**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**

**Shiur #79:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**BACK TO BASICS**

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

***PISHEI YISRAEL* REVISITED**

**PART 2:**

**THE WAGES OF SIN**

**Section 2: Verse 6**

In last week’s *shiur*, we studied the first part of Amos’s detailed rebuke of the evil merchants who can’t wait for “the *chodesh* to pass and the *shabbat* to be over” so that they can resume (or initiate) their exploitation of the indigent.

As promised, we will now address the second of the two verses which depict their corruption and their greedy goals. As pointed out in last week’s *shiur*, this verse deliberately and pointedly evokes Amos’s first rebuke of the aristocracy and royal house of Shomeron (2:6-8). We will observe these parallels and make some suggestions about the editorial considerations of the Book of *Amos* along with our customary attention to the rhetoric employed by the prophet.

**THE TEXT**

*Li-knot ba-kesef dalim*

To buy the indigent for silver,

*Ve-evyon ba’avur na’alayim*

And the needy for a pair of shoes.

We will examine this couplet as one, since both clauses are analogous to the earlier rebuke cited above.

This indictment is a reworking of the earlier phrase:

*Al mikhram ba-kesef tzaddik*

*Ve-evyon ba’avur na’alayim*

Because they sell the righteous for silver,

And [sell] the needy for [the price of] a pair of shoes (2:6)

Here are the two passages side-by-side, for purposes of comparison

**2:6-7**

*…al mikhram ba-kesef tzaddik*

*Ve-evyon ba’avur na’alayim*

*Ha-sho’afim al afar eretz*

*Be-rosh dalim*

*Ve-derekh anavim yattu*

**8:4, 6**

*Shimu zot ha-sho’afim evyon*

*Ve-lashbit aniyei aretz*

*…*

*li-knot ba-kesef dalim*

*ve-evyon ba’avur na’alayim*

ANALYSIS

In the chart above, it is clear that nearly every term used in this selection from Amos’s opening rebuke of the north finds its way back into our rebuke. In these two paired couplets, there are five exactly matched words (*ha-sho’afim, evyon* [more on this below] *eretz, dalim, ba-kesef*); one which is **written** identically, although the *keri* in chapter 8 modifies it somewhat (*aniyei, anavim*); and one completely identical phrase *(ba’avur na’alayim*). The *mikhram* of Chapter 2 is neatly matched by *li-knot* in Chapter 8. It should not be surprising to learn that *ha-sho’afim* appears only twice in *Tanakh*, as does the phrase *ba’avur na’alayim*. Although the nearly synonymous *dal*, *evyon* and *ani/ anav* appear many times in *Tanakh*, the use of all three of these terms — and only these three — in both sections, clearly points to a mutuality of reference.

As such, we will recall our analysis of some of these phrases to inform our study here. (We already studied *ha-sho’afim* and *aniyei aretz* in *Shiur* #77.)

In our analysis of Chapter 2 (*Shiur* #12), I demonstrated that the word *tzaddik* (the one being sold for silver) means “innocent” and does not say anything about the piety of the exploited person. In our passage, the *tzaddik* is replaced with *dal(im)*.

The people of Samaria stand accused of selling needy people for silver. This accusation raises a whole host of questions: Why are they selling them? To whom are they selling them? How are they even able to do this?

To properly understand this indictment, we’ll first look to the second hemistich. Before doing so, however, one matter requires our attention. In the parallel passage in Chapter 2, it is unclear what the function of the *kesef* is. Is *kesef* the **vehicle** of sale? In other words, are they sold **for** silver? Or is *kesef* the **reason** for the sale? Are they sold **on account of** silver? This will also be easier to determine after looking at the next passage.

*Ve-evyon ba’avur na’alayim*

And the needy **for** a pair of shoes

Again, does this mean that the accused sell indigent people and what they receive in return is a pair of shoes? Or are the needy sold because they owe a meager sum (“shoes”) and cannot repay it?

Sadly, both human history in general and *Tanakh* in particular have examples of the latter.

