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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In memory of Yitzchak and Sheva Shayndel Schwartz z”l

יצחק בן חיים צבי שווארץ ז''ל

שבע שיינדל שווארץ בת דוד שטיין ז''ל

whose Yahrzeits fall on Shabbat the thirteenth of Shvat.

Dedicated by Avraham and Sarah Schwartz

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**Shiur #71:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**THE VISIONS**

**AMOS AT BEIT-EL (7:10-17): CONFRONTATION**

**PART 1: TEXT AND OVERVIEW**

In the previous set of *shiurim*, we examined the three visions that Amos had and shared, his petitionary prayers as response to the first two (locusts and fire), and his silence in the face of the third (the *anakh*).

Between the third and fourth visions there is an eight-verse narrative – the only one in the book – which details Amos’s adversarial interaction with Amatzia, the “priest” at Beit-El. We will devote two *shiurim* to this challenging and revealing semi-biographic vignette. In this first *shiur*, we will look at the first six verses of the text, which comprise the dialogue itself. In the next shiur, we will focus our attention on the terms *hozeh* and *navi* and numerous tangential issues. The final two verses constitute a “consequential” prophecy in response to the dialogue, and those will be studied in the third and final *shiur* in this installment.

**PREFACE**

Before tackling the text, it is important to note that this interaction at Beit-El bears some significant parallels with another interaction at Beit-El. Amos’s adversarial dialogue is with a “*Kohen*” at the *bama* in Beit-El, and the king who is the focal point of Amos’s diatribe is Yerovam ben Yoash. But we have previously encountered a similar prophetic interaction. Just after Yerovam ben Nevat establishes his two “alternate” worship sites at Dan and Beit-El to serve as a local and more convenient substitute for Yerushalayim, an enigmatic visitor arrives there:

And, behold, there came a man of God out of Yehuda by the word of *Hashem* to Beit-El; and Yerovam was standing by the altar to offer. And he cried against the altar by the word of *Hashem*, and said: “O altar, altar, thus says *Hashem*: Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Yoshiyahu by name; and upon you he will slaughter the priests of the high places that offer upon you, and men's bones shall they burn upon you.”

Note the parallels – a “man of God” (i.e. prophet) from Yehuda comes to the altar at Beit-El and prophesizes destruction of the site. Yerovam is seen as the direct target of the prophecy, and the priests of the high places (“*kohanei bamot*”) are explicitly identified as targets of God’s anger.

Is it possible that Amos deliberately chose Beit-El in order to reenact that earlier anonymous Judean prophet’s appearance there? Is it significant that the king in Amos’s time is the only one in the numerous dynasties that ruled Shomron to carry the pioneering king’s name? Perhaps. In a later *shiur*, we will see even more parallels between that story and our interaction.

**THE TEXT**

*Va-yishlach Amatzia Kohen Beit-El el Yerovam melekh Yisrael leimor*

Then Amatzia the priest of Beth-El sentto Yerovam king of Yisrael, saying:

Looking back at the establishment of the sanctuary at Beit-El by Yerovam ben Nevat (10th century BCE), we see that he appointed non-*Levi’im* to act as his *Kohanim*:

Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two golden calves…And he set the one in Beit-El, and the other he put in Dan… And he made houses of *bamot*, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi. (*Melakhim I* 12:28-29, 31)

We have no idea if the priesthood that Yerovam established became dynastic, such that only the sons of his appointees could take over the position, or if it remained non-tribal. One other thing to consider – although Yerovam ben Nevat established the sanctuaries at Beit-El and Dan as oriented to worship of *Hashem*, by the time that Achav’s institutionalization of idolatry was complete (approximately a hundred years before Amos’s time), those same sanctuaries may have been devoted to Ba’al worship. That is why the *Rishonim* here, without identifying Amatzia’s tribal background, mark him as an idolatrous priest. If that is the case, then the priests would have been a whole new crop of devotees to Ba’al. Alternatively, with each change of dynasty (Yerovam, Baasha, Omri, Yehu), there may have been a change in “religious leadership.”

Note that the end of the third vision (verse 9) and the first two verses of this narrative are the only places where Yerovam is mentioned by name in the book.

*Kashar alekha Amos be-kerev Beit Yisrael*

Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Yisrael;

Amatzia sees Amos as more than a troublesome prophet from the south; he perceives him as a rabble-rouser, whose rebukes and visions of doom have the potential to generate a popular rebellion against the crown.

