**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

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**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #77:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**BACK TO BASICS**

**REBUKE (8:4-8):**

***PISHEI YISRAEL* REVISITED**

**PART 1:**

**INTRODUCTION**

**Verse 4**

In last week’s *shiur*, we completed our study of the visions sequence, with the confrontation at Beit El between the third and fourth visions. We helped ourselves to a bird’s-eye view of the full sequence and identified literary and rhetorical devices that intensify the message of the passages, both exhortative as well as prosaic.

We are now ready, as it were, to move on to the next passage in Amos — which sounds eerily familiar from Amos’s first rebuke of his northern audience. This sub-unit is a bit lengthier (five verses) than most, so we will focus on the text, lexicon and so forth during the first few *shiurim*, then conclude this sub-unit with a broader look at the passage.

**THE TEXT**

***Shimu zot***

**Hear this**

Amos uses this introductory formula four times before this, three of them using the formula *“Shimu et ha-davar ha-zeh*,” “Hear this matter (these words)”, in 3:1, 4:1 and 5:1. Each of these comes not only at the beginning of a chapter, but also (of far greater relevance to us) at the beginning of an oratorial declaration. The one other related instance is at 3:13, which is in the middle of a speech and serves its own function, unrelated to the other four.

It would seem that our formula (*“Shimu zot”)* is a contracted version of the standard *“Shimu et ha-davar ha-zeh*.” Perhaps at this point in Amos’s career or sequences of presentations, he adopts a “shorthand” formula. This notion, however, would require one of two possible scenarios.

Last week, we discussed the literary aspect of written oratory. One possibility is to posit that the entire Book of *Amos* is an edited work, in which the earlier chapters, regardless of when they were publicly pronounced relative to the later ones, serve as literary building blocks for the rest of the book. In that vein, the reader, accustomed to *Shimu et ha-davar ha-zeh* as an Amosian opening, easily catches that cue with *Shimu zot*. That would mean, however, that Amos doesn’t **say** *Shimu zot* — which then, in turn, means that our written record is not a faithful transcription of the oral presentation of the prophet. While this is possible, it does raise much larger issues about the integrity of the text — issues beyond our scope here, but issues likely to serve as defining obstacles to this theory.

A second proposal may be more appealing. If we assume, for argument’s sake, that the entire Book of *Amos* is pronounced at one site, on one stage and in front of one audience, then that same audience has heard his *Shimu et ha-davar ha-zeh* three times and is able to “hear” the full phrase when he intones *Shimu zot*. While there is nothing in the text to negate this suggestion, it would mean that Amos’s entire prophetic output of record is declared at Beit-El, which might make the oracles against the judges, the “cows of the Bashan” and other targeted groups a bit of a stretch. Once we look at the rest of these verses, we will see that this proposal is highly unlikely, considering that much of our passage is a reworking of the first rebuke of Yisrael in 2:6-8.

I’d like to share one other suggestion.

The three instances of *Shimu et ha-davar ha-zeh* are wordier and each one gives a bit of a pause for the audience before the prophet’s voice storms in direct rebuke; note the first phrases **after** the opening in each of 3:1, 4:1 and 5:1. In our case, however, he speaks in clipped terms and gets right to the point.

Perhaps this is yet another instance of Amos’s rhetorical scheme of “three plus one” — the last “one” being the final nail in the coffin. This alone might be enough to alert and, perhaps even frighten, the audience that already knows Amos and his oratorial style and is familiar with these nuances.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO THE REBUKE

As noted above, Amos’s pronouncement here is close in tone, meaning and even lexicon to his first rebuke of Yisrael. The unusual word *sho’afim* (and the rarer *sho’afim… eretz*), the use of *evyon*, the reference to *anavim* (although in our passage this is the *ketiv,* the written text, only) are common to both. Most telling, however, is his damning the rich (or judges — see below) of the Shomeron for “selling the poor/ innocent for shoes.”

We will revisit some of our discussions from our study of 2:6-8 here.

***Ha-sho’afim evyon***

**O you that would swallow the needy**

The first word, *ha-sho’afim*, seems to come from the root *shin-alef-pei)*, which means “to breathe”, as in *“Pereh limmud midbar, be-avat nafshah* ***sha’afa*** *ruach*,” conventionally translated as “She is a wild ass used to the wilderness, who **snuffs up** wind as per her desire” (*Yirmeyahu* 2:24). This rendering, however, does not make much sense here.

The English translation we used in Chapter 2 (taken from the JPS 1917 edition), rendered *ha-sho’afim* as “those who pant,” which makes little sense in this context. In our context, that same translation (along with a number of others, including KJV) renders it “swallow” (as we have presented here). Although this is the approach favored by most of the Rishonim (Rashi, ibn Ezra and Radak; R. Eliezer of Beaugency has a clever twist on it but still sees it as “swallow”), it seems a bit strained here.

We propose, therefore, following Shalom Paul,[[1]](#footnote-1),that the root in both of these parallel passages is a secondary root of *shin-alef-pei,* which is an alternate form of *shin-vav-pei* and means “to trample”, as in *“Hu ye****shufekha*** *rosh ve-ata te****shufenu*** *akeiv,”* in *Bereishit* 3:15: “He shall trample you at the head and you shall trample him at the heel.” BDB (p. 983) and other Biblical lexicons recognize this secondary root as well. In Chapter 2, we preferred the translation “…who **trample** the ground on the heads of the destitute,” i.e. who “walk all over them” either figuratively or literally. Similarly, here, we will favor this translation: “…you who trample upon the needy” (RSV and others).