For instance, let us consider the case of the widow of one of Elisha’s acolytes, recorded in *II Melakhim* 4:1-7. She owes money and her creditor is coming to seize her two sons as slaves since she has no money with which to repay the loan. Elisha advises her to gather empty vessels and to borrow as many as she can. She is to pour the little bit of oil she has into the vessels. Miraculously, it continues to pour out until she has no more empty vessels; she sells the oil and with it repays her loan.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In a somewhat similar vein, the viceroy of Egypt is prepared to enslave Binyamin for the theft of a goblet (*Bereishit* 44:17).

However, our passage at once clarifies the meaning while shedding light on the meaning in Chapter 2.

“Buying the needy for silver” is an inversion of the earlier passage. Instead of selling indigent people, the accused buy them, ostensibly as slaves. The use of *li-knot ba-kesef* indicates that *kesef* is the **medium** of barter, not the **excuse** for the sale. The parallel clause therefore means that the indigent can be purchased for a meager price — (a pair of?) shoes. Reading this back to our passage, the first two crimes in the indictment refer to selling people as slaves and the *kesef* and *na’alayim* are the price. Although *kesef* is often understood as something of value in *Tanakh* (*vide*, *inter alii*, *Shemot* 22:6, 16), its being paralleled with “shoes” seems to relegate *kesef* here to a meager amount, the sense being that not only are the accused selling people as slaves, they are doing so for little profit.

On the face of it, this is an odd accusation. Is it aimed at debt-collectors who sell their debtors as slave due to their inability to repay their loans? If so, why mention the meager price — wouldn’t the accusation be all the sharper if the profit were greater? Perhaps, as some have suggested, the accused are judges who are willing to take meager bribes to have innocent people who are needy taken as slaves. If so, however, the verb *mikhram* is odd. Instead, we would expect: *al hatotam mishpat,* or some other reference to the perversion of justice. In this case, the verse could have read: *al hatotam mishpat tzaddik u-mkhiratam ba’avur na’alayim*. The crime would be more clearly stated without sacrificing rhetorical or metrical style.

It seems that Shveka’s proposal (see “For Further Study”) is the most reasonable. He refers us to an Ancient Near Eastern Text: Hittite Law 22a, which reads as follows (using the translation of Hoffner, *op. cit.*):

If a male slave shall run away, and someone brings him back, if he captures him nearby, he shall give him (i.e. the finder) a pair of shoes.

The law, in 22b-c, continues to grant greater bounty if found further from the master; see Shveka’s article.

The Code of Hammurabi has a similar law:

If anyone finds runaway male or female slaves in the open country and bring them to their masters, the master of the slaves shall pay him two shekels of silver.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The same law appears in the laws of Ur-Namma, LU 17.

Amos’s indictment of the aristocracy of the Samarian kingdom begins with their treatment of runaway slaves. In contravention of the law in *Devarim* 23:16-17, these hardhearted men would return slaves to their masters for the meager bounty promised.

Do not deliver to his master a slave that has run away to you from his master. He shall live with you, in your midst, in one of your gates that is to his benefit; you shall not oppress him.

This then explains the parallel of *kesef* with *na’alayim*, reflecting both Mesopotamian practices which undoubtedly had parallels throughout the Levant and against which the prophet is inveighing. In Chapter 2, the slave is described with two terms: *tzaddik* and *evyon*. The second term is easily understood and needs no elaboration. Why, however, describe the slave as *tzaddik*?

Perhaps this cuts to the biblical meaning of this word, which, as pointed out in the earlier *shiur*, morphs into something very different by the rabbinic period.

The root *tzadi-dalet-kuf* is one related to court proceedings. In one of the best known passages in the Torah, the court is adjured to chase after justice — “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof”* (*Devarim* 16:20) is the mandate of the court. The term is also used to describe someone who has been acquitted by the court of any wrongdoing (*Devarim* 25:1). Given this, the picture that emerges from Amos’s phrasing is that people wrongfully taken as slaves in adjacent regions would flee their unjust oppression. In at least some circumstances, they would flee to the Samarian kingdom, perhaps relying on the reputation (earned a century earlier) of the Israelite leadership for being kindhearted.[[3]](#footnote-3) In any event, they would be handed over to their masters for a small bounty. The willingness of these scoundrels to hand over poor slaves pleading innocence — and to do so for such a small profit — is the final nail in their providential coffin.

