YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #69:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS -**

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

**PART 2: THE MEANING OF *ANAKH***

In the previous *shiur*, we began our study of the third vision in chapter 7 – the third of four (or five), which lead to the end of the collection of Amos’s prophecies. We noted that the third vision begins with the same pattern as the first two, but then breaks from the pattern when *Hashem* asks Amos to identify what he sees – and then He responds by pronouncing judgment, to which Amos has no petitionary response. We focused much of the last *shiur* on the “set-up” phrase of *mah atah ro’eh*, noting that in the case of Amos (unlike *Yirmiyahu* 1:11-13), the point was to get Amos to verbalize the vision. We will take this point further in this *shiur*.

As noted in that *shiur*, the key word throughout this vision is *anakh*, which is otherwise not found in *Tanakh*, leaving us with a lexical conundrum, as well as an exegetical challenge. To wit – what is an *anakh* and does it have a common meaning in all four instances? Are there two (or more) disparate meanings that are semantically related, or are there multiple homonyms operating here?

We will devote this *shiur* to an exploration of the meaning of *anakh* and the resultant implications for understanding our vision (and perhaps more than just this one). This will include a survey of the interpretive tradition, as well as some of the more recent scholarship on the meaning of the word. For purposes of ease, the two verses in question are reproduced here, with the key word in bold.

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

**THE TEXT**

**Verse 7:**

*Ko hirani*

Thus He showed me;

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

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

*U-ve-yado anakh*

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

**Verse 8:**

*Va-yomer Hashem elai*

And *Hashem* said to me:

*Mah atah ro’eh Amos*

'Amos, what do you see?'

*Va-omar anakh*

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

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

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

*Hineni sam anakh be-kerev ami Yisrael*

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

*Lo osif od avor lo*

I will never again pardon them;

***ANAKH* IN AGGADA**

Aside from the earlier *Targumim*, the first source we have in our literature that addresses the *anakh* is an aggadic statement in BT *Bava Metzia*, among a series of exhortative statements relating to the care a person must exercise when dealing with another person’s feelings. The violation under discussion is known as *ona’at devarim*, verbal mistreatment:

R. Chisda says: All the gates of Heaven are apt to be locked, except for the gates of [prayer for victims of] verbal mistreatment, as it is stated: “And behold, the Lord stood upon a wall built with an *anakh*, and an *anakh* in His hand.” R. Elazar says: In response to all transgressions, God punishes the perpetrator by means of an agent, except for mistreatment [*ona’a*], as it is stated: “And an *anakh* in His hand.” (BT *Bava Metzia* 59a)

Note that both *Eretz Yisrael* (R. Elazar) and *Bavel* (R. Chisda), the two centers of Torah scholarship during the classical period, had a similar homiletic-interpretive tradition of *anakh*: They both saw it as somehow relating to the word *ona’a*. The two words are seemingly distinct. The first two radicals are identical, but the third is a hard consonant in our case (*kaf*) and an aspirant in the applied case (*heh*). This would seem to push the aggadic application away from our discussion, but we will see that that is not necessarily the case.

One salient point here regarding the *aggada* itself: Rashi points out that the image of God holding the *anakh* in His hand indicates that He does not appoint an agent to punish, but rather uses the *anakh* Himself. That would mean that the *anakh* is no longer a “version” of *ona’a* – the crime – but is rather a tool for punishing one who violate that crime. We will return to this approach below.

***ANAKH*: THE *RISHONIM***

As I adumbrated in the previous *shiur*, the *leitwort* is used four times, but apparently not with a consistent meaning. To that end, it seems more efficient and pedagogically sound to survey each exegete’s presentation in all four cases before moving on to the next *parshan*.

Rashi begins by citing the Targum – *shura dedina* (literally, “a wall of justice”). He then explains (following Dunash[[1]](#footnote-1)) that in Arabic, an *anakh* is a plumb-line (or a “level,” used to ensure that walls, etc. are perfectly even) that uses lead as a ballast. The builder looks at it to make sure that the frame is even. Similarly, here, justice is called the “evening line.”

