Yaakov was angry and he disputed Lavan” (*Bereishit* 31:36). Alternately, the prepositions *im* (e.g. *Shemot* 17:2), *el* (e.g. *Shoftim* 21:22) or *et* (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 50:8) are used after *la-riv* – but always identifying the “litigant” against whom the claim is being leveled. Here, however, the verb is followed by the **vehicle** of His judgment (the fire); nonetheless, it is bridged with the prepositional prefix *be*.

In order to address these two difficulties, we will begin with a survey of the medieval traditional commentators (*Rishonim*) to see how they grappled with them, along with their various approaches on the meaning of the “fire.” This will be followed with a brief but vital tangent, and then we’ll see how another school of scholars worked to reconcile the text.

**THE *RISHONIM***

None of the *Rishonim* address the syntactic problem; they understand that the verse – perhaps for the sake of variety – uses the unusual but not unprecedented order of predicate followed by subject.

Rashi reads the “summoning” as God calling to His celestial forces to punish the people (this is how he understands *la-riv*) using fire. In other words, the fire here means – fire (evidently, a supernatural one).

R. Joseph Kara takes an innovative approach. He translates *la-riv* in the customary fashion (unlike Rashi) as “quarrel” but, assuming that we know how that dispute will end, interprets it as meaning that God has resolved to punish the nation by exiling them among the other nations, who are **metaphorically** referred to as “fire.” The difficulty in this method is apparent in the next clause: How can these nations be described as “consuming the depths and devouring the fields”? Kara skirts the issue by interpreting that phrase independently.

Ibn Ezra is the first to raise the possibility that the fire means withering heat. He first presents the fire *ke-mashma’o* – “as per its meaning” – and buttresses this with the verse in *Yeshayahu* 66:16:

*Ki hinei* (!) *Hashem* ***ba-eish*** *nishpat u-vecharbo et kol basar ve-rabu chalelei Hashem*

For by fire will *Hashem* contend, And by His sword with all flesh; And the slain of *Hashem* shall be many.

(Note: “contend” here, *nishpat*, is roughly equivalent to *riv*, if we interpret *riv* in the usual sense of quarrel)

Ibn Ezra then says: “Or [it may mean that] He will intensify the heat **as if** He were burning with fire, and there will be no rain.”

Radak follows ibn Ezra with these two suggested meanings.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency makes a cryptic comment about our passage. He interprets *la-riv ba-eish* as “to engage them in judgment with great heat.” It is unclear whether he sees the fire (as do most) as the punishment awaiting them at the conclusion of this judgment or as the means of that judgment, as if this were a “trial by ordeal,” the ordeal being fire.

R. Joseph ibn Kaspi had already interpreted the “locusts” in the first vision as a metaphor for the Assyrian Emperor (similar to much of the interpretive traditions on the locust plague in *Yoel*; more about this further on). He continues this thread and – arguing that *ki ha-davar ha-echad yumshal be-meshalim rabim*,“one thing may be represented by multiple metaphors” – states that the “fire” here is another image of Assyria. This comes closest to R. Yosef Kara’s read of the fire as alluding to the nations.

In sum, the *Rishonim* take three distinct approaches to understanding the meaning of this vision. The “fire” is either an otherworldly fire that will be used to punish *Am Yisrael*, or a searing heat accompanied by a drought that will destroy all of the crops, or a metaphor for an attacking nation.

Regarding the object of *korei* (i.e. whom is being summoned?), the medieval commentators seem to once again fall into three groups. Either, per Rashi, God is summoning His heavenly hosts to use this fire to attack, or He is summoning Yaakov to a judgment by fire, or He is calling the “fire-nation” to come and punish His people. All are silent regarding the syntactic sequence, and we ought to assume that they understood *Hashem Elokim* **after** the phrase *korei ba-eish* as being the subject – i.e. He is the one doing the summoning.

As mentioned above, before moving ahead, a short but critical tangent is necessary.

**TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

Although we have an abiding trust in the reliability of our Masoretic Text (“MT”), we do recognize that there may be some alternate readings that may claim legitimacy, especially when they are supported by “versions” (e.g. the early *Targumim*, notably the Septuagint), by citations in rabbinic literature (see the first entry in “For Further Study”), or, most obviously, when reliable texts differ in their orthography. Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the advent and virtual explosion of Biblical critical theories and study, one of the areas of research that occupied the interest of scholars was “Text Criticism,” i.e. identifying putative errors in the transmitted text and proposing reconstructions that would revive the original text.

