YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #67:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS -**

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

**PART 2**

In the previous *shiur*, we began our study of the second vision – the “fire” – and focused most of our energies on the difficulties presented by the first part of the description of the vision. We devoted significant space to a tangential discussion about text criticism of the Biblical text, its history within the traditional *beit midrash*, and its more recent stylings in the world of Biblical academia. We then surveyed three (of the dozen or so) proposals for text emendation of that difficult clause – *ve-hinei korei ba-eish A-D-N-Y Elokim* – and I then shared my own proposed explanation, which is free of any need to modify the text or assume a corrupted transmission.

At this point, we will complete our study of that verse. We will then assess the remaining two verses of this vision, the second of Amos’s visions.

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

**THE TEXT**

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

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

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

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

(We have already analyzed these clauses.)

*Va-tokhal et tehom rabbah*

and it devoured the great deep,

As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the “fire” has been variously interpreted as a supernatural fire, as an intense heat wave that would bring a drought, or as a metaphoric representation of an invading nation (i.e. Assyria). Although each of these positions, maintained by at least one of the *Rishonim*, takes this clause describing the effect of the fire into account, it seems smoothest to read this line if the “fire” in the previous one is a literal fire. How would either a heat wave or an invading army be said to “devour the great deep”? Indeed, anything but a cosmic, supernatural attack would be hard to posit here. Of course, to take this position with any measure of confidence depends on how we understand the “devouring of the great deep.”

Numerous ancient mythologies, including some that are alluded to in Biblical texts (see below), reference either a pre-creation or apocalyptic war between the Divine and “the deep chasm” or the beasts that inhabit that space. The second verse in the Torah speaks of the chaos that ruled in the *tehom* before God’s spirit hovered over it and He brought light. Yeshayahu (51:9) praises God:

Are you not the One that hewed Rahab in pieces, that pierced the dragon?[[1]](#footnote-1)

And this is followed by:

Are you not the One that dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; That made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

Here, the prophet praises God for His acts against the sea in the Exodus epic, along with His “war” against the deep and the monsters that inhabited it at the time of creation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In any case, the sense of the verse in *Amos* is that God is summoning the supernatural fire (or His celestial hosts, who will commandeer that fire) to lay waste the earth, such that even the deep chasm (water? ocean?) will become sere, thus extinguishing all of life.

The inherent difficulty with this vision, no matter how we read it, is that all of existence is threatened with extinction as a result of the sins of the Northern Kingdom – an unprecedented (and unmatched) extension of Divine “justice.”

In order to understand this line, we need to see how the phrases *tehom rabbah* in particular and *tehom(ot)* in general are used throughout *Tanakh*.

**TEHOM or TEHOMOT?**

The word *tehom*, indicating “the deep,” “the chasm,” or “the abyss” (depending on both context and translator’s preferences) appears 38 times in the canon. In 5 of these instances (including ours), it is modified by “great” – *rabbah*. One of these is in the plural:

*Yevaka tzurim ba-midbar, va-yashk ke-****tehomot rabbah***

He cleaved rocks in the wilderness, And gave them drink abundantly as out of **the great deep** (*Tehillim* 78:15)

The use of the plural here may hold the key to the preferred interpretive strategy in *Amos*.

We generally interpret *tehom*, following the second verse in *Bereishit* (*…ve-choshekh al penei* ***tehom***), as “the great deep” and see it as describing the single, all-encompassing depths of the world. This great depth is apparently filled with water, as seen from that same verse:

*Ve-ruach Elokim merachefet al penei ha-****mayim***

The spirit of God was hovering over the top of the waters

The use of *al penei* ***tehom***immediately followed by *al penei ha-****mayim***generates a discreet analogy, and we typically see the “deep” as referring to the subterranean waters.

The second and third mentions of *tehom* in *Tanakh* substantiate this impression of a single “abyss” that is filled with water. We find this in the description of the Flood:

*…nivke’u kol ma’ayanot* ***tehom rabbah*** *va-arubot ha-shamayim niftachu*

… all the fountains of the great deep were burst open and the sky’s windows opened. (*Bereishit* 7:11)

and at its cessation:

*Va-yisakhru ma’ayanot* ***tehom*** *va-arubot ha-shamayim, va-yikalei ha-geshem min ha-shamayim*

The deep’s fountains and the sky’s windows were also stopped, and the rain from the sky was restrained.

