**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 #87:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF DOOM**

**A THIRST FOR GOD’S WORD (8:11-14)**

**PART 4:**

**THE GUILTY (verse 14)**

We devoted last week’s *shiur* to re-reading the prophecy of the “famine” as a… prophecy of a famine. Instead of seeing the metaphor of a “thirst for the words of Hashem” as the **exclusive** experience of the famine, we argued that the phrasing “***lo… ve-lo… ki im”*** sometimes means “**not only… nor only… but also**,” suggesting that this is the most reasonable read of 8:11. We based the argument on interpretive traditions that read the vision as one of a “real” famine alongside a spiritual thirst. In addition, there were intratextual issues that led us to that conclusion.

We can now pick up where we left off in the *shiur* prior (#85) and conclude our study of this vision and our study of Chapter 8. After the prophecy foretells of a great famine and we learn that people will wander and search to the ends of the earth? land?, we hear of the swooning of the young maidens and the young men from thirst. This leads us to the final verse.

SWEARING BY THE LIFE OF…

Before beginning our analysis of the text itself, we should note that the accusation which identifies the guilt of the audience references taking oaths in the names of foreign gods. Since this practice is not as prominent on the contemporary landscape, a word or two of contextual introduction is in order.

When the Torah mentions its severe ban on idolatry, one of the recurring issues addressed is swearing by the name of other gods. Indeed, *Chazal* legislate against entering into a partnership with a pagan,[[1]](#footnote-1) for fear that as a result, the Jew may be forced to go to the pagan court to settle a dispute and may be pressured to swear in the name of the local (foreign) deity. The halakhic direction is not to **avoid** swearing per se, but to maintain such an utter distance from pagan deities so as not to even mention their names. Indeed, the Torah **obligates** us to swear in Hashem’s Name:

Fear the Lord your God, worship Him; cleave to Him and swear by His Name.

Although we might see this as **permission** to use God’s Name in an (appropriate) oath, it is viewed by those who calculate the enumeration of *mitzvot* as a positive commandment.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In general, an oath is taken to establish credibility. The reason that someone would associate the oath with the “life” or “soul” of a being depends on which being is the referent of the oath.

Occasionally, the oath is prefaced and formalized by stating “by the life/ soul of” the king/ leader in front of whom the oath is being taken (e.g. *I Shemuel* 1:26; ibid. 17:55 and, with a twist of irony, *II Shemuel* 11:11). The earliest instance of this in *Tanakh* is in *Bereishit* 42:15-16 when Tzafnat Paneiach (Yosef) swears “by the life of Pharaoh” (perhaps meaning “as Pharaoh lives” — or “Pharaoh **will** live if this is true” — see below) that the brothers will not leave without their youngest brother coming down.

There are two ways to see an oath of this sort. Besides Rashi (ibid. v. 15), who claims that whenever Yosef wants to engage in subterfuge, he invokes Pharaoh’s name (but see *Ha-ketav Ve-hakabbala* ad loc.), there is a dispute among grammarians as to how to read this. According to some, the intent is “just as Pharaoh is alive now, so too this statement is true,” in which case the oath is being associated with a fact that is undeniable and the mention of the monarch is a way of showing him honor. This is the direction adopted by, among others, Radak.

Shadal disagrees and maintains that *chei* (*chet* with a *tzeirei* and *yud*) means “will live”, as in the phrase *“Ve-chei achikha imakh,”* “And your brother will live with you” (*Vayikra* 25:36). He understands that the person taking the oath is demonstrating his absolute fealty to and love for the monarch, by invoking the curse of that monarch’s death if his words prove to be untrue.[[3]](#footnote-3) In what would appear to be the most extreme method of showing such loyalty, both the leader’s name and God’s Name (see next section) are invoked, as in David’s intensified oath to Yonatan about Shaul’s designs on his life:

*…Ve-ulam* ***chai Hashem ve-chei nafshekha*** *ki khe-fesa beini u-vein ha-mavet*

…But **by the life of the Lord and by your life**, there is but a step between me and death. (*I Shemuel* 20:3)

This doubled formula surely underscores David’s closeness with Yonatan.

The most intense use of this doubled formula is Elisha’s refusal to leave Eliyahu’s side as his teacher moves closer to his “removal from this world” (II *Melakhim* 2: 2, 4, 6). This again demonstrates Elisha’s intense connection with — and adoration for — his master.[[4]](#footnote-4)

More frequently, an oath is taken “by the life of the Lord”, as per the halakhic prescription mentioned above. This is, of course, the only “oath-referent” that would be mandated *ab initio* in any formal halakhic setting. The intent of this is apparently “just as God lives, so these words are true” — i.e. the person taking the oath is associating the veracity of his claim with the universally understood truth of God’s existence. This seems to be the intent of the phrase in *Vayikra* 19:12: “Do not swear in My Name falsely, and do not profane the Name of your God, I am the Lord.” As ibn Ezra explains (extended commentary to *Shemot* 20:6):

Someone who invokes the Name over something and does not fulfill it, it is as if he has denied the Name; for the reason that he mentioned it is this: “Just as the Lord is true, so will my words.”

