YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #68:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS -**

**VISION #3 (7:7-9): THE *ANAKH***

**PART 1**

In the previous *shiurim*, we studied the first two visions in chapter 7, which we suggested were directed to the king and his property, specifically his fields and crops. We will now address the third vision. The third vision, like the two that precede it, comprises three verses; however, the pattern that we observed in the first two is broken here, as Amos’s ability to plead with God to keep the vision of punishment from being realized breaks down.

In this *shiur*, we will study the text of the first two verses, clarifying difficult words and phrases; in next week’s *shiur*, we will focus on the key word *anakh*, which appears four times in this short passage. In the third installment, we will complete our study of the text and take a more nuanced look at the vision, trying to identify the messages, beyond the obvious, that Amos is endeavoring to communicate to his northern audience.

**VISION #3: *AMOS* 7:7-9**

**THE TEXT**

*Ko hirani*

Thus He showed me;

Note that the pattern *ko hirani* ***A-D-N-Y Elokim*** is broken here. In the first two visions, God was the “presenter” of the vision, although God was active in the vision (forming the locusts, summoning the fire). In this third vision, however, God not only will be present in the vision, but there will also be a dialogue about the **meaning** of the vision. In other words, unlike the locusts and the fire-ordeal (or however we understand the previous vision), Amos does not understand this vision and needs prodding by God and engagement with Him in order to decipher it. The message of doom is not apparent this time, and God explains it to Amos. Perhaps for this reason the phrase cuts to *ko hirani*.

There may be two variations on this explanation for the break from form. On the one hand, since God will be actively dialoging with Amos about the meaning of the vision, it is stylistically more elegant (as well as concise) to omit God’s Names in the exposition. On the other hand, it may be that Amos will only aver that *A-D-N-Y Elokim*“showed me” if the meaning of what he is being shown is clear.

*Ve-hinei A-D-N-Y nitzav al-chomat* ***anakh***

and, behold *A-D-N-Y* stood beside (?) a wall made by an ***anakh***,

Back to form, the description of the vision is introduced with *hinei*. Note that here, Amos describes God as standing on an ***anakh*** wall (more on that later) – but only uses the Name A-D-N-Y, without the Tetragrammaton (which would be pointed and vocalized *Elokim*) as he does, otherwise, throughout this series. This “Name-split” continues in this vision, as we will see; we will comment on it in the next verse.

The key word in this vision is undoubtedly ***anakh.*** It is a *hapax legomenon* (word that appears in only one location in *Tanakh*), but, strangely, it appears four times here – all within two verses. As a result of its absolute limitation to this vision, we have no other passage to use as comparison to help resolve the meaning. In addition, the meaning locally is obscure, although it seems to have something to do with building (a tool? material?). For now, we will leave it be and focus on the rest of the vision. The ***anakh*** problem deserves – and will receive – its own treatment (next week’s *shiur*). That means, however, that the entire analysis in the present *shiur* will be somewhat in stasis, with comprehension and meaning depending on the resolution of ***anakh***.

The image of God “standing” (or “sitting”) is not unheard of in prophetic visions. It dates back to what may be the earliest (recorded) vision in our tradition:

*Va-yachalom ve-hinei sulam* ***mutzav*** *artza ve-rosho magia ha-shmayma…*

And he [Yaakov] dreamt and behold (*hinei[!])* a *sulam* (ladder? ziggurat? – another *hapax legomenon*) was standing on the ground and its top reached the heavens…

*Ve-hinei Hashem* ***nitzav*** *alav, va-yomar…*

And behold (*hinei [!!]*), *Hashem* was standing over it (or “over him”), and He said… (*Bereishit* 28:12-13)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Significantly, the “ladder” (or whatever a *sulam* might be) is not just the **vehicle** for the Divine information – it also proves to be **part of the message** – that this place is the nexus between heaven and earth, *axis mundi,*[[2]](#footnote-2) and the angels ascending and descending demonstrate that.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the same way, God’s “standing on the ***anakh*** wall” – as well as God’s “standing (*nitzav*) on the altar” (*Amos* 9:1, the fifth vision) – possibly indicates some metaphysical centrality. In the second instance in *Amos*, that centrality is easy to trace, as the altar being a focal point for God’s Presence is a common enough notion, especially in the context of Amos’s anti-separatist agenda against the northern sanctuaries. In our case, however, it is not at all clear what the locus of the *chomat anakh* is and how that is highlighted or underscored by God’s being *nitzav* on it. We will address this in the next *shiur* when we survey the possible interpretations as well as implications of *anakh*.

