**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 #84:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF DOOM**

**A THIRST FOR GOD’S WORD (8:11-14)**

**PART 1:**

**THE FAMINE (verse 11)**

We now begin the last section of Chapter 8, which, in our estimation, is a continuation of Amos’s *eschaton*, which he begins with the introduction of *“Vehaya ba-yom ha-hu”* in 8:9. This *shiur* will be devoted to the first verse. It includes an introductory phrase, *“Hinei yamim ba’im,”* which we’ve already investigated a bit (back at 4:2, in *shiur* #32) but which requires further investigation in this context.

The prophecy itself — beyond the introductory phrase — gets more attention in the Midrash than we are accustomed to in our study of Amos. These *midrashim* are not of one cloth; some of them appear to be mutually exclusive.

Thus, this *shiur* will be focused on three things. First of all, we will examine the text itself, as we do when studying any passage, identifying anomalies, challenging words and ambiguous references etc. Secondly, we will look into the use of the introductory *“Hinei yamim ba’im”* and will suggest its significance in this oratory. Finally, we will analyze the various Midrashic exegeses (and eisegeses) and compare them with the approaches of the various *pashtanim* (commentators focused on *peshat,* the simple meaning of the text).

In the next *shiur*, we will continue our study of the text. At the end of that *shiur*, we will offer an argument for dividing the prophecy between vv. 11-12 and vv. 13-14 — besides the convenience of dividing four verses into two pairs of two each. Once we have finished our textual analysis of the passage, we will propose an approach to understanding the underlying message of this entire pericope.

THE TEXT

*Hinei yamim ba’im, ne’um A-D-N-Y Elokim*

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord God,

We will examine this phrase in detail below. Note Amos’s continued insertion of *ne’um* with God’s Name(s), something he does twenty-one times in this short book. I mention this because none of his contemporaries uses this formula nearly as often.

It appears in the canonical book of *Yeshayahu* twenty-three times, but only eleven of them are in the chapters generally associated with the Yeshayahu who was Amos’s contemporary. One of those (at Chapter 37) is part of the narrative of Sancheiriv’s threats against Yerushalayim, which also (and primarily) appears in *II Melakhim* 19. So, all told, in the nearly forty chapters of his works, the phrase appears ten times. In the fourteen chapters of *Hoshea*, it appears four times — three of them clustered in the opening prophecy of God’s promise to rekindle the “old romance” with the Israelites (2:15, 18, 23). The final one appears at 11:11. *Mikha* uses the phrase twice (4:6, 5:9).

In earlier *shiurim*, we advanced the argument that the last six chapters of *Zekharya* were composed by a peer of Amos’s. Curiously, only seven of the nineteen incidences of *ne’um Hashem* (or some variation thereof) in *Zekharya* appear in those latter chapters. In other words, Amos uses this formula far more frequently than his peers. The only prophet to use it with greater frequency is Yirmeyahu (170 times). This, again, supports our argument for Yirmeyahu’s dependence on Amos’s lexicon and rhetorical style.

It is possible that Amos’s consistent use of this “speech-formula” is occasioned by the tentative nature of his own status. Untrained as a prophet (*“Lo navi anokhi ve-lo ven navi*,” 7:14) and perhaps operating in a region where his dialect and accent are considered foreign and, quite possibly, seen as inferior (see Amatzya’s words to him: “Seer, flee yourself to the land of Yehuda, eat bread there and prophesy there,” 7:12), he needs to give more support to his words as the words of God. Hence the consistent use of *ne’um Hashem*.

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba, Tzav*,10) may be instructive here[[1]](#footnote-1):

R. Azaria, quoting R. Yehuda b. R. Simon, expounded the verse [“You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows” (*Tehillim* 45:8)] as referring to Yeshayahu.

Yeshayahu said: I was *metayel* (literally: strolling)[[2]](#footnote-2) in my study house and I heard the voice of the Holy One, Who is blessed, saying: “Whom shall I send and Who will go for us?” (*Yeshayahu* 6:8); I sent Mikha and they were hitting him on the cheek, as it says: “With a rod they strike upon the cheek” (*Mikha* 4:14). I sent Amos and they were calling him *pesilusa*[[3]](#footnote-3) (stammerer; see footnote). They said: Doesn’t God have anyone else to place his Divine Presence upon than this tongueless man, a *pesilusa*?

