**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* #80:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**BACK TO BASICS**

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

***PISHEI YISRAEL* REVISITED**

**PART 4:**

**RETRIBUTION**

**Section 1: Verse 7**

In last week’s *shiur*, we completed our study of Amos’s detailed rebuke of the evil merchants who can’t wait for “the month to pass and the Shabbat to be over” so that they can resume (or initiate) their exploitation of the poor. This included a comparison of Amos’s first rebuke of the Samarian aristocracy (chapter 2:6-8) with this one. We noted Amos’s use of rare words and phrases, matching them in both passages. We then discussed the possible editorial considerations behind these parallel usages

Now that the rebuke has been delivered, announcing God’s retribution follows. We will focus our attention on this punishment in the current *shiur* and the next.

**THE TEXT**

*Nishba Hashem bi-geon Ya’akov*

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Ya’akov:

*NISHBA HASHEM*

The image of God taking an oath is a common one in *Tanakh*.

In the Torah, it is used exclusively in reference to God’s oath to the Patriarchs regarding the granting of the Land of Canaan to their descendants. See e.g. *Shemot* 13:11, *Bamidbar* 14:23 and *Devarim* 31:20, all of which seem to refer back to God’s first oath at *Bereishit* 22:16-19:

*Vayomer* ***bi nishbati*** *ne’um Hashem, ki ya’an asher asita et ha-davar ha-zeh ve-lo chasakhta et binkha et yechidekha. Ki vareikh avarekhekha ve-harba arbeh et zarakha ke-khokhevei ha-shamayim ve-khachol asher al sefat ha-yam ve-yirash zarakha eit sha’ar oyevav. Vehitbarekhu ve-zarakha kol goyei ha-aretz eikev asher shamata be-koli.*

And He said, “I have sworn by myself, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, that I will bless you greatly, and I will multiply your seed greatly like the stars of the heavens, and like the sand which is on the seashore. Your seed will possess the gate of its enemies. In your seed will all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My Voice.”

The difficulty here is plain to see: at no point in this oath does God promise the land (*eretz*) to Avraham. While we may argue that the other blessings explicated in this commitment inhere a sovereign presence in the land, this is neither overtly stated nor absolutely necessary.

Avraham himself states that God swore to give him the land. When he administers the oath to his servant regarding a wife for Yitzhak, the servant asks how he is to act if the girl’s family won’t release her to move to Canaan:

*Hashem Elokei ha-shamayim asher lekachani mi-beit avi u-mei’eretz moladti va-asher dibber li va-asher* ***nishba li l-eimor le-zarakha etein et ha-aretz ha-zot*** *hu yishlach malakho lefanekha velakachta isha li-vni mi-sham*.

The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house, and from the land of my birth, who spoke to me, **and who swore to me, saying, “I will give this land to your seed,”** He will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.

Evidently Avraham understood God’s first words to Him after reaching “the land that I will show you” as an oath:

*Vayera Hashem el Avram vayomer* ***le-zarakha etein et ha-aretz ha-zot*** *vayiven sham mizbeiach la-Shem ha-nireh eilav*

The Lord appeared to Avram and said, “**I will give this land to your seed**.” He built an altar there to the Lord, Who appeared to him.

Note that Avraham’s words to his servant, decades later, are an exact quote of God’s words to Avraham as he first sets foot in the Land of Canaan. Note also that the text, in narrative form, paraphrases this commitment, before expanding it to identify boundaries, when presenting a summation of the *Berit bein Ha-betarim,* the Covenant between the Parts, “On that day, the Lord made a covenant” — “*berit*” and not “*shevua*” — with Avram saying: ‘To your seed I have given this land (*Le-zarakha natati et ha-aretz-ha-zot*)…’”

One or both of these oaths (the Land/ populous progeny) is then referenced when God speaks to Yitzchak (ibid. 26:3), and Yosef on his deathbed refers to “the land that God swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Ya’akov” (ibid. 50:24). As mentioned above, it becomes a constant theme throughout the Exodus and Wilderness narratives, repeated numerous times in Moshe’s farewell speech.

Curiously, the land-granting oath is rarely mentioned in the rest of *Tanakh*. The motif of God’s swearing (which is broadly understood as making an incontrovertible commitment, one where He stakes His reputation, so to speak, on its fulfillment) is used in the context of God’s commitment vis-à-vis an individual or a household. Even more curious is that the Divine commitment in these cases is nearly always one of punishment and possibly destruction. God swears, in Shemuel’s inaugural prophecy, that He will not allow Eli’s household to be forgiven through offerings (*I Shemuel* 3:14). Yirmeyahu foretells the destruction of the Temple as well as that of Edom(!) by invoking God’s oath: *“Bi nishbati ne’um Hashem”* (22:5 and 49:13 respectively).[[1]](#footnote-1) Yeshayahu prophesizes the downfall of Assyria/ Babylonia and invokes God’s commitment to that destruction as an oath (14:24).