Although this is a single indictment, Amos divides it into two. Perhaps he does so to reflect the two disparate bounty-deals mentioned above.

Before sharing another observation, one which touches upon some broader methodological considerations, it behooves us to note that, unlike the parallel indictment in Chapter 2, ours is the (un)stated aim of the wicked merchants. These exploitative aristocrats eagerly await the end of the festival (or month, see *Shiur* #77) in order to gouge the poor, which ultimately leads to these dire results. In our case, unlike the earlier diatribe, it isn’t all that clear that the merchants are deliberately and consciously planning this barter of humans; it may be the disastrous result of their ways which will, in the final result, destroy the populace, the economy and then the country.

I’d like to propose another explanation for Amos’s splitting this indictment into two. It depends, however, on the truth of a premise regarding the editing of the rhetorical record of prophetic output, a topic we broached recently.

If we assume, for argument’s sake, that the written record of the prophet’s speeches is to be conceived as a holistic work, then it stands to reason that literary considerations that determine the makeup of an earlier passage would impact, ipso facto, on a later passage. In other words, were there some local, contextual reason to use a particular phrase or build out a specific meter, when that passage is repeated later in the book, it is likely to carry those same attributes, even if no longer contextually necessary.

By way of example, there is a well-known aphorism in biblical Israel. It is used (evidently) when someone is not regarded, early in one’s life or career, as likely to amount to much. Then suddenly, the person blossoms into a surprisingly successful individual. This phrase is “*Ha-gam Shaul ba-nevi’im*?” (“Is Shaul also among the prophets”?) This *mashal* is recorded twice. The first time is when the otherwise unknown Shaul son of Kish is seized with prophecy and joins the band of prophets descending from the *bama* (high place) at Giva:

… behold, a band of prophets met him; and the spirit of God came mightily upon him, and he prophesied among them.

And it came to pass, when all that knew him before this time saw that, behold, he prophesied with the prophets, then the people said one to another: “What is this that has happened to the son of Kish (*Ma zeh haya le-ven Kish*)? Is Shaul also among the prophets?”

And one of the men from there answered and said: “And who is their father?”

Therefore it became a proverb: “Is Shaul also among the prophets?” (I *Shemuel* 10:10-12)

In this context, the phrase *“Ha-gam Shaul ba-nevi’im?”* is fully understood, especially in light of the antecedent *“Ma zeh haya le-ven Kish*?”

The second story that makes mention of this saying, however, is at a remarkably different point in Shaul’s career. He has already risen to the leadership position and is now obsessed with destroying David. When David flees to Rama to seek help and refuge from Shemuel, Shaul sends three groups of soldiers to seize him, but each of them are themselves seized by the spirit of prophecy which Shemuel is inspiring at Rama (as he is leading a session of the prophetic guild, the *benei ha-nevi'im*). Shaul, using the time-worn advice “if you want a job done right, do it yourself,” finally sets off for Rama himself to capture and kill David. We’ll let the text tell the rest:

Then went he also to Rama, and came to the great cistern that is in Sekhu; and he asked and said: “Where are Shemuel and David?”

And one said: “Behold, they are at Nayot in Rama.”

And he went there to Nayot in Rama; and the spirit of God came upon him also, and he went on, and prophesied, until he came to Nayot in Rama.

And he also stripped off his clothes, and he also prophesied before Shemuel, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Wherefore they say: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (I *Shemuel* 19:22-24)

The etiology of this saying is attributed to two different events, but the particular phrasing of the aphorism fits the first story much better. To be surprised that a virtual nobody is suddenly elevated to prophecy is not only a real surprise, but the easily understood source of a folk saying. To note that the warrior king of Israel has joined with the prophets should not be all that surprising. If it were, we might expect a saying along the lines of the following: *Gam melekh, ve-gam navi?!* Not only a king, but also a prophet?! It seems pretty reasonable that the story which gives birth to this particular saying is the first one; yet, when it is repeated, in a different context, the original context still informs and defines its form.