Note also that the translation presented here renders the preposition *al* as “beside.” The *Rishonim* do not address this word, except insofar as a few of them repeat *al* in their commentary. It seems that they all took for granted that the vision had God standing **atop** the wall. Yet, quite a number of the translations read *al* as “beside.” Indeed, a quick perusal of available translations indicates the predominant position of “beside” (or “by”), including the Revised Standard Version. Why would so many translate the simple preposition *al* as anything but “on”?[[4]](#footnote-4)

It seems that this translation (which Hakham utterly rejects[[5]](#footnote-5)) is based on the fifth vision, mentioned above. The standard translation there is that God was “standing **by** the altar.” This, however, begs the question – why interpret that instance of *al* as “beside” and then have it influence our understanding of *al chomat anakh*? Lest anyone think that this is a tendentious exercise, note that the difference between these two possibilities is stark – not necessarily in their message, but in their impact. In the “beside” retelling, God is standing next to a wall and pointing to it, as it were, as an example of what He is prepared to do to His people. On the other hand, if we take the more “literal” approach of “on,” we have an inherently terrifying vision: God **looms** over the field of vision (double-entendre) and the fate of the people is inescapable.

This same treatment may not be necessary in the fifth vision, as we will see when we study the beginning of chapter 9. This allows Hakham – basing himself on *hino nitzav* ***al*** *olato* (*Bamidbar* 23:6, 17), which assuredly means “beside” – to interpret *nitzav* ***al*** *ha-mizbeach* as “beside” while insisting on a translation of “on” in our vision. Nonetheless, once Amos is envisioning God, it is no more reasonable to imagine Him standing **adjacent to** an altar, a wall, or anything else as seeing Him standing **atop** an altar, a wall, or anything else.

Some commentators, arguing in favor of “beside the altar” in 9:1, cite *Melakhim I* 13:1, which describes Yerovam b. Nevat as

*Omed al ha-mizbe’ach le-haktir*

Standing (beside?) the altar, preparing to burn an offering.

The assumption, which seems pretty reasonable, is that Yerovam was standing next to the altar, readying himself to place an offering on the fire. It would be an odd image to envision a flesh-and-blood king standing on top of an operating altar, with the intense fire and the not-so-subtle stance of being burnt and offered up. That does not explain, however, why that would impact on the interpretation of a vision of God standing *al ha-mizbe’ach*, as argued above.

Perhaps the notion is that God’s “stance” in the fifth vision is intended to imitate (and mock) the priests of the northern cult who stand there and serve – and this ridiculing stance is far more effective if He stands as they do. If we accept that premise, then we can defend the interpretation of “beside the altar” in 9:1, which may impact on 7:7 (our vision).

Nonetheless, I tend to agree with Hakham in rejecting the “beside” interpretation of *al* in our vision. I see the vision as being much more impactful if God is described as standing **atop** the *anakh-*wall.

*U-ve-yado anakh*

with an ***anakh*** in His hand.

The meaning of this clause is fully dependent on the meaning of *anakh.* Is He holding a piece of metal in His hand, or is it a building tool? Both of these are difficult. It seems that the wall is made of some material – *anakh* – but if He were holding some of that material in His hand, the text would indicate a “piece,” such as *betza anakh* or something of the sort. This gives rise to a third possibility: that the meaning of *anakh* is varied here, such that He is standing atop a wall made of *anakh*, and He has something *else* in His hand which is also called *anakh*.

That possibility allows for two variations. Possibly, the two words are semantically related but have distinct meanings. An example of this would be *kesef*, which means “silver” but may (also) mean “money.” In *Tanakh*, the word *adama* means “earth” in both senses – “ground” (as in *reishit peri ha-****adama***[[6]](#footnote-6)) as well as “world” (as in *al penei ha-****adama***[[7]](#footnote-7)). These are essentially variant meanings of the same word, applied differently. Perhaps the strongest example of this linguistic phenomenon is the word ***cherem***, which has a common meaning but is used in four distinct ways in *Yehoshua* 6.