In other passages in *Tanakh*, *tehom* seems to be used as an image of “the deep,” without reference to water, such as:

*Tzidkatekha ke-harerei E-l, mishpatekha* ***tehom rabbah***

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; Your judgments are like **the great deep** (*Tehillim* 36:7)

Unlike the parallel in *Bereishit* 7-8, where the *tehom* is matched with “the sky’s windows” that let forth rain, here the *tehom* is parallel to mountains, expressing the unfathomable reaches of God’s righteousness. The sense here is “mountain high, abyss deep.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Nevertheless, *tehom* is usually related to waters. But is it a **single, undifferentiated** abyss of water, encompassing the world? It certainly seems like it in *Bereishit*, both in the Creation story as well as the Flood narrative. Yet, further investigation of its use throughout *Tanakh* indicates otherwise.

***Tehom*** *el* ***tehom*** *korei le-kol tzinorekha, kol mishbarekha ve-galekha alai avaru*

**Deep** calls to **deep** in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

By definition, “deep calls to deep” implies a ***tehom*** that is separate from another ***tehom***. Therefore, the word sometimes (though certainly *not* always) refers to a specific and geographically limited underground space where water is found.

I would like to suggest that the *tehom* in our passage is not the “primordial,” single and global abyss, but rather a specific and focused one. Nonetheless, Amos chooses to reference it in cosmic and grand terms. Where is this *tehom* and what is Amos’s rhetorical strategy here?

In order to address this, we will need to solve one more local exegetical conundrum. In our verse, the “fire” is described as *va-tokhal* the abyss; then, it is *ve-akhla* the field. Are these two verbs using different tenses? If so, what are those tenses and what difference does this reflect? If not, why use two different conjugations to communicate the same tense?

The *Rishonim* do not address this variation; contemporary translations, however, reflect different approaches. Some read the verbs as varying forms of the past tense, such that Amos’s vision describes an already devoured deep and fields. Others have the first verb in the past perfect (“had already devoured”), whereas the second is the ongoing present (“and was now devouring”). In either scheme, the sequence of the description is odd. We would expect the above-ground field to be destroyed by the “fire” and only after that for the great deep to be rendered sere. Why this order? Perhaps a broader look at the visions and their context will be helpful to understanding this.

**WHO IS “YAAKOV”?**

In the first two visions, the “target” is called “Yaakov,” and Amos petitions God to restrain the punishment because “Yaakov is too small” and incapable of withstanding the locusts and the fire. We interpreted the first vision as if Yaakov was another name for the Northern Kingdom (as the mainstream of interpretations holds), although we raised the question in the first vision as to why Shomron would be called “Yaakov” (instead of, say, “Ephraim”). Besides the odd choice of cognomen, there are other indications that we may not have gotten the full story. In the first vision, the locusts follow “the king’s shearings,” which is generally explained as referring to the first harvest or some other known time during the harvest that has something to do with the royal house. It is, in any case, an odd way to mark a time within the harvest season.

What is perhaps more unsettling is the framework of the narrative that is sandwiched between the third and fourth visions and occupies the second half of our chapter. In that scene, the priest at Beit-El sends a message to the king:

“… Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Yisrael; the land is not able to bear all his words. For this is what Amos said: ‘Yerovam will die by the sword, And Yisrael will surely be led away captive from his land.'” (7:10-11)

Where do Amos’s words specifically target Yerovam ben Yoash (“Yerovam II”)? Why are these prophecies any more threatening to the royal house than those that make up the first two-thirds of the book?

I would like to propose that these first two visions are aimed directly at the royal house, not at the entire kingdom or even all of the aristocracy. This would signal a sea change in Amos’s addresses per the change in his addressees. Up to this point, Amos’s rhetorical charges and rebukes have been aimed chiefly at the leadership of the north – the judiciary, the wealthy and the court, both in broad terms and specifically to each group. At this point, Amos hones in on the core of the problem – the house of Yerovam ben Yoash, who had a politically and militarily successful rule during the middle part of the 8th century BCE. As indicated in *Melakhim II* 14, he was able to reestablish Israelite sovereignty over territory that bordered Aram by re-conquering it from the kingdom’s perennial enemy to the east:

He restored the border of Israel from Levo-Chamat unto the sea of the Arabah, according to the word of *Hashem*, the God of Israel… (*Melakhim* *II* 14:25)

Yet, this successful king was found most wanting in his loyalty to God and his moral leadership:

And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not deviate from all the sins of Yerovam ben Nevat, who had caused Yisrael to sin. (ibid. verse 24)

As we see in our own story that follows the first three visions, Yerovam maintained the “outlier” sanctuaries at Beit-El (where this confrontation takes place) and at Dan. The sanctuary at Beit-El is even called *mikdash melekh* – a royal sanctuary (*Amos* 7:13).

In the first vision, the mention of *gizei ha-melekh* should not be seen as a harvest-season marker, but rather as the target of the locusts. They will devour everything, not *after* (Heb: “*achar*”) the king’s produce has been harvested, but rather *following* (“*achar*”) the harvesters of the king. In other words, the locusts will follow those harvesters and devour the produce that they have reaped.