In a similar style, I’d like to propose that Amos’s reason for dividing the indictment into two separate criminal acts is to generate the septad of accusation which is the rhetorical strategy in that oracle, as we outlined in those *shiurim* at the beginning of the series. In Chapter 2, Amos pronounces seven punishments against Yisrael, preceded by a recitation of seven acts of beneficence which God has performed for His people. That list is itself introduced with a detailing of seven terrible crimes that His people have committed, all of which lead to those punishments:

1. Selling the innocent for silver
2. Selling the needy for a pair of shoes
3. Trampling the heads of the indigent
4. Perverting the path of the humble
5. Father and son “sharing” the same maiden
6. Lying on seized garments
7. Drinking wine taken as payment for a fine

(See our discussions in *Shiurim* #12-15 for detailed analysis of each of these.)

Since Amos is impelled by his rhetorical strategy (creating the “septad of crimes”) to split our accusation into two, it remains split even in our chapter where that consideration is no longer contextually meaningful.

*U-mappal bar nashbir*

And sell the refuse of the grain.

Amos continues to use unusual words here. *Mappal*, which in modern Hebrew means “waterfall”, appears only twice in *Tanakh*. Besides Amos’s use here, in the middle of God’s description (from the whirlwind) of the mighty Leviathan (which stretches from 40:25 to 41:26 in *Iyov*, a total of thirty-four verses), the text describes its scales/ skin:

***Mappelei*** *vesaro daveiku*

*Yatzuk alav bal yimmot*

The flakes of his flesh are joined together.

They are firm upon him; they cannot be moved. (41:15)

Rashbam explains *mappelei* as meaning “the falling off (*nefillat*) of pieces [of its flesh].” He then offers an alternative, relying on the Talmudic phrase *pelaei peluyei,* meaning “dents” or “splits”; i.e. flesh that is cracked open.

Ibn Ezra offers a similar take (as does Ralbag), explaining: “The sections of its fat that are hanging off of its flesh. It seems to me that it is from the same root as *u-mappal bar nashbir”* (!).

Rashbam’s original interpretation, along with that favored by ibn Ezra and Ralbag, sees *mappal* as a nominal version of the root *nafal*, fall. Hence, in our case, the word is assumed to be referring to parts of the grain that have fallen off. The import of the word, though, is subject to some discussion.

Rashi, following the Targum, explains that the merchants’ plot is “the waste that fell from the wheat in the sifter, we will sell to the poor at an inflated price.” Similarly, ibn Ezra and Radak understand *mappal* as equivalent to the meaning in *Iyov* 41 — that which falls off the sifter. Radak modifies their plotting, making it a bit milder than Rashi, by noting that when the price of wheat is inflated, the indigent will be willing to buy the detritus, which normally would only be fed to birds. No deception is intended, just exploiting the need of the indigent to sell even that part of the harvest which would normally not be marketable.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency has an innovative read of this phrase. He understands *mappal bar* as the empty larder in their houses, i.e. the merchants say: we will be able to sell to them (presumably at a steep price) because they have no wheat at home. This approach fits nicely with the allusion to Yosef argued above, continuing to contrast their venal plans with Yosef’s successful and compassionate salvation of Egypt.

One final note on this phrase. As Paul points out,[[4]](#footnote-4) ending the indictment with a mention of *bar* and the verb *nashbir* (see the last *shiur* for a discussion about the use of these two relatively infrequent words) helps to create an *inclusio*, or “literary sandwich”. The indictment began with the merchants plotting “***venashbira*** *shever*…*veniftecha* ***bar***;” he now concludes the indictment, in chiastic fashion, with the phrase “*mappal* ***bar nashbir***.”

We have completed our study of the indictment; in the next *shiur*, we will analyze the final two verses of this passage which are comprised of God’s promised punishment that Amos’s audience should anticipate for their wicked behavior.

**For Further Study:**

**Selling the poor for shoes:**

Avi Shveka, “For a Pair of Shoes: A New Light on an Obscure Verse in Amos’ Prophecy,” *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012), pp. 95-114.

1. Parenthetically, this would seem to be the textual “anchor” for the famous Chanuka story recorded in the scholiumof *Megillat Ta’anit* (BT *Shabbat* 21b). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Retrieved from: <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp> on January 7, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I *Melakhim* 20:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, pp. 129-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)