On the other hand, we could be dealing with a very convenient homophone, such as *kol demei achikha tzo’akim elai min ha-adama* (the voice of *demei* – meaning both “blood” as well as “silence” – of your brother cries out to Me from the ground[[8]](#footnote-8)). We would be hard-pressed to argue this interpretive strategy, since we have very little to go on to determine the meaning of *anakh* at all; to find two disparate meanings for that single, unmatched word would be like finding a needle in Kansas. We will, as such, either look for a single meaning that is flexible enough to allow for both usages (and the two in the next verse) or semantically related words with varied applications.

*Va-yomer Hashem elai*

And *Hashem* said to me:

Each of the visions in this sequence includes a dialogue between Amos and God, reported to his audience by the prophet. This is, however, the first one in which God initiates the conversation.

*Mah atah ro’eh Amos*

'Amos, what do you see?'

Anyone who has ever studied *Yirmiyahu* or listened during the reading of the first *haftara* of the “three weeks” (or, for that matter, on Shabbat Chanuka or *Parashat Behaalotekha*) will recognize this phrase. The question *mah atah ro’eh* appears seven times in *Tanakh* – all within the rhetoric of the literary *Nevi’im*, all spoken by God. It appears three times in *Yirmiyahu* (twice in the first chapter) and twice each in *Amos* and *Zekharya* (the first time in the famous vision of the golden *menora*). The two appearances in *Zekharya* may be distinct in context, as *Zekharya* consistently needs assistance to understand and interpret the visions, as evidenced by the constant guidance of the *malakh ha-dover bi*, “the angel who speaks (explains) to me.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

When Yirmiyahu protests at his investiture that he is unfit to be a prophet, God assures him that he is indeed capable, made so “from the womb” by his Creator. God then shows him an almond staff and asks him:

*Mah atah ro’eh Yirmiyahu?*

To which, the young prophet responds

*Makel shaked ani ro’eh*

God encourages the neophyte:

*Heitavta lirot*

you have seen well

*Ki shoked ani al devari la-asoto*

For I am watching over My word in order to fulfill it (*Yirmiyahu* 1:11-12)

This interaction is yet another example of how Yirmiyahu’s rhetoric relies on – and borrows from – that of Amos.[[10]](#footnote-10) There are, however, several significant differences between this instance in *Yirmiyahu* (and the one that follows in that same chapter) and the later one in *Yirmiyahu*, as well as the question posed twice to Amos. First of all, this was Yirmiyahu’s first vision; it is an understandable move on the part of the Master to engage His young acolyte and ensure that he is envisioning properly. Second, this dialogue was in response to Yirmiyahu’s expressing his self-doubt about his abilities as a prophet. Third of all, God responds in kind – *heitavta lirot* – “you have seen well.” This is the expected response and makes God’s question easy to understand. No such responses is forthcoming in our case – so to what end did God ask Amos *mah atah ro’eh*? We either have to distinguish between the implication of these words in *Yirmiyahu* chapter 1 and in *Yirmiyahu* 24 and *Amos* or reassess our understanding of their meaning in *Yirmiyahu*.

I would like to suggest that the purpose of *mah atah ro’eh* is to rhetorically manipulate the respondent (prophet) to explicate aloud what he is seeing. The value of this, as is made manifest through so much ritual, is to make it “real.” By saying *anakh*, the *anakh* (whatever it may be) becomes a real thing, no mere vision that can subsequently be dismissed via petition and prayer (as the locusts and fire were recalled). By forcing Amos to say the word, it becomes an irrevocable reality, as will be realized by the end of the vision-dialogue.[[11]](#footnote-11) The same may be argued for the two fig baskets in *Yirmiyahu* 24. The reality that the Jews who insist on staying behind will be destroyed and that the Jews who accept exile to Bavel will survive is a reality to which Yirmiyahu has to resign himself.