R. Pinchas observed: Why was his name Amos? Because he was weighted down (*amus*) by his tongue.

Although the purpose of this *midrash* is to highlight Yeshayahu’s readiness to go at God’s command, it can also tell us something about Amos. The “failure” of Mikha, that he is beaten about the face by his audience, is explicit in the text (so to speak). However, there is nothing explicit in the text to indicate that Amos is oratorically challenged. Perhaps the intense frequency of *ne’um Hashem*, along with the explicit awareness of Amos’s “foreignness” to the northern audience, moves the homileticists to view Amos that way.

*Vehishlachti ra’av ba-aretz*

When I will send a famine on the land;

Famine is a recurring theme in the history of the ancient world and one which often has far-reaching implications.

There are a number of recorded famines in *Tanakh*. Some of them are explicitly presented as circumstantial, such as the famine in Egypt which Yosef correctly intuits from Pharaoh’s dreams (*Bereishit* 41) or the famine which sends Elimelekh and his family to Moav (*Ruth* 1). I note “explicitly” because the Midrashic tradition will often identify God’s hand as using the famine to “move history along”, particularly in the case of the Yosef story.[[4]](#footnote-4) Famines, however, are never presented (in advance) in the narrative text as a deliberate act of God, though the underlying belief of any providential theistic system is to see any momentous and impactful natural event as being God’s doing.

Describing God as generating a famine, even after the fact, is uncommon in *Tanakh*. Divine intent is explicitly presented in the context of the three-year famine in David’s time (*II Shemuel* 21) and in the three-year famine in Achav’s time (*I Melakhim* 17-18). The first of these is due to Shaul’s crime against the Givonim; the second as a Divine response to Achav’s promoting of Ba’al-worship in the north. To be sure, the latter famine is announced in advance (*I Melakhim* 17:1) but no explicit reason is stated by Eliyahu at that point. A famine is one of the choices which David is given as punishment for his taking of the census (*II Shemuel* 24; *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 21) and it is one of the motifs of the threatening prophecy of Yechezkel in Chapter 5, referenced again in 7:15. Later in Yechezkel’s prophecies, the famine is presented as part of God’s four-pronged arsenal of punishments (“*arba’at shefatai ha-ra’im*,” 14:21), within the context of the famine that God will “send”:

*Vehishlachti bah ra’av vehikhrati mimena adam u-vhema*

I will send famine against her (the land) and I will cut off from it man and beast. (14:13)

Besides our verse, this is the only other place where the prophet uses this verb to foretell a famine. The notion of God’s “sending” a famine intensifies the sense of punishment and while it is possible that Yechezkel intends to bring Amos’s vision to mind by using *“Vehishlachti ra’av*,” it may not be the case. In *Yechezkel* 14, the prophet talks about God’s four weapons of punishment and two of them (the famine and the plague) are “sent.”

In any case, the powerful sense of deliberate Divine punishment which should resonate with any audience hearing *“Vehishlachti ra’av ba-aretz”* ought to evoke a likewise powerful move towards contrition.

*Lo ra’av la-lechem*

Not a famine of bread,

Here is where Amos’s rhetorical genius takes over. This is the moment of irony — and shock. A “bread-and-water” famine is a dreaded cataclysm which decimates kingdoms, moves populations and alters national histories. Whether explicitly announced as a sign of God’s anger (see *inter alii* *Devarim* 11:17; *Vayikra* 26:19-20) or understood that way after the fact (e.g. *II Melakhim* 8:1), it is a devastating event which eats away at the essential survival of the tribe, the family and the individual. The words *“Vehishlachti ra’av ba-aretz”* would have evoked a sense of existential fear among those giving ear to Amos’s oratory. The next phrase, unprecedented (and unmatched since; but see *Yeshayahu* 55:1) in the prophetic canon, turns things on their head. The exact thing which these people **have been avoiding** is that which they will end up seeking as they do their daily bread — and will feel deprived when it is no longer available.

