**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**

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**Shiur #90:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF DOOM**

**THE FIFTH VISION (9:1-6)**

**PART 3:**

**YOU CAN RUN…BUT YOU CANNOT HIDE (verses 2-4)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we examined the opening verse of this prophecy, focusing on the unique presentation of God as directly uttering not only threats, but also commands to (perhaps) a member of the heavenly retinue to carry out His terrifying punishment and devastation. We noted that it is not clear which building is the focal object of His destructive directives – whether the *Mikdash* in Beit-El, **the** *Mikdash* in Yerushalayim, or a metaphoric building. We also raised the possibility that the altar that God was envisioned as standing next to or on top of was in Yerushalayim, but the building He was slating for demolition was the one in Beit-El. We then discussed the difficult phrases and somewhat inscrutable imagery that the rest of the verse painted – leaving us unsure of just how far and wide this impending punishment was to affect and who would be the ones “at the front and at the rear” who would not be spared.

Verses 2-4 seem to be an expansion of the second half of verse 1. As such, we will examine this section as a unit in this *shiur*. The following *shiur* (or two) will be devoted to analyzing the text of these verses in greater depth.

BEFORE THE TEXT…

Before examining the text, we ought to note that the objects of God’s anger in the previous verse are an unspecified group. Are all of them are officiants in the to-be-destroyed sanctuary, or is that group represented by the term *rosh* in the phrase *u-vetza’am be-****rosh*** *kulam*? In that case, who are the *acharit* who will be slayed by the sword?

In last week’s *shiur*, I shared Hadjiev’s suggestion that *be-rosh kulam* refers to the group standing in front (i.e. the lead priests) and the *acharit* is everyone standing behind them (lower level priests? non-priests who are observers?). If this is the case, then who are the people fleeing in our passage, hiding low and high, in caves, in the sea, and in captivity? I will suggest a modified version of Hadjiev’s approach further on that will address this issue and hopefully identify with greater clarity the failed runners of our verses.

THE TEXT

Since we are taking a panoramic view of this section, we will again present the entire text, with translation, before commenting:

***Im*** *yachteru ve-she’ol* Though they dig into Sheol,

***Mi-sham*** *yadi tikachem* From there shall My hand take them;

***Ve-im*** *ya’alu ha-shamayim* And though they climb up to heaven,

***Mi-sham*** *orideim* From there I will bring them down.

***Ve-im*** *yeichavu be-rosh ha-Karmel* And though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,

***Mi-sham*** *achapes u-lekachtim* from there I will search out and take them;

***Ve-im*** *yisatru mi-neged einai* And though they hide from My sight

*Be-karka ha-yam* at the bottom of the sea,

***Mi-sham*** *atzaveh et ha-nachash* There I will command the serpent,

*U-neshakham.* and it shall bite them

***Ve-im*** *yeilkhu va-shevi* And though they go into captivity

*Lifnei oiveihem*  before their enemies,

***Mi-sham*** *atzaveh et ha-cherev*  There I will command the sword,

*Ve-haragatam*  and it shall slay them;

*Ve-samti eini aleihem* And I will set My eyes upon them

*Le-ra’ah ve-lo le-tova*  For evil, and not for good.

THE TEXT PATTERN

The rhythm of this passage is clear. I have marked the refrain in bold:

***Im***(if)[location where they flee or are taken]*…*

***mi-sham***(from there) [God’s method of catching and punishing them]

There are five points of attack – the netherworld (below), the heavens (above), the top of the Carmel (above), the bottom of the sea (below),[[1]](#footnote-1) and, finally, captivity (neither above nor below). As we begin to explore these points, keep in mind that in the previous hemistich – which might be understood as a “header” – the *acharit* (laggers? followers?) would be killed by the sword. The same fate is listed in the last verse of our section as awaiting those who are taken into captivity. We will revisit this below.

