**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 #85:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF DOOM**

**A THIRST FOR GOD’S WORD (8:11-14)**

**PART 2:**

**THE SEARCH (verses 12-13)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we began our study of Amos’s end-of-days scenario, which includes God’s sending a famine to the land (the Land of Israel? the earth?): “not a famine for bread nor a thirst for water, rather [a thirst] for the word of God” (verse 11). The next two verses present the consequences of that anticipated hunger/ thirst for God’s word. We will address these two verses here. In next week’s *shiur*, we will revisit the standard translation of v. 11 and propose an alternative reading which significantly impacts on our understanding of this prophecy.

**THE TEXT**

*Vena’u mi-yam ad yam*

They shall wander from sea to sea,

Who will wander and who will run to and fro? The undefined subject here would imply a broad or all-encompassing movement — to wit: “everyone will wander; all will run to and fro, seeking God’s word.” However, the next verse may help focus on (or limit) the group of wanderers. We will address the possible meanings of “*mi-yam ad yam”* below, within the larger question of the reach of this prophecy.

The root *nun-vav-ayin* (translated here as “wander”) is perhaps best known to us from the punishment meted out to Kayin for his crime of fratricide:

***Na*** *va-nad tihyeh va-aretz*

You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth (*Bereishit* 4:12)

In this usage, *noa* generates a sense of aimlessness – Kayin isn’t **going anywhere specific**, he is just exiled.

In some cases, the verb takes on a particularly undisciplined sense of movement. In *Tehillim* 107, for instance, the sailors who cannot control their storm-tossed ship are described as staggering like drunkards (v. 27):

*Yachogu* ***ve-yanu’u*** *ka-shikor ve-khol chokhmatam titbala*

They reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits' end.

This sense of “staggering” is perhaps most clearly used by Yeshayahu:

***Noa******tanua*** *eretz ka-shikor vehitnodeda ka-meluna vekhaved aleha pishah venafela ve-lo tosif kum*

The earth will stagger around like a drunk; it will sway back and forth like a hut in a windstorm. Its sin will weigh it down, and it will fall and never get up again. (*Yeshayahu* 24:20)

It would be difficult to read our “wandering” as aimless, insofar as the entire purpose of their movement is to find God’s word; “reeling” or “staggering” might fit better, as we will see further on.

*U-mitzafon ve-ad mizrach*

And from north to east;

The “north” in prophetic rhetoric is often an allusion to Mesopotamia (see, e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 1:13-15). That does make *mizrach* (east, literally the direction where the sun rises) a bit puzzling — does this mean that people will wander to Jordan, looking for God’s word? A more reasonable approach would be to assume these directions as being boundaries of the Land, within which seeking God’s word is a “reasonable” search. It would mean that they would search from the northern boundary of the Land (Chamat?) and to the eastern border (the Jordan River? Jericho?). That may help us understand the previous clause, *“mi-yam ad yam,”* “from sea to sea.” ibn Ezra explains:

They will travel from the Reed Sea, which is south of the Land of Israel, to the Great (Mediterranean) Sea at the setting of the sun (i.e. west).

Radak favorably quotes ibn Ezra and adds:

[Amos] mentions the four directions; behold, in the Land of Israel they will not find words of prophecy, all the more so outside of the Land during days of exile.

There are, however, several problems with understanding one of the “seas” as the Reed Sea, *Yam Suf*. First of all, it is never referenced as a border of Israel — the southern border (in the expanded version of *Bereishit* 15) is the “River of Egypt” (Nehar Mitzrayim or Nachal Mitzrayim), regarding which there are a number of well-respected opinions (the Nile Delta, Wadi El-Arish among others). Secondly, the south is not typically mentioned as a direction of wandering; when the intent is Egypt, that country is explicitly identified (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 27:13). When the psalmist speaks to the (anticipated) ingathered exiles (*Tehillim* 107:2-3), he omits the south, mentioning the west twice (*yam* [seaward, i.e. to the Mediterranean] and *ma’arav* [to the direction where the sun sets]).