Note that *lechem* in *Tanakh* has an essential meaning of “food”. For instance, the psalmist )*Tehillim* 147:9) praises God who “*noten li-vhema* ***lachmah,”*** “gives the beast its *lechem*.” After all, animals do not eat baked bread.

In one unusual case, honey is even considered *lechem*, as follows. Shaul’s oath, *“Arur ha-ish asher yokhal lechem ad ha-erev,”* “Cursed is the man who will eat bread before evening” (*I Shemuel* 14:24), is considered to be violated by his son Yonatan when he eats honey (ibid. vv. 43-44). Since the staple food in the Near East remains bread (certainly through the rabbinic period if not later), bread is called *lechem*. In numerous mentions in *Tanakh*, it is unclear if the meaning of *lechem* is specifically bread (as it surely is when coupled with *pat,* such as the *pat lechem* offered by Avraham to his guests in *Bereishit* 18) of the more generally “food,” even when coupled with water (as it is here and in numerous places in *Tanakh*). Translating *lechem* here as “bread” is a convention but by no means convincing. However, since famines in *Tanakh* are invariably focused around a lack of grain, the irony of the image works more powerfully if we read it as “bread” rather than “food.”

*Ve-lo tzama la-mayim*

Nor a thirst for water,

What is curious about this phrase is that a “thirst” is not part of the original threat — just a *ra’av*, famine. This is, however, understandable within the rhetorical strategy since famines are always the byproduct of a drought. A drought means that there is no potable water (desalinization is eons in the future). Amos’s foretelling of a *ra’av* inheres a thirst as well.

*Ki im li-shmoa et divrei Hashem*

But of hearing the words of the Lord.

The use of *ki* here is common in *Tanakh*, with the meaning of “rather,” such as *“Lo yukhal le-vaker et ben ha-ahuva…* ***ki*** *et ha-bekhor ben ha-senua yakir…”* “He may not recognize as firstborn the son of his beloved wife… **rather** he shall acknowledge the firstborn who is the son of his despised wife…” (*Devarim* 21:16-17), among countless other examples.

Notice the gapping here — the full intent of the phrase is: ***ki******im*** *ra’av ve-tzama* ***li-shmoa et divrei Hashem***. Generally, we see gapping as a poetic device, used to maintain meter, and that may be operating here:

*Lo ra’av la-lechem ve-lo tzama la-mayim*

*Ki-im li-shmoa et-divrei Hashem*

There may be another consideration at play here. By isolating what the people **will** desire, he subtly promotes the image (foreign to his audience) of people listening to God’s word — without the painful association of famine and thirst. This may help to make this goal more attractive to his audience, yet another indication of Amos’s oratorical brilliance.

Now that we have concluded our assessment of the text of verse 10 itself, we will turn our attention to the two larger issues in this passage — the introductory *“Hinei yamim ba’im”* as used in *Tanakh*, and the interpretive traditions about this predicted famine for the word of God.

*HINEI YAMIM BA’IM*

The sometimes ominous introduction *“Hinei yamim ba’im*,” may almost be said to be coined by Amos. It does appear once in the pre-monarchic era, when the *ish ha-Elokim* notifies Eli about the fall of his household (*I Shemuel* 2:31). It also appears once during Amos’s era in *II Melakhim* 20:17 (parallel in *Yeshayahu* 39:6) when Yeshayahu informs Chizkiyahu that the day is coming when all of the treasures which he and his ancestors have amassed will be carted off to Bavel. I believe that Amos builds his three adaptations of the phrase from the sense of the passage in *Shemuel*.

First, let us consider one introductory note. The word *hinei*, which appears well over one thousand times in *Tanakh*, carries an element of surprise. Avraham is at Moriya and *“Ve-hinei ayil,”* “Behold, there was a ram.” Ya’akov wakes up the morning after his wedding and *“Ve-hinei hi Leia,”* “Behold, she was Leia.” Balak tells Bilam that he has hired him to curse his enemies: *“Ve-hinei beirakhta vareikh,”* “Behold, you indeed blessed.”