Structurally, it is clear that verses 2 and 3 work as double-nested parallels. In other words, not only does each hemistich contain its own if-then parallel and not only does each hemistich parallel the other half of its verse, but each entire verse parallels the other. I am paraphrasing here:

V2: *if* they hide in Sheol 🡪 *from there* I will take them

  *If* they climb up to heaven 🡪 *from there* I will bring them down

V3: *if they* hide atop Carmel 🡪 *from there*  I will take them down

 *If* they hide in the sea 🡪*from there* I will command the snake…

A brief explanation is in order. The first hemistich of verse 2 presents the *location* where they would flee and *God’s reach* to get them there. Each of the four phrases is set up this way. This parallelism is *nested* within the larger parallel of the verse. In addition, the first half of verse 2 parallels the second half, forming a type of merismus, wherein both extremes are presented, implying that everything in between is included.

The same analysis is applicable to verse 3. Each of these, then, is a double-nested parallelism. They are “double-nested” because, as illustrated, verse 2 is a fairly perfect parallel with verse 3.

What we find odd about this couplet is not what it says but what it decidedly does *not* say. Whenever a biblical author speaks of four directions, it is invariably the four points of the compass.[[2]](#footnote-2) When the text deviates from this pattern, such as in *Tehillim* 107:3 (north, west, east, west) and above in *Amos* 8:12 (sea to sea, north to east), our ears hear the dissonance and look for an unexpected piece of information. In our case, Amos has gone far afield of our expected four directions; instead of describing flight to the four ends of the earth, he describes people doing the impossible (hiding in Sheol, climbing up to heaven, hiding at the bottom of the sea) or the foolhardy (hiding in a cave atop Mount Carmel).

Before examining Amos’s rhetorical purpose in using this surprising set of directions, we must also attend to the fifth and final place of flight – the prisoner of war camp of the invading enemy. Surprising as that is to us, for Amos’s audience it is a rhetorical slap in the face in at least four ways.

First of all, any biblical audience will assume that the double-couplet of directions, even if unusual (down-up-up-down) is complete and would not expect another *im…mi-sham*.

Second, the first four directions are all either humanly impossible or else seemingly symbolic (more on the symbolism of hiding in a cave on Mt. Carmel in the next *shiur*). The final one – being taken into captivity – is not only doable, it is a fate that will befall the Northern Kingdom within a few short decades. From the perspective of the contemporary audience, Amos is speaking impossibilities – likely meaning something either hyperbolic or metaphoric – and then suddenly “getting real.”

A third rhetorical twist is the essential act of being taken into captivity. This is not ever done willingly and, unlike the first four descriptions, cannot be an attempt to flee God.

The final irony is this: In the first four attempts to flee anticipated here, the person fleeing is trying to save himself from God’s wrath, and were it not for God chasing him and “taking him…bringing him down…taking him…commanding the serpent to bite him,” the person would succeed in his quest to be spared. In contrast, when someone is taken into captivity, *even if this were his preferred station* (over a life in hiding), he has already been “seized.” What further need is there for God to go after him?

SOLUTIONS TO THE CAPTIVITY PUZZLE

I would like to propose two distinct solutions to the captivity conundrum.

As I mentioned above, the same fate of death by the sword reserved for those taken into captivity is identified as the punishment to be meted out to the *acharit* in verse 1. Perhaps this is the *only* punishment awaiting “everybody else.” It is possible that the first four fleeing attempts are poetic-metaphoric, i.e. not “real,” and that only the final one is what will really happen to the people. In the first three fleeing attempts, God maintains that He will “take them” or “bring them down,” but not what He will do with them. The only one who is explicitly harmed is the one who went to the bottom of the sea – the serpent bites him. Putting the serpent’s bite aside for a moment, perhaps we should read the entire passage as follows (paraphrased for clarity and brevity):

I will smash those that are the leaders and will go after the rest with the sword. No matter where they try to flee (even if they would try to dig under the earth, climb to the heavens, hide in a cave on Mount Carmel, or hide under the sea), they will ultimately be taken into captivity and slaughtered there.