The imagery, just as in that first rebuke, is of a judiciary and/ or elite whose members abuse their positions of power at the utter expense of the downtrodden. In our case, it seems to be a general statement which is followed by examples of how the destitute are trampled.

One final note about translations. In most of the translations that see *sho’afim* as “swallow”, the sentence is presented as a statement of fact: “you who swallow the needy.” The JPS, however, adds in a clause which changes the tone significantly: “you that **would** swallow the needy.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In this reading, Amos is addressing a venal and avaricious audience that is still plotting how to exploit the poor, but hasn’t yet done so. Perhaps the thinking behind this shift is based on the rest of the verse, where they are quoted as saying “when will the new moon be over,” etc. In other words, they are awaiting the chance to reopen their markets where they cheat the buyers. If we read *Ha-sho’afim evyon ve-lahashbit aniyei aretz* as the “topic sentence” or general statement (*kelal*) followed by the details (*perat*), then this rendering is reasonable.

Rashi (v. 5) reads it this way:

“When will the new moon be over…” This is the “yearning.”

Here, he translates *sho’afim* as “yearning” or “anticipating”, but note how he translates it above!

They were anticipating a time when the price of grain would go up and they would sell to the poor with interest and then seize their fields.

***Ve-lashbit aniyei aretz***

**And destroy the poor of the land**

The Rishonim, across the board, understand that *lashbit* should be understood as the causative *le-****ha****shbit*, to get rid of. Ibn Ezra points out that the *patach* under the *lamed* is there to indicate the missing *hei.* (It remains unclear, however, how it would have been read without the *patach.*) Rashi cites two examples of this phenomenon, and one of these is also noted by ibn Ezra and Radak:

*Hashem tziva el Kena’an* ***lashmid*** *ma’uzneha*

The Lord commanded concerning Kena’an to destroy its strongholds (*Yeshayahu* 23:11)

*Lashmid* is understood there as if it were written *le-hashmid,* while there is some question as to whether Kena’an there refers to Canaanites per se or to merchants.

In any case, in our verse, the straightforward reading of the accusation is that the merchants (who we will explicitly hear of in the next verse) intend to rid the land of its poor. But is that really what they want? After all, it is the poor and their interest (usury) that fuel the appetites of the wealthy!

Nevertheless, both R. Eliezer of Beaugency and Radak take this general position. R. Eliezer has a curious take: “to rid from among them the poor of the land, and to live alone in the land.” Radak explains: “meaning, they intend to make them disappear from the world, as they take what is theirs deceitfully and unjustly.” Both of them understand that it is the deliberate purpose of these wealthy merchants to rid the land of its poor by “swallowing them up.”

Ibn Ezra has a different approach here: “…meaning: you will rid the people” — or “other people” — “from the land, from that which you are saying: ‘When will the new moon be over and we will open up our grain stores.’”

Both Hakham[[3]](#footnote-3) and Paul,[[4]](#footnote-4) however, understand *l(eh)ashbit* as equivalent to *ha-mashbitim*. In other words, the infinitive should be understood as a present participle. If so, *lashbit* is a parallel with *ha-sho’afim*, leaving us with: “You who trample the poor and” — also **or** thereby; see below — “rid the land of the poor.”

As noted just above, these two clauses may be seen to have a relationship of proximity or causality. In other words, the merchants are doing two things: trampling the poor as well as ridding the land of its poor. Alternatively, they are doing one thing: trampling the poor, which will lead to the poor being gone from the land.

I find the second approach far more likely, as it makes the merchants out to be merely venal, not self-destructive. They are actually acting against self-interest in the long run, as their behavior will leave them with no more poor people to abuse, but they aren’t intentionally killing their own golden goose. If so, then the *vav* of *ve-lashbit* should be understood as a *vav ha-beiur* (*vav* explicative), in which case the *vav* is followed by an explanation (or explication) of the foregoing clause.

Note that *aniyei* is written “*anvei,”* “the humble [of].” In Chapter 2, the parallel word is not only written *anvei* but also read that way. *Anavim* there is generally translated as “humble,” understanding *anavim* in its usual sense.

There are, however, numerous instances in *Tanakh* where *anavim* is an alternate version of *aniyim*, the poor. For example, in *Yeshayahu* 11:4, *anvei aretz* is clearly “the poor of the land,” as it stands in parallel with *dalim*, the destitute. Indeed, the same parallel in that verse militates in favor of understanding the word as “the poor.” The same parallelism forms our understanding of our verse: *Shimu zot ha-sho’afim evyon, ve-lashbit aniyei (*written: *anvei*) *aretz*.

Some of the biblical dictionaries conflate the two, reading the word as “poor, humble, meek” but the two roots, although related, are distinct. A number of the modern English translations render the word as “needy” or “destitute;” some even take it in a third direction and translate it as “oppressed,” reading the root as *ayin-nun-yud*.

The accusation against the wealthy merchants of Shomeron is that they trample the needy, which will lead the humble/ poor/ oppressed to disappear from the land.

In the next verse, we will find out how their actions lead to this lamentable result.

In the next *shiur*, we will address verse 5, which details the anticipation of these merchants, their attitudes towards the festivals (when commerce isn’t practiced) and their knowing abuse of the poor via crooked commercial practices.

1. Shalom Paul, *Mikra Le-Yisrael: Amos* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1994), p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Similarly, ASV (American Standard Version). HNV (Hebrew Names Version) presents a similar phrase: “you who desire to swallow up the needy” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Da’at Mikra,* p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)