Rashi does not comment on the separate *anakh* that is in God’s hand. We ought to presume that he envisioned that Amos saw God holding a plummet in His hand. Rashi also makes no comment on Amos’s one-word answer, but he does explain the pronouncement, “Behold, I will set an ***anakh*** in the midst of My people Yisrael:”

Behold, I will judge them according to the strict line of justice.

According to Rashi, the *anakh* in all four instances has a consistent meaning and is used as a metaphor in the final one.

R. Joseph Kara records Menachem’s[[2]](#footnote-2) suggestion that *anakh* relates to *neikhim* (*Tehillim* 35:15), meaning “shattered.” In Menachem’s *machberet*, he elaborates and indicates that the word means “shatter” and that God is holding the tool with which He shattered in His hand. This is in itself awkward and, in spite of Rabbenu Tam’s defense of Menachem (in his notes on Dunash), Dunash’s blistering critique of the suggestion is persuasive.

Kara then follows Rashi in citing Dunash’s interpretation. He then immediately explains the message – that just as an *anakh* sets the wall to be straight, with no stone protruding on either side, similarly God will not “incline” to forgive them for any of their sins without first executing judgment.

It is not clear how Kara brings judgment into the message without relying on the Targum, which he doesn’t mention. He comments no further, so we must assume that he has explained all four instances as did Rashi – *anakh* is a plumb-line.

One note before moving on – among the early grammarians (we already cited Dunash and Menachem), ibn Janah weighs in and maintains that *anakh* is tin, rather than lead. It is interesting to note that through modern times, these two translations have been the most commonly used and defended. (See “For Further Study”; Noonan’s article surveys the literature on tin vs. lead.)

Ibn Ezra takes the position that *anakh* is lead and maintains that meaning throughout. The vision is of a lead wall, sturdy and impenetrable. The pronouncement is that God will set up a lead wall between the people and Him – so as not to hear their petitions – and that is how Ibn Ezra reads *lo osif avor lo*. He offers an alternative to the last, reading *avor* as “forgive” (as in *over al pesha)*. He completely omits the “plumb-line” from his comments.

Radak prefers tin to lead here, based on the Arabic, but he then argues for plumb-line,[[3]](#footnote-3) as these are typically made using tin (or lead). The wall is straight, “built with the line of judgment and the weights of justice.” God’s holding the *anakh* in His hand means that He is holding judgment in His hand to judge them based on their deeds. The fact that it is “in His hand” indicates that He will not utterly destroy them, as their actions warrant, for vengeance and compassion are all in His hands, and He is filled with compassion and always inclines towards kindness. Radak then cites the *gemara* cited above, but he interprets it as if the creditor is standing over the debtor holding his loan-document.

One startling element about Radak’s explanation is that he reads this third vision as relatively softer than the first two, and he explains Amos’s silence in that light:

The prophet did not cry out in response to this vision because he did not see that God was causing total destruction [as he did in the locust and fire visions – YE], but rather that He was going to judge them with affliction and exile. Therefore, He said to him, “What do you see – that you didn’t cry out as you did in the first two visions?” and Amos responded: “I saw an *anakh* – that you would judge them with proper, aligned judgment.”

“*Lo osif od avor lo”*: Meaning, to completely overlook all of their sins, not to punish them. I will no longer tolerate this; rather, I will punish them with judgement. They built *bamot* and sanctuaries to anger Me, and I will destroy them and make them desolate, and those who worship there will fall by the sword – i.e. the house of Yerovam b. Yoash, who worshiped and supported those who worshipped and they had the ability to protest – for the sin of the people is held to the king’s account.

In this interpretation, Radak deviates significantly from other *Rishonim –* and most commentators since – who generally view this third vision as far more severe than the first two. His points, however, are well taken. Perhaps his strongest argument is Amos’s silence in the face of the vision. He sees it not as Amos being struck dumb by the severity of the vision or by God’s manipulating him to say the word *anakh*, but rather caused by Amos’s sense that this vision isn’t so bad and that there is no call for his intercession.