This would then solve another, lesser problem in verse 1. God commands a member of His heavenly retinue to strike the capitals of the columns and shake the threshold, which will bring the house down. Those who are *be-rosh kulam* (either the leaders or the ones standing in front) will be killed by the shards of the building or some other collateral result of the destruction. Those who are not killed by this *ra’ash* will then be killed by the sword. Which sword? Where is the sword here? We can now suggest that this sword is the same sword of the captors, explicated and defined in verse 4. The continuum is:

I will kill the last ones/rest of them by the sword 🡪 I will command the sword and it will kill them (🡪the captors will fulfill God’s directive by killing them in captivity)

Or perhaps more clearly:

The captors will kill them with the sword, unknowingly acting as God’s agents, as He commands the sword to kill them, fulfilling the opening threat – *ve-acharitam ba-cherev eherog*.

If the first four attempts to flee are not “real” but metaphoric, we ought to be able to explain the purpose of this odd interjection, standing as it does between God’s threat and the method of His fulfillment.

As I have argued earlier, this vision is part of Amos’s larger *eschaton*, which begins in the middle of chapter 8. One of the seminal verses in this end-of-days prophecy is the famine for the words of God (8:11-14). In that famine, which I proposed was envisioned as a literal deprivation of physical nutrition *along with* a thirst for God’s words, the starving people are depicted as wandering “from sea to sea and from north to east they search out” to find God’s words – to no avail (verse 12). No matter how we interpret those four directions (see shiur #30), there are *four points on the horizontal axis of the compass* listed there. The targeted and afflicted people will search **everywhere**, *seeking God*. In this next (matched) vision, the targeted population will attempt to *escape God* and try to disappear – i.e. to be **nowhere** by going to four points on the *vertical axis of the compass*. There is even a subtle set of parallels in the lists. Whereas the starving people will go *sea to sea*, the targeted people will flee *below ground* and *to the bottom of the sea*. And as the starving young men and women will go to the north and east, those fleeing God’s wrath will seek refuge on Mount Carmel (in the north) and in heaven. In ancient maps (as can be seen on the Medba map), east was always on the top, such that from the perspective of Amos’s audience, going to the east was going “up.”

In other words, it may be that the people aren’t really expected to try to run away from God, but that Amos wants to set up their anticipated reaction to sensing God’s fury in apposition to their predictable and inevitable reaction to God withholding His presence, as experienced through a drought and subsequent famine. These same people who will search high and low to “hear God’s word” when it is a matter of survival will do everything to avoid hearing God’s word when it comes to their accountability.

Alternatively, I would like to suggest that we read the four attempts to flee not as metaphor, but rather as hyperbole based on models with which Amos’s audience would have been familiar.

YONA, THE SHE’OL AND THE SEA

The image of someone trying to burrow to *She’ol* (the underworld or the grave) brings one character to mind from the same era and the same region.

Yona ben Amitai, who is mentioned only once outside of *Sefer Yona*, is a prophet operating in the north during the reign of Yerovam ben Yoash, more or less concurrently with Amos. Yona’s one prophecy recorded in *Melakhim* is directly about Yerovam and his envisioned military success. Furthermore, Yona hails from Gat Ha-Chepher, a northern town belonging to the tribe of Zevulun (per *Yehoshua* 19:13):

He [Yerovam ben Yoash] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Chamat as far as the Sea of the Araba, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Yona the son of Amitai the prophet, who was from Gat Chepher. (2 *Melakhim* 14:25)

Read in a straightforward fashion,[[3]](#footnote-3) the story of Yona and his failed attempt to flee from God (and God’s word!) would have been known in the kingdom at the time. Although a full treatment of the Yona story is significantly beyond the purview of this *shiur*, even a cursory read of his behavior on the boat makes it clear that Yona wishes to die (a wish he later explicates – twice – in the final chapter).