Finally, and most significantly, the phrase *mi-yam ad yam* appears in two other places in *Tanakh*; and in both of those passages, the meaning is almost assuredly a metaphorical way of indicating “everywhere” and not specifically pointing to any delineated body of water:

*Veyeird mi-yam ad yam u-minahar ad afsei aretz*

He will rule from sea to sea and from the river until the ends of the earth (*Tehillim* 72:8)

Commentators are divided as to whether this psalm describes (in hopeful/ prayerful terms) the rule of Shelomo, as per the superscription (72:1, *li-Shlomo*) or if it anticipates the Messianic ruler. (See ibn Ezra and Radak at 72:1 and throughout the rest of the psalm.)

The other mention of *mi-yam ad yam* is surely helpful here and would seem to favor the Messianic interpretation of the phrase in this psalm:

*Gili me’od bat Tziyon, hari’i bat Yerushalayim,*

*Hinei malkeikh yavo lakh, tzadik ve-nosha hu*

*Ani ve-rokheiv al chamor ve-al ayir ben atonot*

*Vehikhrati rekhev mei-Efrayim ve-sus mi-Yrushalayim*

*Venikhreta keshet milchama*

*Vedibber shalom la-goyim*

*Umoshelo* ***mi-yam ad yam***

*U-minahar ad afsei aretz*

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,

Humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of jennets.

I will cut off the chariot from Efrayim and the war horse from Jerusalem;

And the battle bow shall be cut off,

And he shall command peace to the nations;

His dominion shall be **from sea to sea,**

And from the river to the ends of the earth. (*Zekharya* 9:9-10).

This prophecy is certainly Messianic. As I have argued earlier, this section of *Zekharya* dates to Amos’s period, which may impact on our understanding of the phrase in Amos. We cannot properly date *Tehillim* 72, but if we ascribe it to David (dedicated to his son upon taking the throne; see ibn Ezra’s first approach at 72:1), this may be the “source-text” from which both Amos and Zekharya, sharing the spirit of eschatological longing and anticipation, borrow the image. (Conversely, if the psalm is later, it would have likely taken the phrase from *Zekharya*).

Prof. Meir Weiss (see For “Further Study”) cites Prof. Y. A. Zeligman’s suggestion that the phrase “*mi-yam ad yam u-minahar ad-afsei-aretz”* may be Mesopotamian in origin, a poetic way of saying “to the four corners of the earth”. His suggestion is that the original intent of *yam ad yam* is the Mediterranean (seen as the westernmost border of land within the potential empire) to the Persian Gulf. In any case, “the river” in *Tanakh* invariably alludes to the Euphrates (see *inter alii* *Yehoshua* 24:2, *Bereishit* 15:18) and “the ends of the earth” likely extends northwest into Aram (modern day Syria/ Turkey. Alternatively, as Gressman[[1]](#footnote-1) argues, “the river” is the central point and “the ends of the earth” radiate out in every direction as far as can be imagined.

As such, we seem to be better served by understanding *mi-yam ad yam* as a poetic manner of expressing “everywhere” or “the four corners of the earth,” among other Biblical means of expressing “everywhere.” Therefore, we would read our passage as prognosticating an omnidirectional (as opposed to strictly quadridirectional) search for the word of God. Whether this search stretches from one end of the Land to the other or to all ends of the earth is something we will need to address after we have analyzed the entire prophecy. The fundamental question which needs to be resolved in order to define the geographical borders of the search is this: is this passage essentially a particularistic Jewish eschaton or a universal one? We will pick this broader issue up below.

*Yeshotetu le-vakesh et devar Hashem*

they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord,

*Ve-lo yimtza’u*

but they shall not find it.

The verb *shin-tet-tet* here is presented as the parallel to *noa*, which we analyzed above. The words, however, are not synonymous. The verb *shotet*, attested to in one form or another seventeen times in *Tanakh*, generally takes on a meaning of “search,” more like “search high and low.” For instance, Yirmeyahu challenges his audience:

***Shotetu*** *be-chutzot Yerushalayim u-ru na u-du u-vakshu vi-rchovoteha im timtze’u ish im yeish oseh mishpat mevakesh emuna va’eslach lah*

**Run to and fro** through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her. (*Yirmeyahu* 5:1)

Similarly, when David sends Yoav on the ill-advised mission to take an unwarranted census of the army, he commands his chief of staff:

*…****Shut*** *na be-khol shivtei Yisrael mi-Dan ve-ad Be’er Sheva u-fikdu et-ha-am veyadati et mispar ha-am*

…"**Go through** all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Be’er Sheva, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people." (*II Shemuel* 24:2)

Indeed, this is what they do:

***Vayashutu*** *be-khol ha-aretz…*

So when they had **gone through** all the land… (ibid. v. 8)

At first blush, it would seem that our descriptors are operating against each other. Is the wandering going to be aimless, staggering like a drunkard — or a focused search mission to find the word of God? This tension may lie at the heart of the prophecy, once we get a clearer picture of its intent. We will discuss this further in next week’s shiur.

The matched verbs *bet-kuf-shin* and *mem-tzadi-alef* (“seek” and “find” respectively) are common in *Tanakh*, both in the sense of looking for an item (Shaul goes out “*le-vakesh”* his father’s donkeys; he is informed that “*nimtza’u,”* they have already been found in *I Shemuel* 10:2) as well as seeking information (the allegations against Bigtan and Teresh are investigated, “*vayvukash ha-davar*,” and are found to be true, “*vayimatzei”*). These two meanings coalesce in the passage from *Yirmeyahu* 5 cited above:

***Shotetu*** *be-chutzot Yerushalayim u-ru na u-du u-vakshu vi-rchovoteha im timtze’u ish im yeish oseh mishpat mevakesh emuna va’eslach lah.*

Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! **Search** her squares to see if you can **find** a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her.

This pair of verbs is also used in the context of seeking God. Hoshea prophesizes, in an image that resonates with our prophecy all too well:

*Be-tzonam u-vivkaram yelekhu* ***le-vakesh*** *et Hashem ve-lo* ***yimtza’u*** – *chalatz mei-hem*.

With their flocks and herds they shall go to **seek** the LORD, but they will not **find** Him; He has withdrawn from them. (*Hoshea* 10:6)

Just as in our vision, they will go to **seek** Hashem but will not **find** Him.

This usage seems to be anchored in the hopeful turn in the frightening warning of Moshe regarding exile:

*Uvikashtem mi-sham et Hashem Elokekha* ***umatzata*** *ki tidreshenu be-khol levavekha u-vkhol nafshekha*

But from there you will **seek** the Lord your God, and you will **find** him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. (*Devarim* 4:29)

Reading our vision (and that of Hoshea, above) in the light of *Devarim*, are we to conclude that those seeking God and not finding Him are failing due to their lack of focus — they are not seeking God with all of their heart and all of their soul? Or are we to take a hint from Hoshea’s words and presume that things have gotten appreciably worse than the prophecy of *Devarim* and God has, indeed, “abandoned” the people and will not be found by them no matter how straight and intense their desire? Whereas Hoshea’s vision seems to lean towards the latter (“*chalatz mei-hem”),* a correct reading of Amos’s *eschaton* hangs in the balance.

*Ba-yom ha-hu titalafna ha-betulot ha-yafot*

On that day, the beautiful maidens will faint

*Ve-habachurim ba-tzama*

And the young men [will faint] from thirst

The verb *hitalef* (in the reflexive) appears (in all forms) five times in *Tanakh*; its basic meaning is “to be completely covered,” as in *Shir Ha-shirim* 5:14’s “*me’ulefet sapirim,*” “overlaid with sapphires.” In all other mentions, however, it takes on the (borrowed?) meaning of “being so covered as to have one’s senses obscured” (BDB) — or to “swoon away.”