It is broadly assumed that “textual criticism” of the Bible is a product of the Enlightenment and is related to the various schools that espoused the Documentary Hypothesis and other approaches that are potentially at odds with traditional belief. This is not necessarily the case, as our rabbinic tradition engaged in textual criticism (see, *inter alia*, the *Sifri* at *Berakha* #356 – the tradition of the “three scrolls of the Torah” that varied from each other and, in each case, the rabbis ruled in accord- with the version consistent to two of them).[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, properly nailing down the exact orthography of the text was a centuries-long enterprise undertaken by the Masoretes in 6th-9th century Babylonia and Tiberias and one which continues to provide opportunities and challenges to scholars.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As an example, the *gemara* (BT *Sanhedrin* 4b) cites two opinions as to the source for the four compartments in the head-*Tefillin*. R. Yishmael’s source is the three instances of the word *totafot* (*Shemot* 13:16; *Devarim* 6:8, 11:18), which are spelled, respectively, *ttft, ttft, twtfwt* – the first two being written in such a way that could be read as singular (“frontlet”), whereas the last one is surely plural. Therefore, 1+1+2=4 is R. Yishmael’s source. *Tosafot* (ad loc., s.v. *le-totafot*) points out that the *sifrei* *Torah* that were extant in France in their day had a different lettering.

One parenthetical note: Some people have an instinctive reaction to the word “criticism” in the context of revered texts, and that reaction is rarely positive. We have to keep in mind that the colloquial meaning of “criticism” – i.e. to find fault (as in, “don’t be so critical!”) – is worlds away from the academic usage. When an academician engages in “criticism,” it means that he or she is looking at a text, a story, a doctrine, or what have you and evaluating certain things about it. When was it composed? What genre is it? Are there glosses that have made their way into the text itself? And so on. This becomes more refined and sensitive when dealing with *Tanakh*, but we have been trained from our earliest experiences with *gemara* to look at all texts with an evaluative eye – not to judge its worth, but to assess its meaning and to clarify the proper reading and understanding.

Textual criticism has its own set of intuitive and formal guidelines. The limitations that text critics of any oeuvre respect (if they are serious scholars) are raised when it comes to the text of *Tanakh*.

First of all, keep in mind that the Biblical text has no vowels (if words are written in *ketiv chaser,* “defective spelling”), which allows for a range of possible vocalizations. We will see an example of this in one of the proposals shared below. Second, we recognize that certain mistakes are more common among copyists, such as letter transposition, and we will see an example of this in another of the suggested emendations further on. We are more likely to look for explanations along those lines. Before all of these, of course, we will be ready to entertain the possibility of a textual variant if we have textual witnesses to back it up. The ideal witness, of course, would be a proper Biblical text – such as a scroll from the collection at Qumran, to take the oldest likely artifact, or a medieval manuscript (such as the Aleppo Codex).

For example, *Shmuel I* 25:22 reads:

*…im ash’ir mikol asher lo* ***ad ha-boker*** *mashtin be-kir*

[David, in response to Naval’s refusal to pay for David’s guarding of his flock over the winter, swears:] “If I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning so much as one male.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is the text as you will find it in the Aleppo Codex and, following that text, in the Breuer and Simanim editions of *Tanakh*. However, the Koren *Tanakh* reads:

*…im ash’ir mikol asher lo* ***ad OR* *ha-boker*** *mashtin be-kir*

“If I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning **light** so much as one male.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Even a cursory look at the commentators reflects this variant; some of them include *or* in the lemma, while others do not (this may reflect a printer’s version, but the point is still made). Kittel, in his monumental *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, records the text as per the Aleppo Codex – ***ad ha-boker***. Weil, in his Masoretic notes, indicates that “permulti” (many) manuscripts include ***or***.

Those in the traditional camp (virtually all scholars before the 18th century) will not entertain a textual emendation if there isn’t some sort of testimony as to its existence. This is, it can be fairly stated, the difference between “traditional” text criticism and “modern” (whatever that may mean; suffice it to say, “nontraditional”) text criticism. Modern text critics of the Bible are willing to suggest alternative readings of the text without any attestation, based on certain principles (a few are shared above) and some “educated guesswork.”