Amos himself has used this rhetorical device twice already:

*Nishba A-D-N-Y Hashem be-kodsho ki hinei yamim ba’im aleikhem…*

The Sovereign Lord has sworn by His holiness: behold, days are coming upon you… (4:2)

And back in Chapter 6, we find:

*Nishba A-D-N-Y Hashem be-nafsho ne’um-Hashem Elokei Tzevaot meta’eiv anokhi et geon Ya’akov ve-armenotav saneiti vehisgarti ir u-mloah*

The Sovereign Lord has sworn by Himself, says the Lord, the God of Hosts: I abhor the pride of Ya’akov,[[2]](#footnote-2) and hate his palaces; and I will deliver up the city with all that is therein.

We have yet another example of a rhetorical flair which seems to belong to Amos — the only prophet to use it more than once (*Yeshayahu* 62:8 is generally regarded as belonging to a later prophet) until Yirmeyahu. We have already established, numerous times, that Yirmeyahu relies heavily on Amos’s oratorial style.

*GEON[[3]](#footnote-3) YA’AKOV*

Amos depicts God as swearing “by the pride of Ya’akov.” The phrase *geon Ya’akov* appears four times in *Tanakh* — twice in *Amos* (here and back in 6:8), once in *Nachum* and once in *Tehillim.*

In *Tehillim*, the referent seems to be the Land of Israel:

*Yivchar lanu et* ***nachalateinu et geon Ya’akov*** *asher aheiv*

He chooses our inheritance for us, *geon Ya’akov* which He loves. (47:5)

On the other hand, the reference in *Nachum* would seem to mean something about sovereignty over the Land, which the prophet promises that God will restore:

*Ki shav Hashem et geon Ya’akov ki-geon Yisrael ki vekakum bokekim u-zmoreihem shicheitu*

For the Lord will restore *geon Ya’akov*, as the pride of Yisrael (*geon Yisrael)*; for the emptiers have emptied them out and marred their vine-branches. (*Nachum* 2:3)

The truly challenging instance is Amos’s earlier use, which we cited above in the context of our discussion of God’s oaths:

*Nishba A-D-N-Y Hashem be-nafsho ne’um-Hashem Elokei Tzeva’ot meta’eiv anokhi et* ***geon Ya’akov*** *ve-armenotav saneiti vehisgarti ir u-mloah*

The Sovereign Lord has sworn by Himself, says the Lord, the God of Hosts: I abhor the pride of Ya’akov, and hate his palaces; and I will deliver up the city with all that is therein.

God is rejecting/ abhorring *geon Ya’akov —* what could that mean? Here is a paraphrase of our discussion from our study of that passage.

We identified at least four proposed meanings for the term. In *Tehillim* 47, it seems to mean the land; in *Nachum* 2, some sense of sovereignty. In our passage (*Amos* 8:7), the commentators (see below) suggest that it may mean God’s Name, the Holy Ark or the Temple.

Can *geon Ya’akov* in 6:8 mean the Land of Israel? Hardly, as that would fly in the face of the rest of Amos’s (and all other prophets’) rhetoric — just the opposite, it is the sanctity of the Land that has been defiled by the sinful and unethical behavior of the nation being rebuked.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is also unlikely to mean the Temple (or the Ark). Neither of these are present in Shomeron; just the opposite is the case. Part of the earlier rebuke in Chapter 6, the premise for this Divine oath, cuts to the **lack** of the *sancta* in Shomeron. Certainly, the other meaning in the later *Amos*-reference — God’s Name or the Temple/ Ark — is impossible. God is not abhorring/ rejecting His own Name, nor His holy places in Yerushalayim.

All of that left us with two possible translation strategies in Chapter 6. Either the meaning used by Nachum is at play here; or it is an enigmatic phrase with some other meaning, unattested elsewhere.

One methodological note: it is always preferable to keep consistent meanings within words and phrases in *Tanakh*, at least within one literary period and genre. As such, we would prefer to read this as carrying the same meaning as when Nachum uses it (who is not too distant in time from Amos, as his entire prophecy is aimed at Nineveh), rather than propose a new meaning.

It seems that Nachum’s meaning works perfectly well there. God is rejecting the sovereignty of Shomeron and is prepared to send these hedonistic aristocrats into exile (as per 6:7). The subsequent clause, in which God expresses His hatred for their palaces, supports this interpretation.

Now let us survey the Rishonim here and see how they interpret this uncommon phrase in the context of Amos’s pronouncement.