Even though, using forward gapping, both the maidens and the young men are described with this verb, it takes on the feminine conjugation, *titalafna* (as opposed to *yitalefu)* — despite the general rule in Hebrew grammar that a mixed group assumes the masculine conjugation. The simple explanation of this is that because the *betulot* are mentioned first and the verb is elided in the context of the *bachurim*, the feminine verb is used.[[2]](#footnote-2) Beyond this, it is likely because, as we will see below, the impact of the young women suffering thus is a more painful image

The *bachur* (young man) and *betula* (literally “virgin;” but in these usages, typically “young maiden”) are a common enough pair in *Tanakh*. Sometimes they are one half of a couplet with the aging/ infant pair as part of a merismus, indicating that all will be affected:

*Gam bachur gam betula, yoneik im ish seiva*

Both young man and young woman, suckling and elderly man. (*Devarim* 32:25)

In several places, like ours, only the young are mentioned —

*…shimu na kol ha-amim u-ru makhovi,* ***betulotai******u-vachurai*** *halekhu ba-shevi*

…but hear, all you peoples, and behold my suffering; **my maidens** and **my young men** have gone into captivity. (*Eikha* 1:18)

There is a particularly painful image, seeing the young men, vital and robust, with their whole lives ahead of them, being taken into captivity. It is specifically the tarnishing of physical beauty which underscores the pain of defeat.

It is perhaps significant that when these two appear as part of a larger all-encompassing grouping,[[3]](#footnote-3) the *bachur* is mentioned first. On the other hand, when only these two are mentioned, highlighting either the boundless joy of youth or the epic tragedy of young lives taken, the *betulot* appear first. Such is the case in *Eikha* 1:18[[4]](#footnote-4) and such is the case in our passage. This is likely because these passages are not about an all-inclusive web; rather they highlight the impact of seeing the robust youth in their celebration or the tragic upheaval of devastation. This is most clearly highlighted among the *betulot*. They are likely referred to that way (as opposed to *ne’arot* or *almot*) as it highlights either the promise of impending marriage and family — or the painful extinguishment of that bright future.

As this is the case, since our “famine” is a dearth of God’s word and the hunger is intellectual/ spiritual — why highlight the young men and women?

Radak addresses this oddity and proposes that

Even the young maidens and young men who are generally engaged in worldly pleasures will have such a thirst for the word of God in order to hear it, for the long time that it has been deprived from them, that they will greatly lust for it.

This fits with Radak’s overall approach to this vision (mentioned above) that the envisioned “famine” is to take place with the cessation of prophecy, during the Second Commonwealth.

Since we have taken the path of the *midrashim* that this vision is eschatological, it cannot refer to a cessation of prophecy; rather, something else is meant by *devar Hashem*. If we were to imprint Radak’s approach onto the vision as we see it, it would mean that suddenly people in the prime of their youth would search wide and far for God’s word and, unable to find it, would become faint from this thirst.

(Note: several observers of the “seeking” impulses of the 1960’s culture which led many young Jews to the Far East and other exotic places like to point to our vision as being realized in the late twentieth century. Besides the fact that this “seeking” was short-lived, by and large with disastrous results, and that it was in no means confined to the Jewish community, there are numerous other reasons to reject this identification. A more detailed rejoinder belongs to a paper on Jewish sociology, not here).

Indeed, the imagery here is graphic to a point where we seem to have lost sight of the search. No matter how far we want to take the parable of Torah as water and the word of God as nourishment, describing specifically young men and women as fainting from hunger and thirst is contextually discordant. It seems that the prophet himself is seeking the words and cannot find them — he seems to be like the “wanderer” who has lost his way. This is, of course, not the case: it is we who have not followed him accurately.

This conundrum seems to be the reason that Paul (in *Mikra Le-Yisrael*) separates this verse from the previous two and sees verses 11-12 as a vision about a thirst for God; verses 13-14 are, for him, a distinct prophecy about a literal thirst that will leave the young people swooning and fainting. I don’t think that this sectioning off is necessary or even recommended.

In the next *shiur*, I will suggest a different approach to this prophecy and vision, keeping all four verses within one piece (as the Masoretic apportioning indicates) and solving the fainting of the young beautiful maidens and the young men.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY:**

*“Mi-yam ad yam*”

Meir Weiss, *The Bible and Modern Literary Theory* [Heb.: *Ha-mikra Ki-dmuto*] (Jerusalem: 1987), pp. 180-186.

1. See Weiss ibid. fn. 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g. *Bereishit* 33:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. *Yirmeyahu* 51:20, *Tehillim* 78:63-64 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A careful reading of *Eikha* 2:21 leads to the same result: the elders and youths starve “*ba-chutzot,”* whereas “*betulotai u-vachurai”* are slaughtered and die by the sword. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)