The challenging words and phrases in our clause have been cause for consternation among text critics for over a hundred years. Nearly all of them start with the premise that our text is “corrupt” and must be emended; they simply disagree as to the best emendation. The challenges seem so insurmountable that Morgenstern records eleven different proposals for text-emendation and then proposes his own twelfth “repair.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

I will share three proposals that have been made over the last half-century. In addition to highlighting the difficulties that every scholar encounters in this passage and the intriguing ways in which they go about trying to find solutions, it will also serve as a bit of an introduction to Biblical text criticism.

I will present the proposals in order of ascending radicalism. The first will suggest an extra **letter**, the second will suggest no changes to the letters but will suggest a change to the **words** (just wait and see!), and the third will emend both. All three of these proposals are fully presented in the articles cited in the “For Further Study” section. (Limburg, whose article is also cited, supports our version and explains the *riv ba-eish* as consistent with Biblical themes, pretty much following ibn Ezra.)

**FIRST PROPOSAL: EHRLICH**

Arnold Ehrlich, in his monumental turn-of-the-century work *Mikra Ke-Feshuto*, maintains that the text cannot be supported as is. He then suggests:

I say that the *bet* of *ba-eish* was errantly repeated from the previous word, and the original words were *le-rov eish*. [This is a copyist error referred to as “dittography,” in which a word or letter is mistakenly copied an extra time.] And witness to this [i.e. support for this thesis] is *tehom rabbah* at the end of the verse, for these two phrases are parallel to each other: God is calling the “great fire” (*rov eish*) to devour the “great deep.”

Ehrlich suggests that we “drop” the *bet* and then re-point the word *lrv* to read *le-rov* instead of *la-riv*. This fundamentally changes the meaning: There is no “quarrel” or “suit” going on here, which makes this vision more in line with the previous one, in which God is preparing the punishment and all matters of guilt have already been decided.

**SECOND PROPOSAL: HILLERS**

Delbert Hillers, in an article in 1964, invoked a brief observation made by Max Krenkel in 1866, one which was never picked up by the scholarly community until Hillers brought it into the academic limelight. Krenkel suggested that the letters *lrb bes* are all correct, but that at some point the two words were “mis-divided.” Taking just the letters (all consonants) of these two words, we have *lrbbes*. Since, as Hillers demonstrates with some suasion, ancient texts were often written without clear division between words, it is possible that the original words were *lrbb es* – or, with vowels, *le-reviv eish*, meaning “a rain of fire.” Hillers goes on to show that the word *reviv* is supported in the Biblical text (although never in the singular – always *revivim*, and never meaning anything but “rain”). He finds his main support in ancient Near Eastern texts outside of the Biblical tradition, in which “divine fire” is a weapon used against primordial creatures. There is, as he points out, precedent in the Bible – the destruction of Sedom and its neighbors was accomplished by God:

Then *Hashem* rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah sulfur and fire from *Hashem* out of the sky. (*Bereishit* 19:24)

As the author argues, the advantage of this emendation is that it involves no changes to the actual Masoretic Text – just the division of the words. As with Ehrlich’s proposal, however, this does significantly change the **meaning** of the text. There is no quarrel, no judgment – just punishment – and, again, it is more consistent in tone with the first vision.

Of interest is that Andersen and Freedman, in their *Anchor Bible* commentary on *Amos* (1987), adopted this emendation and translated:

Indeed, my Lord *Hashem* was summoning showers of fire

In spite of this, they critique Krenkel’s emendation in their commentary. Mays (OTL, 1969) uses this for his translation as well.

**THIRD PROPOSAL: SIMONE**

In a recent article, Michael Simone picks up where Hillers-Krenkel left off. He accepts the “mis-division” suggestion, such that the original consonantal text read: *lrvv es*. He then suggests, based partially on the arguments cited above (*reviv* is always in the plural in *Tanakh* and never means “rain” other than water), that we have a letter transposition to *bet* from *kaf*. In other words, the “original” read *hinei korei le-rekhev eish* (consonantal: *lrkv es*): “God is summoning a **chariot of fire**.” The *rekhev esh*, which we are familiar with from the story of Eliyahu’s leaving this world and a later vision of Elisha, is a motif used elsewhere in *Tanakh* (e.g. *Tehillim* 68; *Chabakuk* 3) in the context of theophanies. In an extended sense, it could even be said to be at the core of Yechezkel’s famous first vision (*Yechezkel*, chapter 1). (I believe that this is actually a weakness in his argument, as this vision is not essentially about God’s appearance to people, but about God’s punishing the kingdom.) Simone makes his arguments, and I’ll leave it to the interested reader to follow up with any of these proposals that is of interest.