In the first chapter of *Yirmiyahu*, it is not the almond staff that is the focal point of the vision; after all, the staff says little about the future. It is that **whatever** God’s word is will undeniably happen. What is at stake is Yirmiyahu’s ability as a prophet, so God “sets him up” to say the words *makel shaked ani ro’eh*. This is the essential admission of the rectitude of his candidacy, admitted by the very mouth that had just averred *na’ar anokhi* (“I’m just a lad”). It is the second vision Yirmiyahu sees – the boiling pot – that actually speaks to the specific threat that looms over Yehuda. In that case, Yirmiyahu just says *sir nafuach u-fanav mipenei tzafona*,“a seething pot, faced towards the north,” omitting those key words *ani ro’eh*. His ability to see is no longer at issue; rather, it is the specific vision he experiences – and it is the irrevocable reality of the impending conquest “from the north” that he must speak aloud.

*Va-omar anakh*

And I said: 'An ***anakh***.'

This third instance of the key word *anakh* may be the same as the first two, or one of them (if they are different; see above) – or yet a third meaning. We will flesh all of this out in the next *shiur*. Note that Amos does **not** say *anakh ani ro’eh*; he just answers the question. It is not his ability as a seer that needs to be proven (to himself), but rather the fact of the *anakh*, which evidently spells doom for his audience.

*Va-yomer A-D-N-Y*

Then *A-D-N-Y* said:

Throughout this sequence of visions, the Name-combination *A-D-N-Y Hashem* has been used; in this dialogue, that paired name seems to have been split. First “*Hashem*” (Y-H-V-H) asks Amos “what do you see,” to which Amos answers *“anakh*.” Then A-D-N-Y explains the meaning of the vision. It is as if the combination of awe-inspiring Lordship (A-D-N-Y) was tempered by the compassion implicit in the Tetragrammaton – until now. With the *anakh* vision, that tempering is over, and although the familiar, compassionate Y-H-V-H asks Amos what he sees, it is the Lord, sans compassion, who declares the meaning.

*Hineni sam anakh be-kerev ami Yisrael*

Behold, I will set an ***anakh*** in the midst of My people Yisrael

This entire phrase is indecipherable without getting a handle on the meaning of *anakh*, and we will revisit it in the next *shiur*. We must again ask: Is this the same *anakh* as the makeup or material of the wall? Is it the same *anakh* as God holds in His hand? We can be fairly confident that Amos’s one word answer refers to one or the other of those, but is this interpretation of the symbol yet a third meaning, or is it one of the first two – or are they all one? First, we will need to explore the meaning of the word.

*Lo osif od avor lo*

I will never again pardon them;

This Divine commitment to no longer pardon seems to be a response to the successful petitions of Amos in the first two visions. God forgives once and twice – but not a third time. This stands in contradistinction to the Divine justice described in the opening chapters, where God forgives **three** times but the fourth “crosses the line.” Indeed, the phrase *lo osif avor lo* is hauntingly evocative of *lo ashivenu*. Does it mean that the measure of Divine justice has tightened as the criminal behavior of the northern kingdom has gone from bad to worse? Or are we to understand the “three-four” rhetoric of the opening chapters as a poetic device (see our *shiurim* there) and not specifically tied to a number of crimes? We will have to leave these questions open until the final *shiur* in this series, when we will study the last verse and try to put it all together.

In the meantime, we will focus our energies in the next *shiur*, as promised, on the *anakh*.

1. See also *Bamidbar* 22:23, 31 and *Yeshayahu* 3:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York, Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series XLVI, 1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Otherwise, they seem to serve no purpose in the vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. LXX also uses “on” - ἐπὶ. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Daat Mikra* p. 57. Mays, *Old Testament Library, Amos*, p. 131, and Andersen and Freedman, *Anchor Bible – Amos,* p. 796, both render the preposition as “beside,” although Andersen and Freedman note the interpretive tradition, which they credit to the Septuagint, of “on.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Devarim* 26:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Bamidbar* 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Bereishit* 4:10, God’s words to Kayin after the murder of Hevel. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is a phrase unique to *Zekharya*, appearing 11 times in the first six chapters (1:9, 13, 14, 2:2, 7, 4:1, 4, 5, 5:8, 10, 6:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is possible that Zekharya’s rhetoric, in turn, is informed by that of Yirmiyahu. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This suggestion came from a delightful conversation I had with my daughter, Ariella. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)