The message here is odd, considering the content of the book until this point. Nearly all of Amos’s oratory is aimed at the aristocracy, the corrupt judiciary, and the royal house – hardly “in the midst of the House of Israel.” We must consider the possibility that Amatzia sees Amos as a personal threat. Remember that Amos already warned the people not to go to Beit-El (or Gilgal or Beer-Sheva) to worship. If the leadership heeds him, the populace is likely to follow suit. That may be a threat to (at least) the livelihood of the priests at Beit-El. Perhaps the message that Amatzia sent to the king, tinged with some hysteria, was intended to spur the king to action against Amos and was itself an exaggeration.

It is also possible that Amos was delivering some of these prophecies – notably, the visions in this section – in Beit-El, at the site of the royal sanctuary. Amatzia’s words in the next few verses seem to support this back story. If so, celebrants and onlookers would have also heard him, and even if Amos did not intend his prophecies to speak directly to the people, they would have heard and been potentially inspired to rebel.

The word *kesher*, which appears approximately 20 times in the monarchic history (*Shmuel*, *Melakhim* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*), appears only twice (with the meaning of “conspiracy”) in the words of the literary prophets – here and in *Yeshayahu* 8:12. In other words, although it is a somewhat regular feature of the narrative, describing the fate of dynasties, it was not often used in rhetoric (with the one glaring exception in Shaul’s words to his courtiers in *Shmuel I* 22).

*Lo tukhal ha-aretz le-hakhil et kol devarav*

the land is not able to bear all his words.

The image of the land having to “bear” words is a curious one. Radak reads “the land” as meaning “the people of the land,” and he explains that the people (who are presumably loyal to the crown) cannot bear to hear so many bad things about their own nation. Hakham, on the other hand, sees the phrase *lo tukhal ha-aretz le-hakhil et kol devarav* as a metaphor. His words are like bubbling wine, which, when put into a barrel, will burst the barrel. In the same way, his words are likely to generate a rebellion among the people.[[1]](#footnote-1) Abravanel, without resorting to the metaphor-explanation, sees it the same way – as a warning against the potential of Amos’s words inciting rebellion against the king.

This approach presumes a significantly lowered sense of loyalty among the people. Their first response would not be to despise the “southern man of God” who threatens the king, but rather to side with him!

It is significant to note that there is a history, specifically in the north, of prophets identifying and anointing kings (such as Elisha in the case of Chazael and Yehu, and Achiya in the case of Yerovam ben Nevat). It is not unreasonable to think that Amatzia saw Amos as yet another prophet aiming to unseat Yerovam and the house of Yehu and replace him with another king (who might be, in their eyes, a Judean vassal).

Paul points to the alliteration in this phrase – *tukhal le-hakhil kol*. A subliminal message of this alliterative scheme would be *okhel ha-kol* – that his words will lead to (or prophesize) **everything** in the north being devoured.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Ki kho amar Amos*

For thus said Amos:

This short phrase is heavy with implication. First of all, the priest uses the same familiar introductory “messenger formula” with which Amos himself had delivered the first series of oracles (chapters 1-2). Remember that this formula is used when relaying or delivering the words of a liege to a vassal. Thus, “*Ko amar* *Balak*,” “*Ko amar Par’oh*,” and “*Ko amar Yosef*.” The understated power of “*Ko amar Amos*” as a message to the king is clear – Amos presumes himself to be the lord over Yerovam, his servant. That is, of course, not Amos’s position, but that is how Amatzia wants to portray the Judean prophet to his king.

Secondly, and of no less significance, is the very phrase *ko amar Amos*. Amos would not have said *ko omar* (“thus say I”), but rather *ko amar Hashem*. This central and determinant piece of Amos’s prophecies is omitted. The conclusion that Yerovam is intended to reach is that these are Amos’s words – not God’s! As such, corralling Amos as a rabble-rousing orator from the south is the right move – just as Yerovam ben Nevat sought to do to the anonymous Judean prophet at Beit El, two hundred years earlier (yet another parallel).

*Ba-cherev yamut Yerovam*

Yerovam shall die by the sword,

This paraphrased quote from Amos’s last vision is inexactly presented. Amos had reported in God’s name that the meaning of the *anakh* vision was

the high places of Yischak will be made desolate and the sanctuaries of Yisrael will be destroyed, and **I will rise up against the house of Yerovam by the sword**.