Thus, if someone swears that something **is** true, just as if he swears that he **will do it** (or **will avoid it),** and his words prove to be false, by associating God with his words, he indirectly denies the truth of God’s existence and thereby profanes God’s Name.

Ibn Ezra uses this model to proffer a different explanation to “swearing in the name of king”, discussed above. He sees the two on a continuum and explains as follows:

The custom among Egyptians until this very day is that if a man swears by the head of the king and then doesn’t fulfill his words, he is sentenced to death. Even if he gives his weight in gold as a ransom, he will not be allowed to live, since he publicly degraded the king. If this is true about a flesh-and-blood king, whose beginnings are ignoble and whose rule and end are all vanity, how much more so that a person should be careful that his tongue should not trip him up to cause himself to sin.

We can now get a clearer understanding of the Torah’s strong animadversion against swearing (or even invoking) the names of pagan gods. By doing so, the person is staking the truth of his own words on the truth of their existence, power and rule.

THE TEXT

*Ha-nishba’im be-ashmat Shomeron*

These are the ones who now take oaths in the name of the sinful idol goddess of Samaria.

(Literally: Who swear by the guilt of Samaria.)

The meaning of *ashmat Shomeron* (a *hapax legomenon*) is not at all clear, although it is fairly evident that it some form of foreign deity.

Radak (ad loc.) is the only one among the medieval commentators to address its meaning, and even his analysis is incomplete. Without explaining the meaning of the words *ashma* here, he does define *ashmat Shomeron* as

…the [Golden] Calf which is in Beit El; he associates it with Shomeron because the capital of the kingdom of Efrayim (Israel) is Shomeron. The kings are the ones who support the “worship of the calves,” and the people follow them.

This comment is difficult. Not only does Radak not explain the meaning of *ashma* here, but his explanation seems a bit forced. Why would the people swearing by the calf in Beit El refer to it as *ashmat Shomeron* and not *ashmat* [sic] *Beit El*; or, if the prophet wanted to get a “dig” in, *ashmat Beit Aven*.

Furthermore, if the southern worship site is associated with Shomeron, why does the northern site get called *elohekha* ***Dan*** below? Finally — and this is a much larger issue which impacts not only on our verse but on several verses in *Hoshea* as well — is the worship at Beit El really foreign worship, literal *avoda zara*? Is idolatry the focus at those sites? Remember that Yerovam I sets them both up as alternatives to the Temple, and the Golden Calf constructed at each place is inaugurated with the words *“Hinei elohekha Yisrael, asher he’elukha mei-eretz Mitzrayim,”* “Behold your god, Israel, who took you up out of Egypt” (*I Melakhim* 12:28). Although idolatry is subsequently introduced in the north (as it is, tragically, in Yehuda), it isn’t at all clear that this is the focal point of worship at Beit El and Dan, nor the purpose of the calves.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Hakham[[6]](#footnote-6) suggests that *ashmat Shomron* might be a degrading play on words, referring to the tree standing in Shomeron from the onset of the current dynasty of Yehu *(II Melakhim* 13:6). This interpretation does not suffer from either of the challenges above; the reference is to a real idolatrous icon which stands in Shomeron. Degrading wordplay in *Tanakh* to belittle idolatry is famous — for instance, renaming *Ba’al Zevul* (Master of the High Place) to *Ba’al Zevuv* (Lord of the Flies). It does suffer from asymmetry, as the next, seemingly parallel rebuke is against those who swear by the god of Dan, which does refer to that worship site. Nevertheless, considering that this verse contains a tristich — (*1) Ashmat Shomron, 2) Chei elohekha Dan, 3) Chei derekh Be’er Sheva* — that may make the lack of parallel less problematic. That the *asheira*-worship might itself be called an *ashma* is supported by *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:18:

And they forsook the house of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and served the ***asheirim*** and the idols; and wrath came upon Yehuda and Yerushalayim for this their guiltiness (***be-ashmatam*** *zot*).

Further support may come from an inscription found in the northern Sinai, dated to the beginning of the 8th century BCE, which references an *asheira* in Shomeron which salutes “Y-H-V-H, Shomeron and his *Asheira*.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Haim Beinart, in his article in the *Biblical Encyclopedia,*[[8]](#footnote-8) suggests that the referent in our verse may be Ashima, listed among the foreign gods brought to Shomeron by the transplants from Chamat (*II Melakhim* 17:30). This deity is well-attested in northern Syria (Chamat is in northern Syria; these transplants are part of the Assyrian population transfer after the conquest of Shomeron in c. 722 BCE). It is possible, suggests Beinart, that Ashima-worship had already made its way to Shomeron before the Assyrian conquest.