Before a final proposal, here is the conclusion of the verse:

*Va-tokhal et tehom rabba*

and it devoured the great deep,

*Ve-akhela et ha-chelek*

and would have eaten up the land.

**A FOURTH PROPOSAL**

As I noted above, the awkward syntax, which violates the pattern of the other visions (where *A-D-N-Y Elokim* is the explicit actor) was not addressed by the *Rishonim*. In addition, the moderns mentioned above (and a whole host of others) either ignored the problem or suggested that the inclusion of the two Divine Names was a “later interpolation” (or “gloss”) intended to maintain the use of this name-combination within the vision series.

I would like to propose that the syntax is deliberate (and part of the original text), and understanding it may help decipher the whole phrase.

Instead of reading the verse as, *ve-hinei korei la-riv ba-eish, A-D-N-Y Elokim*, read it as, *vehinei korei la-riv, ba-eish A-D-N-Y Elokim*. In other words, the appearance of God’s Names here is not intended **purely** as the subject, but also as an adjectival noun, defining the fire. Instead of translating it as, “behold, *Hashem Elokim* was summoning a trial by fire,” read it as, “behold, He was summoning a quarrel, using the fire of *Hashem Elokim*.” This fire may either be the medium of the ordeal or the punishment awaiting the guilty people and their land at the conclusion of the trial.

No changes need be made to the orthography, although we may be more comfortable with a repointing of the *bet* of *ba-eish* to a *schwa*, such that we would read it as *be-eish,* thus making it in the construct state. The deliberate delay of the invocation of God’s Names here is intended to make a double use of those Names – as both the One summoning the trial as well as source of the fire. It is a Godly fire.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will continue with a complete analysis of the rest of this verse as well as the two remaining verses in this vision.

**For Further Study:**

Regarding text variants and rabbinic literature:

Wolf, Shmuel: *Mishpachat Soferim* (Vitebsk, 1883) (Heb.) (available on [www.hebrewbooks.org](http://www.hebrewbooks.org))

Regarding Orthodox attitudes towards textual criticism of the Biblical text:

Menachem Cohen*, The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism*,available online at <http://users.cecs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/CohenArt/>

Text emendation suggestions on *la-riv ba-eish*:

1. Limburg, James. “Amos 7:4: A Judgment with Fire?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly,* vol. 35, no. 3 (July 1973), pp. 346–349.
2. Ehrlich, Arnold B. *Mikra Ke-Feshuto*, vol. 3 (Berlin, 1901), pp. 413-414.
3. Hillers, Delbert R. “Amos 7:4 and Ancient Parallels.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Apr. 1964), pp. 221–225.
4. [Michael R. Simone](https://yulib002.mc.yu.edu:2167/search?f_0=author&q_0=Michael+R.+Simone). “A ‘Chariot of Fire’ in Amos 7:4: A Text Critical Solution for *qōrē’ lārīb bā’ēš*.”[*Vetus Testamentum*](https://yulib002.mc.yu.edu:2167/view/journals/vt/vt-overview.xml), [vol. 66, no. 3](https://yulib002.mc.yu.edu:2167/view/journals/vt/66/3/vt.66.issue-3.xml) (2016), pp. 456-471.
1. See also the astounding statement in *Bamidbar Rabba* 3:13. The final suggestion made there to explain the diacritical marks over Aharon’s name is that Ezra was unsure as to whether that word belonged there at all. More directly to our point, see Radak’s introduction to his commentary on *Sefer Yehoshua* and his explanation for the phenomenon of *Keri/Ketiv*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Below, I cite a seminal article by Prof. Menachem Cohen of Bar-Ilan University, which addresses the issues of textual criticism of *Tanakh* from a traditional perspective [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am not translating *mashtin be-kir* literally, but rather for meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I became aware of this variant in a most amusing way. I was teaching *Sefer Shmuel*, and each student was called on to read, with the classmates eagerly listening, as they would be rewarded (at no cost to the student reading) for catching errors in the reading. The student reading intoned ***ad ha-boker*** and several students raised their hands, calling out ***ad or ha-boker!*** The student who was reading stood his ground and insisted that his *Tanakh* did not have the word *or*. He handed it to me and I saw that, indeed, the word was not there (he had a Breuer *Tanakh*). *U-mitalmidai yoter mi-kulam!*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. J. Morgenstern, Amos Studies (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1941), pp. 59, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)