The Targum interprets the phrase as “*kayeim Hashem di-yhav revuta le-Ya’akov*,” meaning “the Lord, Who granted greatness to Ya’akov, swore…” In other words, God, Who gave grandeur and pride to Ya’akov, swears — i.e. that greatness has been abused and abandoned. In 6:8 above, the Targum renders *geon Ya’akov* as “*beit makdesha revuteih de-Ya’akov,”* “the temple, which is the greatness of Ya’akov. In *Nachum*, the phrase is translated as “*tukfa de-Ya’akov,”* “the power/ strength of Ya’akov.” (We will ignore the Targum of *Tehillim*, as that is not of the same authorship or school as the Targum of *Nevi’im*; scholarly opinions generally date it to the 6th or 7th century CE.)

Ibn Ezra interprets *geon Ya’akov* as “the Honored Name (i.e. God), Who is known to the nation of Ya’akov only.”[[5]](#footnote-5) He then cites the Karaite Yefet b. Eli who, based on *Yechezkel* 24:21 and *Tehillim* 78:61, interprets it as a reference to the Ark.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency says “*Hu mikdasham,”* “It is their temple” — seemingly pointing to the sanctuary at Beit El. It is hard to understand why this would be called “the pride of Ya’akov;” he does not use the same interpretation in 6:8, where it would have fit nicely. Perhaps *mikdasham* refers to the sanctuary in Yerushalayim, which puts this interpretation in line with Yefet and Radak (see next paragraph).

Radak sees equivalence between the phrase *“Nishba Hashem bi-geon Ya’akov”* and *“Bi nishbati*” — and this is analogous to *“Nishba Hashem be-nafsho”* above. God, to wit, is “the pride of Ya’akov.” He then allows that it may refer to the Temple (in Yerushalayim), and he references *Tehillim* 47:5. Radak elaborates beautifully, connecting our verse with 6:8:

Similarly, he said above “I abhor *geon Ya’akov”* and the Temple is the pride of Ya’akov, since it is there that the Glory resides and He swore by His Glory that He caused to reside among Ya’akov — and they, through their sins, caused it to leave there.

It is interesting to note that in *Nachum*, Radak interprets *geon Ya’akov* as Yehuda and Yerushalayim.

Paul[[6]](#footnote-6) interprets the phrase here as impacted by the use in 6:8, i.e. the presumed pride of the people, their palaces and such. He sees the choice of this phrase as a deliberately stinging preface to the punishment — God swears by the brazen arrogance of the people…(He associates this with the usage in *Tehillim* 47, which he suggests uses a common phrase, known in Shomeron, which reflects the pride of the northern kingdom.)

*Im eshkach la-netzach kol ma’aseihem*

Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

THE OATH FORMULA

We are generally familiar with a *shevua* (oath) in colloquy, as well as in rabbinic literature, as comprising two components. The first is the “oath-form” introduction. In modern usage, we might say “I swear that” (or “I aver that”). In rabbinic literature, we typically see “*shevua she-*” although there is a list of available variants (see, e.g. Mishna, *Nedarim* 1:1). Although the people had trepidation in the rabbinic era (and some continue to have) about the metaphysical and spiritual implications of violating an oath, the main point of swearing is to testify to the truth of a statement. The defendant, for instance, is putting his or her own religious scruples on the line and using them to gain credibility.

In the biblical era, contradistinctively, the major driving factor that lends weight to the oath is the attendant punishment. In other words, one taking an oath would essentially state that if one’s words do not reflect the truth, one is ready to accept a severe punishment. In a sense, this isn’t just putting one’s reputation or spiritual stature on the line, but risking health, property or one’s very life.

We do find several oaths in *Tanakh* which are purely declarative and not conditional, e.g. *I Melakhim* 2:24: *“Ve-ata chai Hashem… ki ha-yom yumat Adoniyahu,”* when Shelomo swears that Adoniyahu will “die that very day.” In that case, Shelomo is not invoking a punishment for himself if his words fail to be realized. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of oaths in *Tanakh* follow the conditional model.

Thus, an oath given in the biblical idiom usually contains three prongs. First there is an “oath-form,” such as *“Bi nishbati”* (see above), *“Chai Hashem,”* etc. Second and central to the commitment is the conditional statement introduced with the particle *im/ im lo*; the third and final element is the curse that one is willing to bring upon oneself if these words prove false, i.e. for non-fulfillment of the condition.

In some cases, the entire formula is presented, as a formula followed by a conditional statement. The protasis would be the statement which the declarant wishes to have accepted as true. The apodosis would be the imprecation that one would be willing to accept were it not true. However, in *Tanakh*, we never find a complete formula; the apodosis is always elided. Perhaps the reason is that the declarant isn’t prepared to utter such words about himself or herself (to wit: “and if I don’t fulfill this, then such-and-such will happen to me”). It is further possible that the ellipsis accomplishes far more than a stated self-curse. By leaving the imprecation unstated, the terror of the unsaid may outweigh the potentially horrific imagery of anything explicated.