In other words, the threat of the sword hung over the “house of Yerovam” – i.e. his children. Indeed, as pointed out in the last *shiur*, Yerovam’s son, Zekharia, was assassinated and killed by the sword. Amatzia’s deliberate blurring of the message was intended to spur immediate and drastic action on the part of the royal house against the Tekoite interloper.

*ve-Yisrael galo yigleh me-al admato.*

And Yisrael shall surely be led away captive put of his land.

When we look back to Amatzia’s first warning – “the land will not be able to tolerate/contain all of his words” – we observe a nearly polar divide among the commentators as to the intent of the phrase. Some, such as ibn Ezra and R. Eliezer of Beaugency, understood that the people naturally sided with their king and they would not tolerate the threats uttered by Amos. However, we also saw the comments of others, notably Abravanel, who included the phrase as part of the threat. In other words, Amos is riling “the whole land” against the king. It is difficult to sustain this interpretation considering Amatzia’s brief message, however. The first half – that Yerovam will die by the sword – fits this read comfortably. But the second half – that Yisrael will surely be exiled – does not comport, *prima facie*, with this interpretation. For if the threat is against all of the people of the Northern Kingdom, why would this lead to a rebellion? It would more likely lead to a popular lynching of Amos!

There is a way to salvage Abravanel’s approach, and it may be contextually (and textually) appealing. If the message that Amos is broadcasting is specifically anti-Yerovam and his intent (per Amatzia’s reporting) is to provoke a popular rebellion, then the second part of the message should be understood with a bit more nuance. Instead of reading the two clauses as sequential – first the king will be killed and **then** Yisrael will be exiled – read it as conditional. To wit – Yerovam **must** die by the sword **or else** Yisrael will be exiled.

These two verses (10-11) comprise Amatzia’s excited and near-hysterical message to the court. The next few verses are the direct dialogue between “priest” and prophet.

*Va-yomer Amatzia el Amos*

Then Amatzia said to Amos:

Are we to understand that Amos was privy to Amatzia’s message to the king? Did Amatzia state it aloud, or was it sent as a private message to the court? Nothing in the verses above provides any guidance, but this verse may be indicative.

If we interpret *va-yomer* here as, “Also, Amatzia said,” as numerous translations render it (KJV, JPS), then this would seem to be the second overt and public statement made by Amatzia. First he turned to a messenger, in the presence of those gathered**as well as Amos**, and sent his urgent message to the court. He then turned to Amos to confront him directly.

On the other hand, if we interpret *va-yomer* here as, “then Amatzia said” (as we have it here, per NET, CSB and numerous other translations), these may very well be the first words that Amos (or anyone else present) heard.

*Chozeh! Lekh berach lekha el eretz Yehuda*

Seer! Go, flee yourself away to the land of Yehuda,

Amatzia uses a seemingly archaic term for a prophet – *chozeh*, literally “seer.” We will devote the next *shiur* to understanding the use of this word here and the implication of Amos’s response below, where he references the term *navi*.

*Ve-ekhol sham lechem ve-sham tinavei*

and there eat bread, and prophesy there;

This is a most curious send-off. What does Amatzia mean here? Why would Amos be eating bread “there” or “here”? We will address these questions more fully in the next *shiur.* Suffice it at this point to note that Amatzia sees Amos as an unwelcome southerner, out of his element and without the right to orate in the north.

*u-Veit-El lo tosif od le-hinavei*

but prophesy not again any more at Beit-El,

This phrase gives us the impression that Amos may have been at Beit-El for a while, presenting his prophecies. Why would he choose this location? Several answers come to mind. First of all, it was a royal sanctuary (*mikdash melekh*), where the king may have himself have come to participate in the cult practices. It was also a popular pilgrimage site, as we see from stories in *Shoftim* (19:18) and *Shmuel* (10:3). In addition, it was originally chosen by Yerovam (in addition to its storied past beginning with Yaakov) due to its proximity to Yehuda. It was, for a time, the southernmost city in the Yisraelite kingdom. This may have made it a “safer” place for Amos to preach, given that it was also quite a distance from the capitol in Shomron.