R. Joseph ibn Kaspi interprets along Rashi’s line of thinking, but he adds a dramatic point. He proposes that on occasion, the metaphor may imply more than one message. First of all, an *anakh* (plumb-line) is generally used to build, but here, the image of God holding it atop the wall signifies destruction – that God will destroy the firm and secure walls of Yisrael. That is the message from the vision itself, before God’s pronouncement-explanation. Then, His statement, *hineni sam anakh be-kerev ami Yisrael,* teaches that all of God’s judgements are carefully and precisely measured out. Ibn Kaspi cites a verse – which some others also relate to our vision – in *Yeshayahu*:

*Ve-samti mishpat le-kav u-tzedaka le-mishkolet*

And I will make justice the line, And righteousness the plummet (*Yeshayahu* 28:17)

**MODERN COMMENTARIES**

Hakham follows Rashi in interpreting the *anakh* as a plumb-line, but then adopts a piece of ibn Kaspi’s interpretation, reading the *chomat anakh* as representing the strong fortifications of the Northern Kingdom, which they erroneously think are impenetrable. He reads Amos’s silence as his being confused by the vision and not understanding its message. Hence, he cannot pray for it to be forestalled. Hakham seemingly adopts ibn Kaspi’s interpretation and maintains that the import of the message *hineni sam anakh* is that God will destroy those selfsame walls. This is not exactly how ibn Kaspi read it – he saw that as the meaning of the vision itself, and the pronouncement meant that God will judge the people with a strict measure of judgment.

Paul broadly adopts Rashi’s interpretation but modifies the material to tin (from lead).

Mays[[4]](#footnote-4) adopts the Assyrian etymology pointing to “lead” and reads it as a plumb-line. He cleverly explains that the seeming innocence of the vision, as opposed to locusts and fire, keeps Amos from interceding. In his read, the plumb-line points to a wall that was originally straight (i.e. Yisrael in the former days) but that now needs straightening (thus, the *anakh* in His hand).

Freedman and Andersen[[5]](#footnote-5) survey a number of text emendations suggested by various authors, including Horst’s reading of *anachah* (with a *chet* in place of the final *kaf*), meaning “groan,” as well as Riedel’s suggestion that the word should be read *anakeh* (I will clean out). Both of these, along with several other proposals, all impact only on the final mention of *anakh*, without touching the first three instances – all of which mean lead (or tin) plummet.

Novick surveys a number of these suggestions as well. He points to the fourth vision as possibly holding the key to the third. As happens here, God asks Amos what he sees, and Amos’s answer is then the basis for some clever wordplay by God – the word *kayitz* is modified to *ketz* to lead to the pronouncement. In the same vein, Novick maintains that the word *anakh* is a homonym with which Amos is unfamiliar. In other words, Amos sees the plummet-wall, with God standing atop it with a plummet in His hand. When asked what he sees, Amos says *anakh* – not knowing that the word has another unrelated meaning and that by uttering it himself, he has sealed the fate of his audience and can no longer pray to have the decree stayed.

Novick then suggests two possible readings. One is based on Cooper’s suggestion[[6]](#footnote-6) that *anakh* is a shortened form of *anokhi* and that the meaning here is, “I will place Myself among the people of Yisrael.” Novick is justifiably suspicious, as this formulation doesn’t exist elsewhere in *Tanakh* and suffers from awkward syntax. He then modifies this suggestion, proposing that the word *sam* be read as *shemi* and keeping *anokhi* – to wit, ”Behold, I am placing My very Name in the midst of my people Yisrael.” Like any scholar, however, he would rather be able to interpret the verse without recourse to any emendation. As such, he shares a second possibility – that *anakh* is related lexically to *anachah* (as per Horst above, without resort to suggesting a textual corruption). He points to a number of roots in Hebrew that have multiple expressions. For instance, *tza’ak* (with opening *tzadi*) is identical to *za’ak* (opening *zayin*) and *tzachak* (opening *tzadi*) is identical to *sachak* (opening *sin*) – as we see (perhaps) in the next verse, where Yitzchak is called *Yischak*.