The archetype in Shemuel speaks to a **contextually anticipated time**, i.e. within the context of the prophecy (the fall of the house of Eli), that prophecy will be realized to such an extreme degree such as to provide a surprising twist. Eli has been chosen (per the previous verse) to be God’s servant with the intention of dynastic status. “*Hinei yamim ba’im” —* the future holds a bitter surprise for you: your power will be stripped, the lifespan of your family members will be shortened and you will be reduced to poverty. (see *I Shemuel* 2:31-37).

When Amos uses the phrase for the first time, in 4:2, he is addressing the “cows of the Bashan” and telling them that the day is nigh when they will have their fortunes overturned (see our discussion in *Shiur* #32). In other words, *“Hinei yamim ba’im”* does not **necessarily** introduce an “end-of-days” scenario; it is sympathetic with its literary context.

Since, as I have argued, from 8:9 and on, Amos engages in eschatological visions, this instance of *hinei yamim ba’im* should be seen in that light and interpreted accordingly. In other words, at some undetermined date, centuries or millennia in the future, this famine and thirst for the word of God will be sent to the Land (or the earth? — see *Yeshayahu* 11:9). Much the same can be argued for Amos’s final use, as he introduces his epilogue; we will address this when we get to the end of Chapter 9.

In Amos’s wake, Yirmeyahu uses the phrase fifteen times — but he is the only other *navi* to use this phrase. Many of his visions introduced with the phrase are promising – although some are threatening. However, all of them are contextually relevant. For instance, in Yirmeyahu’s moving prophecy of return (Chapter 23), envisioning the loyal shepherds and the salvation of Yehuda, he prophesizes:

*Hinei yamim ba’im ne’um Hashem, vahakimoti le-David tzemach tzadik umalakh melekh vehiskil ve’asa mishpat u-tzdaka ba-aretz*

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (23:5)

Two verses later, he uses the same introductory formula to present yet another (pleasant) surprise:

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when men shall no longer say, “As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,” but “As the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.” Then they shall dwell in their own land. (vv. 7-8)

As I've mentioned several times, it seems fairly clear that Yirmeyahu is inspired, at least in his rhetorical style, by Amos. After concluding our study of Amos, we will engage in several excurses about the book, including one examining the impact of Amos on later prophets. At that point, we will survey the numerous points of contact between Yirmeyahu and Amos.

*“LO RA’AV LA-LECHEM”:* THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS

The Midrashic tradition regarding our passage is broadly eschatologically-based. There is a passage which shows up in two places in *Bereishit* *Rabba*[[5]](#footnote-5) which identifies ten famines in the world’s history. The ninth one in their enumeration is one that “comes and goes in the world,” i.e. regular droughts. The final one is “in the future times”, and then it cites our verse.[[6]](#footnote-6) *Ruth Rabba* (Ch. 1) shares the same Midrash but considers **our** famine to be the one that “comes and goes in the world,” i.e. an occasional event in world history. Whether we consider the version in *Ruth Rabba* to be the result of a scribal error has strong implications — do the authors of the Midrash see our verse as a prophecy of an “end-of-days” scenario or as an occasional event in history?

In a related *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabbati, Lekh Lekha* p. 71), our verse is used to resolve the meaning of “a place of thirst where there is no water” in *Devarim* 8. According to this midrash, it alludes to the era of Roman oppression, when they (will?) (have?) put such an awesome burden on Yisrael that the Torah stands to be forgotten from among them. Oddly, the Midrash is not satisfied with the internal explanation that the thirst will be for the word of God, but draws on *Yeshayahu* 55:1 to support the idea that “water” is an allusion to Torah.

In two parallel passages in the Midrashic corpus, our verse is used to explain a phrase in *Eikha* 2:19, “*ha-atufim be-ra’av,”* as meaning that the “hunger” which covers them is a lack of Torah (*Eliyahu Rabba*, Ch. 19) or a lack of vision and prophecy (*Lekach Tov, Eikha,* Ch. 2).

The most famous rabbinic homily using our vision is, again, eschatological with a particularly “contemporary” twist.