In our vision (#2), the *riv* (quarrel/suit/claim) is **against the king himself –**   
Rex adversus regem. This king, who has continued the political-religious policies of his eponymous forebearer and who resides at the core of the rot that corrupted the northern “high society,” is the “Yaakov” of Amos’s prophecies. After the first vision (or within it), Amos pleads with God on**Yerovam’s** behalf, claiming that he isn’t strong enough to withstand the threatened locust plague – and God accedes to his request (partially, as we discussed in the previous *shiurim*).

Now that we have demonstrated that *tehom* can refer to a specific aquifer (as opposed to the global or omniversal abyss), we might read the “fire-ordeal” as an attack on a specific *tehom* – that of the king, that which rests under and nourishes his fields.

This vision is one of trial-by-fire against the king – a fire that, in Amos’s vision (not yet realized in “real space”) has first dried up the underground aquifer, *tehom rabba*. The word *rabbah* here may just mean “great,” as we have seen the plural *tehomot rabbah* in *Tehillim* 78:15, implying that the singular *tehom rabbah* is not necessarily **the** global deep.

With this explanation in hand, we will address the rest of the verse: The reason that Amos adds *rabbah* here is a rhetorical flourish and quite deliberate. The king presumes a significance about himself that is far beyond his station. He is, after all, the leader of a relatively small kingdom, not a major player on the world stage. He is a loser as often as a winner in regional skirmishes. He presumes himself to be the embodiment of the people Israel – hence “Yaakov” – and he thinks his royal house has ultimate significance[[4]](#footnote-4) – hence *tehom rabbah*.

*Ve-akhelah et ha-chelek*

and would have eaten up the land.

Even though this translation (JPS 1917) distinguishes between *va-tokhal* (“devoured”) and *ve-akhlah* (“would devour”), it seems that the favored translation is to read them as both in the ongoing present. Amos is, after all, presenting a vision; he sees the fire devouring the underground aquifer of the king and then moving on to consume **the[[5]](#footnote-5)** *chelek*, a word that is used elsewhere in *Tanakh* to refer to a **specific** field.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is the king’s field – which is why Amatzia now, and only now, sends an urgent message to Yerovam, claiming that Amos is calling for his demise.

As noted, there are several ways to understand this “fire” and how it affects the deep (aquifer) and then the field. It could be a supernatural fire, burning all of that up. In that case, we would expect the field to be consumed first – but, being supernatural, we might have to, *ab initio*, put aside all of our expectations. Alternately, it could be a searing heat and resultant drought, in which case the sequence of aquifer-field is easier to explain.

*Va-omar A-D-N-Y Elokim*

Then said I: O A-D-N-Y Elokim,

*Chadal na*

cease, I beseech Thee

This verse is *almost* a replica of the parallel verse in the previous vision, with one crucial difference. Instead of *selach na* (“forgive immediately”), a request that was ultimately not granted, Amos begs *chadal na* – essentially “back off now,” realizing that God is not about to **forgive** the sins of Yerovam’s house that are the proximate cause of these threats. Instead, taking a cue from God’s response to his previous petition, he beseeches God to stay the punishment.

*Mi yakum Yaakov*

How shall Jacob stand?

*Ki katan hu*

for he is small

Amos’s argument for cancelling the planned plague is the same as last time: “Yaakov” is too feeble, too weak to withstand such a blistering attack.

Keeping our approach in mind, imagine how these words would have sounded once they reached Yerovam’s ears – and we get a fuller picture of the mood that drove Amatzia to send his message to Shomron.

*Nicham Hashem al zot*

The Lord repented concerning this

*Gam hi lo tihyeh*

“This also shall not be,”

Again, we have a repeat of the previous scenario – God “repents” and promises that this plague will not come to pass. The sequencing of the visions is no editorial matter. It is clear from God’s words, *gam hi*, that this vision followed the first and that Amos’s prayer and God’s acceding to it followed the same pattern in the locust plague.

*Amar A-D-N-Y Elokim*

said A-D-N-Y Elokim

Amos concludes with the signature formula that, again, utilizes the Divine name-combination that permeates the visions.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will begin our study of the third vision, which again occupies three verses, but with a critical break in the pattern and, subsequently, a dramatically different outcome.

1. See Hakham’s comments in *Da’at Mikra*, *Yeshayahu* ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also *Yeshayahu* 27:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Admittedly, not as great a lyric as “River Deep, Mountain High.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, in an Egyptian context (where such presumptions had, at least, some hold in reality) *Yechezkel* 29:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Radak ad loc., who interprets the use of the definite article as referencing the king’s field. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *inter alia, Ruth* 2:3, 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)