*Ve-ameru chei elohekha Dan*

They vow, 'As surely as your god lives, O Dan,'

For Radak (and those who follow him), who maintains that *ashmat Shomeron* refers to the Golden Calf at Beit El, this phrase needs nearly no explanation. Why the devotee would use the second person suffix, *elohe****kha*** instead of *eloh****ai*** (“my god”) or just *eloh****ei*** (“the god of”), is unclear. Radak opines that this is how one worshipper would swear to his fellow, presuming and building on the fealty of his friend.

Hakham (*Da’at Mikra* ibid.) suggests that this may have been the common way of referring to the calf in Dan, based on the inaugural declaration, “*hinei elohe****kha*** *Yisrael*.”

Parenthetically, it is possible and even likely that the actual words that someone swearing by the deity at Dan would say would be *chai* (rhymes with “high”) *elohekha Dan*, instead of *chei* (rhymes with “hay”); but since that vocalization is used exclusively when we swear by Hashem’s name (see Shadal’s comments above), the prophet makes the mild and possibly unnoticed switch to avoid having those phrases pass his lips.

*Ve-chei derekh Be’er Sheva*

Or 'As surely as the way to Be’er Sheva lives’

We’ve already discussed the possible significance of Beer Sheva as a worship site, even though it is in Yehuda’s territory (and theoretically settled by members of the tribe of Shimon). The northern tribes would have revered it as part of their “ancestral worship” which helped to justify the sanctification of older sites like Beit El (Ya’akov), Dan (Avraham) and Gilgal (Yehoshua). Swearing by the “way” or “road” to Be’er Sheva, however, is a bit odd.

Rav Yosef Kara suggests that people would not only swear by their worship-destination (Beit El, Dan) but also by the road that took them there. This is difficult on three counts. First of all, where do find such a notion: that the road **to** the sanctified spot takes on its own holiness? Secondly, the road to Be’er Sheva, if anything, leads away from both worship sites — except for someone coming from Arad (or Eilat?). Finally, since this rebuke is fully and unequivocally aimed at the northern population, what would be the relevance of the road to Be’er Sheva?

Radak contends further:

They would walk from Be’er Sheva, which is at the end of the territory, to the calf in Dan which is at the other end of the territory, as it says “From Dan to Be’er Sheva” (e.g. *I Shemuel* 3:20, *II Shemuel* 24:15). Since they were so attached to the worship of the calves, they thought that they would get a good rewards if they went to worship the one that was in Dan, as it says: “The people went to the one in Dan” and they would swear “by the life of the one to whom we walked on the road to Be’er Sheva.”

The difficulties here are discernible. The notion of *sekhar halikha*, the merit one accrues for traveling towards a destination for a sacred purpose, is not universal; the whole purpose of Yerovam’s establishing two “outposts” for worship is to make a pilgrimage convenient (as a way of keeping the people from going to Yerushalayim to worship). Assuming that people would come from southern Yehuda to worship in the north — and go all the way to Dan — is a strained proposition.

As I mentioned above, it seems from Amos’s earlier prophecy (5:5) that the northern tribes revered Be’er Sheva. I’d like to suggest that because getting there was both arduous and perhaps treacherous (passing the border with Yehuda), they longingly looked at the road **to** Be’er Sheva (i.e. from the north) as the “best that they could do” and revered that in lieu.

*Venafelu ve-lo yakumu od*

But they will fall down and not get up again.”

This phrase is all too familiar to us from 5:2:

*Nafela lo tosif kum betulat Yisrael*

She has fallen, the maiden of Yisrael, and will never arise again.

Another clever rhetorical flair employed here by Amos will only resonate with the audience that recalls his words at 5:2. In the previous verse, he mentions the *betulot ha-yafot* who will swoon and faint from the thirst. Even though those are to be understood as real young women, he now has the “corporate maiden” — the People of Israel — falling. This only makes sense while keeping the earlier mention of falling and not being able to get up in mind. We continue to be amazed and impressed by Amos’s linguistic deftness and oratorial brilliance.

We have concluded our study of this prophecy; in next week’s *shiur*, we will begin our study of the last chapter of Amos, beginning with the vision at 9:1.

1. BT *Bekhorot* 2b; Rambam, *Hilkhot Shutafin* 5:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambam, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot,* Positive #7; *Yere’im* #267, 315; *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* #108; *Sefer Ha-chinnukh* #435. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This second approach is closer to the direction taken by Rashi, albeit with an obvious caveat [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In what seems to be a deliberate twist, the phrase is used once more — by the Shunamite woman who, when her son is in need of Elisha’s miraculous intervention, swears “*Chai Hashem ve-chei nafshekha im e’ezveka,”* “By the life of the Lord and by your life, I will not go away from you” *(II Melakhim* 4:30). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. But see *Hoshea* 10:5. We will discuss this in our forthcoming series on *Hoshea*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Da’at Mikra,* p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Shmuel Ahituv, *Collection of [Ancient] Hebrew Inscriptions*, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Encyclopedia Mikra’it* (Jerusalem: 1950), Vol. 1, p. 762 [Heb.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)