In an interesting offering, Park (see “For Further Study”) suggests that the polar *im/ im lo* particles (she calls them “polar” since they reflect, in an oath, a commitment to absolute refusal or absolute action respectively) should be seen as rhetorical questions as opposed to the protasis of a conditional statement, with apodosis elided. For example, let us examine the oath taken by God in *Bamidbar* 14:21-23:

*Ve-ulam* ***chai ani****… ki khol ha-anashim… ve-lo shamu be-koli…* ***im yiru et ha-aretz asher nishbati la-avotam…***

Yet indeed, **as I live** [oath-form]… for all of those men… and have not listened to My voice… **if they will see the Land which I swore to their fathers…**

We generally understand the phrase “*im yiru et ha-aretz”* as the protasis: “If they do see the land,” and the apodosis — “such and such terrible thing will happen to Me” (!) — as elided. We will yet return to the theological difficulty here.

Park prefers to read the conditional clause as a rhetorical question, with nothing elided. She would translate here:

As I live (oath), regarding these men… will they see the Land which I swore to their fathers…?

This is an intriguing proposal which impacts on our understanding of scores of passages in *Tanakh*. Some of what makes this appealing is specifically the theological difficulty raised when this formula is used by God.

As noted above, if there really is an elided consequence in the oath in *Bamidbar* 14 (or, for that matter, in our verse in *Amos* 8:7), then what is the unstated imprecation? Are we to understand that God is committing to some self-destructive act (as if…) should His words not come true? A broader question might be posed here: why does God express Himself in oaths at all? A person typically swears in order to gain credibility — something which makes no sense in the context of God speaking with people, be they His loyalists (e.g. *Bereishit* 26:3), His nation (*Devarim* 31:23), an enemy nation (see, e.g. *Yeshayahu* 14:24) or the entire world (ibid. 54:9).

R. Yishmael’s principle of hermeneutics, *“Dibbera ha-Torah ki-lshon benei adam,”* “The Torah speaks in human language,” has implications for halakhic Midrash, where that statement originates. However, it also speaks to the issue raised here. Not only does *Tanakh* utilize anthropomorphism (e.g. “God’s outstretched arm”) and anthropopathism (“God was jealous”) to generate some level of “accessibility” to God, it also uses what we might call “anthropologos,” i.e. having God’s words presented in the style of people. Even the notion of God’s “speaking” may be a borrowed term; after all, we don’t know if prophets have any auditory experience when receiving prophecy, yet the prophet responds to God, *“Shomeia avdekha,”* “Your servant is listening” (*I Shemuel* 3:9). In the same way, God utilizes various levels of intensity of speech to denote increasing severity or commitment (read: reality). A Divine promise is not a Divine decree; neither of them rise to a Divine oath, and a Divine covenant seems to trump all.

In the same way as God’s “swearing” is a way of indicating a strong commitment which cannot be overturned, the elided consequence just follows that form — not that we would ever imagine a real imprecation there.

In our rebuke, God has committed, with no hope for this direction to be altered, that He will never forget the wicked deeds of the Northern aristocracy and merchant class.

In the next *shiur*, we will conclude our study of this section and analyze the explicated punishment, which the audience (until this point) only knows is firm and irrevocable.

**For Further Study:**

*Gaon*:

T. Katzir (Katz), “*Mi-geon Ha-Yarden Li-geonat Ha-kita*,” The Academy of the Hebrew Language (website), available at: <http://tinyurl.com/y4948kzm>

Abba Bendavid, *Leshon Mikra U-lshon Chakhamim* (Tel Aviv: 1967), p. 147.

Manfred R. Lehmann, “Biblical Oaths,” *Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Vol. 81, no. 1 (1969), pp. 74–92.

Grace J. Park, "Polar ‘*im* in Oaths and the Question of Literacy in Lachish 3," *Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125.3: 463-478.

1. Even though God never explicitly swears that He will maintain David’s dynasty, such an oath is assumed by David’s contemporaries (e.g. Avner, *II Shemuel* 3:9) as well as in later psalms (*Tehillim* 89:50). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We will address this term below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The word *gaon* in *Tanakh* (which, when joined to the following word, becomes “*geon*”) means “pride” or “exaltation.” The word has taken a circuitous and wild etymological ride to its current meaning of “genius.” See: “For Further Study.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul (*Mikra Le-Yisrael,* p. 130) finds support for this interpretation from *Mikha* 5:3, “*Bi-geon shem Hashem Elokav.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)