A staple in Novick’s various proposals – both those he rejects as well as those that he adopts – is that Amos, being a southern prophet, is unfamiliar with the northern dialect and that God effectively “traps” him into passing sentence, unknowingly, on Yisrael. I find this difficult on the most basic grounds. The notion that the mere utterance of a word by the unknowing agent can confirm and render irrevocable God’s punishment is theologically troubling to say the least. There is, however, some merit in Novick’s final suggestion, following Horst, which may hold the key to this conundrum.

One brief tangent is in order.

**THE TWO-RADICAL ROOT**

We have all been trained to recognize the three radicals that make up a Hebrew root. We can identify irregular verbs where the middle radical is a *yod* or *vav* and know how to conjugate *bo* and *shuv*. There is, however, a popular theory among some linguists that, at least in the case of many word-families, the essential root is made up of two radicals and that the third is a sort of “rudder” to guide the broad meaning to a specific one.

For instance, the many words that begin with *peh resh* all have a common meaning. Here are four as examples out of are over a dozen that could be cited: *P\*r\*z* – to be unwalled; *p\*r\*m* – to slice vegetables*; p\*r\*s(amekh)* – to slice bread*; p\*r\*q –* to break something down. All of these (plus ten more) have one broad meaning – to take a single entity and break it down into smaller parts. There are numerous root-systems in Hebrew where this theory may be applied.

**BACK TO THE AGGADA**

We began this journey with the passage in BT *Bava Metzia*, where somehow *anakh* was used to hint to *ona’ah*. Curiously, the root of *anakh* is the same as *ona’ah* – until the last letter. I would like to propose that *anakh* has two meanings – **meanings that Amos himself would know**. Amos saw a plumb-lined wall, with the plummet itself made of tin or lead, and God was standing atop that wall, holding a plummet in His hand. Amos correctly identified it as *anakh*, which evidently is related to the word *anachah* (with *chet* as final radical), *anaka* (with *kuf* as the final radical), and *ona’ah* (*heh*). All of these speak of grievous pain – a pain that doesn’t evoke crying out, but rather a pain of resignation. The victim of *ona’ah* is silent in his shame; the person who sighs (*anachah*) shows his feelings of impotence in the face of his troubles; and the people who are *ne’enakim* (from *anakah*) are typically those who are imprisoned (*Tehillim* 79:11, 102:21) or the most impoverished (ibid. 12:6). Perhaps this passage in *Yechezkel* makes the point most clearly, when he is commanded by God to put a mark on the heads of the people who are:

*Ha-ne’enachim ve-ha-ne’enakim*

[set a mark upon the foreheads of the men] who sigh and who cry

I do not take to the idea that Amos was “fooled” into passing judgement and that that manipulative act sealed the fate of the people. Rather, the clever use of an otherwise unattested – but likely – homonym, where *anakh* both describes the wall-vision as well as the sighs of resignation that the people will be expressing, teaches Amos that God’s judgment has moved from an active, terrifying threat that can be forestalled with prayer to a more subtle threat that will leave the people hopeless. Amos, understanding this, responds with the only appropriate response – silence.

**For Further Study:**

Noonan, Benjamin J. "There and Back Again: “Tin” or “Lead” in *Amos* 7:7-9?" Vetus Testamentum 63.2: 299-307.

Novick, Tzvi. "Duping the Prophet." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33:1 (2008): 115-128. Web.

1. Dunash b. Labrat, North African philologist who later lived in Cordoba; died 990. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Menachem ibn Saruq, Spanish philologist; died ~970. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this, he follows his father, R. Yoseph Kimhi, in the *Sefer HaGalui*, who also cites Menachem and Dunash and favors Dunash’s interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mays, James L., *Amos* (OTL, Westminster Press 1969), p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Andersen, Francis L., and Freedman, David Noel, *Amos* (AB, Doubleday, 1989), p. 758. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cooper, Alan, *The Meaning of Amos’s Third Vision (Amos 7:7-9)*, in Mordechai Cogan et al*.* (eds.), *Tehilla Le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (Winona Lake, IN, 1997), pp. 16-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)