*ki mikdash melekh hu*

for it is the king's sanctuary,

Is the proper translation “it is **the** king’s sanctuary” or “it is a royal sanctuary”? The distinction makes quite a difference. In the first read, Amatzia is telling Amos to leave because this is the “property” of Yerovam, and the king himself is liable to return at any point. In the second read (which I admit to favoring), it raises Amos’s effrontery to an insult to the crown – coming into a royal sanctuary and preaching against the king.

The phrase *mikdash melekh* (which we know from a more positive context, as R. Shlomo Alkabetz integrated it into *Lekha Dodi*) appears only once in *Tanakh*. Indeed, the notion of a *mikdash melekh* is familiar to us, but from foreign, pagan nations, where the divinity and the royal house sit at proximate corners of a blurry divide. In a sense, Amatzia’s clumsy description of the altar at Beit-El says more than Amos could, although this is not a point that Amos ever directly attacks. The establishment of Beit-El was occasioned by Yerovam ben Nevat’s fear that the people’s pilgrimage to Yerushalayim would lead them to revert their allegiance to Rechavam, and Yerovam’s kingdom (or his life) would not last long. Beit-El (and Dan) were set up to provide a “local and convenient” place to worship *Hashem*. Yet it wasn’t long before Yerovam turned the “off-site” sanctuary to God into a royal sanctuary, which it remained for at least two hundred years.

*u-veit mamlakha hu*

and it is a royal house.

The concluding phrase here seals the point made above. The sanctuary is not a guarded place, off-limits to impurity and outsiders due to its connection with the Divine. It is, instead, a royal precinct and, as such, someone coming with a message of doom against the kingdom is a true trespasser.

*Va-ya’an Amos va-yomer el Amatzia*

Then Amos answered, and said to Amatzia:

Again, we will assume that this interaction is public and that Amos is aiming his response at the assemblage, far more than at Amatzia himself.

*Lo navi anokhi ve-lo ven navi anokhi*

I am not a prophet, nor am I a prophet's son;

Again, we will take up this phrase in detail in the next *shiur*, when we examine the meaning of *chozeh* and *navi* (and *ben navi*). At this point, we may note that Amos’s claim is that he is not part of a professional guild of prophets, nor is he a prophet by vocation. Rather, he is…

*Ki voker anokhi*

for I am a herdsman

Amos is a rancher, who herds animals. In other words, he is not part of the scholastic or ascetic class, but rather a “regular person.”

*u-voleis shikmim*

and a dresser of sycamore-trees;

The word *boleis* is a *hapax legomenon* but the best hypothesis as to its meaning is the puncturing of sycamore-figs; evidently this practice, which is still done in Egypt today, hastens the ripening of the fruit without exposing the fruit to worm infestation. As Paul points out, since this was only done during a short part of the season, it was possible for Amos to be both herder as well as ”sycamore -dresser.”

This autobiographical statement is consistent with the opening line of the book, where Amos is referred to as one of the *nokdim* from Tekoa. As we discussed in our opening *shiur*, a *noked* is a rancher (see *Melakhim* II 3:4).

*ve-yikacheini Hashem me-acharei ha-tzon*

and *Hashem* took me from behind the flock,

This description is evocative, in no uncertain terms, of *Hashem*’s words to David (though the office of Natan, the prophet):

Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I took you from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, that you should be a leader over My people, over Yisrael. (*Shmuel* II 7:8)

The notion is that, like David, Amos was not someone who sought this office, nor did he relish the awesome responsibility that comes with it. He was tending his flock, dressing his sycamores, when God plucked him up and sent him on his mission for the benefit of the entire nation.

*va-yomer elai Hashem*

and Hashem said to me:

Although this is a necessary cog in the oratory, it does seem to underscore that which Amatzia deliberately omitted. The words that Amos is delivering are not his own; they are God’s words and a Divine message, ignored at one’s own peril.

*lekh hinavei el ami Yisrael*

Go, prophesy unto My people Israel.

This completes the picture. Amos was sent; he did not “go.” When Amatzia tells him *lekh, berach lekha*, “go and flee yourself,” he expresses an assumption that Amos chose to come and may now choose to go. This is not the case, as Amos spells out for him (and the gathered pilgrims and onlookers).

In the next *shiur*, we will address the office of *chozeh* and *navi* and Amatzia’s enigmatic demand of Amos to “go to the land of Yehuda and eat bread there and there give prophecy.”

1. *Da’at Mikra*,p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)