He continues to “go down” – down to Yafo, down to the boat, and down into the hold before going to sleep. In Hebrew, the pattern is even more telling:

***Va-yered*** *Yafo…****va-yered*** *bah…ve-Yona* ***yarad*** *el yarketei ha-sefina…****va-yerad****am.*

The use of the relatively rare *va-yeradam* (instead of the more common *va-yishan*) manipulates this series into a “3+1” pattern (which we discussed in the first *shiurim* on chapter 1). Yona’s true goal in “going down” is to “go down, to sleep (die).” Even in his prayer/psalm, he opens with recounting that he is calling out to God *mi-beten She’ol* – from the belly of the underworld/grave (*Yona* 2:3).

The association of fleeing “to the floor of the sea” cannot be clearer. In the story of Yona, God “appoints” (read “commands”) the fish to swallow Yona – then appoints/commands the fish to vomit him up on dry land. This comes daringly close to this description of our audience fleeing “down”:

And though they hide from My sight at the bottom of the sea,

There I will command the serpent and it shall bite them

ELIYAHU, CARMEL, AND THE HEAVENS

One generation earlier, a charismatic prophet and miracle-worker lived, preached, and taught would-be prophets in the Northern Kingdom. Perhaps the most storied of *nevi’im*, Eliyahu of Toshev in Gil’ad was another agent of Hashem who tried to flee from his responsibilities as a prophet and, like Yona,[[4]](#footnote-4) asked God to take his life (1 *Melakhim* 19:4).

Eliyahu’s most powerful and impressive moment was atop Mount Carmel, where he challenged the hundreds of prophets of Ba’al who served in Achav’s court and defeated them, leading to a temporary religious revival among the people and the immediate demise of these pagan practitioners (1 *Melakhim* 18:38-40). Immediately after that success, however, he fled from Izevel, who promised to kill him *by the sword*. His flight took him to Sinai/Chorev, where he came to “the cave” and then encountered God, who asked him, “What are you doing here, Eliyahu?” At the height of this interaction, Hashem rebuked Eliyahu for abandoning his mission and the people, and He then sent him back. In an eerie echo of our prophecy, God directed him:

And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Chazael to be king over Syria; and Yehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Avel-Mecholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And him who escapes from the sword of Chazael shall Yehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Yehu shall Elisha slay. (ibid. 19:15-17)

Amos’s description of someone hiding in a cave on Mount Carmel seems to conflate the two extremes of Eliyahu’s career – his astounding success in the name of God and his terror and flight to a cave where he encounters God.

Eliyahu leaves the earthly abode in an unprecedented fashion:

And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Eliyahu went up by a whirlwind into heaven. (2 *Melakhim* 2:11)

Amos seems to be referencing these two stories, one of which (Eliyahu) was certainly known to his audience. These are stories of agents of God, men worthy of prophecy, who nonetheless tried to flee God’s word – to no avail.

Using these images and evoking these larger-than-life characters should have had the effect of demonstrating to his audience the futility of trying to run from God. Wherever they try to run, “the Omnipresent has many executioners,”[[5]](#footnote-5) and they will ultimately end up at the sharp end of the captor’s swords.

1. In shiur #88, I pointed out the chiastic structure here, placing those “fleeing up and away” in the middle, at the nexus of the chiasmus. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. *BereishIt* 13:14; ibid. 28:14; *Devarim* 13:8 *Yeshayahu* 11:12, ibid. 49:12 (?). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If, following some who read the story as an extended metaphor, Yona’s flight to Tarshish and the rest never took place, it is still possible that the story – as such – would have been known. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Mekhilta*, *Shemot* 12:1, which compares and contrasts Yona and Eliyahu. See also *Pirkei de-Rebbi Eliezer* ch. 32, where Yona is identified as the son of the widow in Tzarefat whom Eliyahu revives. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BT *Ta’anit* 18b; see Adiel Schremer, “‘*The Lord Has Forsaken the Land’: Radical Explanations of the Military and Political Defeat of the Jews in Tannaitic Literature*,”,*Journal of Jewish Studies* 59:2 (Autumn 2008), pp.183–200 n. 25 for further references [↑](#footnote-ref-5)