The Tosefta in *Eduyot* (1:1) records that “when our Sages entered the vineyard in Yavneh”:[[7]](#footnote-7)

They said: The Torah is destined to be forgotten from the Jewish people, as it is stated:

“Behold, days are approaching, says the Lord God, and I will send forth a hunger in the land, not a hunger for bread and not a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of Hashem. And they will drift from sea to sea, and from north to east they will roam to find the word of the Lord, but they will not find it” (8:11-12).

“The word of the Lord” — that is prophecy.

“The word of the Lord” — that is the end of days.

“The word of the Lord” — that nothing in Torah will seem analogous to another.

Let us begin with Hillel and Shammai…

In BT *Shabbat* 138b, this *tosefta* has an addendum:

…And what is the meaning of: “They will roam to find the word of the Lord, but they will not find it”?

They said: It is destined that a woman will take a loaf of *teruma* bread and circulate among the synagogues and study halls to ascertain whether it is ritually impure or whether it is ritually pure, and there will be none who understands…

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: Heaven forfend that the Torah should be forgotten from the Jewish people, as it is stated: “And this song shall answer to him as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten from his seed” (*Devarim* 31:21). Rather, how do I explain: “They will roam to find the word of God, but they will not find it”? It means that they will not find clear law and clear teaching together

Across the board, we find that *Chazal* read our prophecy as being eschatological; in some cases (such as in the Tosefta) they are comfortable seeing at as alluding to their day.

It is interesting that the Rishonim, by and large, ignore this interpretive tradition.

Rashi is fairly subdued here, but does suggest that the reason for the thirst will be that *ruach ha-kodesh,* the holy spirit, will have left the people. This is certainly something that Rashi would put years before him; therefore, he seems to be reading our passage as a prophecy which had already been realized before the rabbinic era.

His younger colleague, Rav Yosef Kara, is more explicit. He points to the end of the first commonwealth, translating the famine as a lack of prophecy, and notes that after the end of the Davidic dynasty, only Chaggai, Zekharya and Malakhi prophesize.

In a similar vein, ibn Ezra notes the deliberate irony (as pointed out above) in Amos’s words — that Amatzya has ordered him **not** to prophesize — and now Amos is foretelling a time when all of the prophets will be dead.

Radak follows this thinking and explains the next verse — that they will travel far to find the word of God — as being due to the fact that there will be no more prophets and they will desperately want to know what their future holds.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency adds an innovative twist to this approach. He maintains that Amos is pronouncing that they will have such an accumulation of troubles that they will go far and wide to find out if their awful situation is permanent or if there is an end in sight.

In sum, we find that the Rishonim all take a position that Amos’s prophecy is “proximate” and fairly immediate, speaking to the direct experience of prophecy which the people (or at least their leaders) eschew, and predicting a time when they will all go thirsting after the literal “word of God” (i.e. *nevua*) and will not be able to find i/t.

The Midrash, on the other hand, sees Amos’s words as reaching far into the future, to a time that many would claim speaks of modern Man and his constant state of existential crisis.

An honest assessment of the text leads us to believe that it is deliberately ambiguous and allows, simultaneously, for both readings. To the immediate audience of Amos, the words speak of an end of prophecy. To the eternal audience of the Jewish people through the generations, it speaks to one potential end-of-days scenario.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will continue our study of Amos’s eschatological (or not) visions.

1. The Midrash ends up associating the expounded verse with Aharon, thus connecting it with the base text at *Vayikra* 8:1, the sanctification of the priests*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Margaliot, *Vayikra Rabba*, Vol. 1, p. 197, footnote to line 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One unable to pronounce certain letters, stammerer (Jastrow). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Tehillim* 105:16; compare with *II Melakhim* 8:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Toledot* 64; *Bereishit* 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also *Otzar Ha-midrashim* (Eisenstein), *Hallel*, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This phrase usually refers to the “return” to Yavneh in the middle of the 2nd century CE; however since the rabbis credit the first Yavneh generation with the composition of *Eduyot*, one might argue that this *tosefta* refers to the 1st-century establishment of the academy there. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)