**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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Sponsored by Adam and Nurit Lerer

in loving memory of Adam’s grandfather,   
Murray Lerer / Moshe Yitzchak Ben Avraham Aryeh Z”L

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**Shiur #91:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF DOOM**

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

**PART 4:**

**THE DEPTHS AND THE HEIGHTS (verse 2)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we took a broader view of verses 2-4, which detail the envisioned flight of the people (priests?) fleeing God’s wrath on the day of judgment. We pointed out the chiastic structure of verses 2-3, enveloping the heights (heavens, Mt. Carmel) with the depths (*She’ol*, depths of the sea), which led to verse 4, “fleeing” by being taken captive by the enemy (!?). I suggested that we might read verses 2 and 3 as alluding to the flights of two agents of God – Yona, who tried to escape God at the depths of the sea, and Eliyahu, who also tried to abandon his mission, only to find himself in a cave atop a mountain, and who ultimately was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. We also noted that the frightening rhythms of “kill here, and those who escape, find them and kill them as well until they are all slaughtered” is evocative of Hashem’s threatening promise to Eliyahu (while in that cave!) that Chaza’el will kill many and those who escape will be killed by Yehu (the king he was to anoint) and those who successfully flee Yehu’s sword will be killed by Elisha (whom Eliyahu was to anoint in his place).

We move from the bird’s-eye view to a worm’s-eye view. As promised in the last *shiur*, this *shiur* (and the next two) will be focused on a detailed analysis of these three verses; we will reference the last *shiur* throughout. I have kept the **refrain** of this bit of terrifying poetry marked as such.

THE TEXT

***Im*** *yachteru ve-she’ol*

Though they dig into Sheol,

THE *MACHTERET*

The root *chatar* appears only 10 times in the entire canon – twice as a noun (*machteret*) and the rest as a verb. As a noun, it takes on the meaning of a “break-in” of sorts, although it may allude to the actual act of forcing an opening into a wall. The most famous *machteret* in *Tanakh* is in *Shemot* 22:1. To get a better sense of its use and meaning, we will quote the entire passage:

*Ki yignov ish shor o seh u-tevacho o mekharo, chamisha bakar yeshalem tachat ha-shor ve-arba tzon tachat ha-seh. Im ba-****machteret*** *yimatzeh ha-ganav ve-huka va-meit, ein lo damim. Im zarcha ha-shemesh alav damim lo; shalem yeshalem im ein lo ve-nimkar be-gneivato. Im himatzei timatzei ve-yado ha-geneva mi-shor ad chamor ad seh chayim, shenayim yeshaleim.*

If a man steals an ox or a sheep and kills it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. If the thief is found **breaking in** and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt of bloodshed for him. If the sun has risen on him, guilt of bloodshed shall be for him; he shall make restitution. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the stolen property is found in his hand alive, whether it is ox, donkey, or sheep, he shall pay double. (*Shemot* 21:37-22:4)

Rashbam (at 22:1) concisely notes: “*Im ba-machteret* – at night.”

Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) provides a more expansion explanation. He uses *Iyov* 24:16 – *chatar ba-chosekh batim*” (they dig into houses in the dark) – to prove that a *machteret* can only happen at night:

Once the text follows it by saying “if the sun has risen on him,” we understand that a person who digs into a house will only do so at night, for he cannot do so during the day, as there are passersby who will see him…

R. Chezekiah b. Manoach (*Chizkuni* ad loc.) identifies the *machteret* as a *pirtzah* – i.e. a breach. It isn’t clear whether the burglar made the breach or found it.

Parenthetically, *Chazal* famously read the follow-up verse about the sun rising as metaphorically referring to clarity – i.e. “if the matter is as clear as day that the burglar is not a threat to the homeowner’s life, then his blood will be reckoned (*damim lo*).” The example given by the *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 72b) is that of a father coming to steal from his son. This interpretation leads to a dispute, with far-reaching consequences, between Rambam and Raavad as to the staying power of *peshat* in the face of *Midrash* *Chazal* (see *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Geneiva* 9:8, and Raavad there).

The other mention of *machteret* is in *Yirmiyahu*, and it apparently plays off of the *machteret* in the Law Code of *Parashat Mishpatim*. Yirmiyahu chastises the people for their sinful behavior and for innocent blood they have spilled:

*Gam be-khnafayikh nimtze’u dam nafshot evyonim nekiyim*

*Lo va-****machteret*** *metzatim, ki al kol eleh*

Even your clothes are stained with the lifeblood of the poor who had not done anything wrong; you did not catch them **breaking into your homes.** Yet, in spite of all these things you have done,[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, and Radak all explain the word *metzatim* as meaning “you found” (as per the translation here). Kara points to *Yechezkel* 16:58 for support of that suffix being used for the feminine second person.

All of these *Rishonim*, along with more recent commentators (e.g. Shadal), relate the mention of ***machteret*** here to *Shemot* 22:1. To quote Radak:

*Lo ba-machteret*: As it says: “If the thief is found breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt of bloodshed for him.” Yet you did not find them breaking in; why did you kill them? They were innocent people!

As a verb, *chatar* appears eight times, all but one in the oratory of the prophets. Five of these are found in *Yechezkel* (8:8 [x2], 12:5, 7, 12). All of them make reference to burrowing into a wall. All are “visionary.”

Yechezkel is brought, via a vision, from Bavel to Yerushalayim, and we see a city and a *Mikdash* that is at once familiar while quite strange. He is told to burrow through a wall of the courtyard in order to see for himself the abominations committed there (chapter 8). In a rather obscure set of commands, Yechezkel is told to sneak in “like a thief” and take the vessels of the *Mikdash* “before their eyes” and remove them (chapter 12). However we understand these difficult passages (somewhat par for the course in many sections of *Yechezkel*), the meaning of the verb is clear. It means “to break in surreptitiously” – i.e. like a thief. It involves making some sort of a breach in a wall and then using that opening to enter without being seen. The irony in chapter 12 is that he is to break in in this manner *le-eineihem* – before their eyes.

The one mention in *Ketuvim* is one we’ve already seen. Iyov’s final response to Eliphaz takes up chapters 23-24 and continues to decry the apparent lack of Divine justice in the world. In describing the activities of the wicked, he states:

From out of the city the dying groan, and the soul of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer.

There are those who rebel against the light, who are not acquainted with its ways, and do not stay in its paths.

The murderer rises in the dark, so that he may kill the poor and needy; and in the night he is as a thief.

The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight, saying, “No eye will see me”; and he disguises his face.

In the dark they **dig** through houses *(****chatar*** *ba-choshekh batim)*; by day they shut themselves up; they do not know the light.

For deep darkness is morning to all of them; for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness. (*Iyov* 24:12-17)

Again, the meaning of the verb is to burrow into a house secretly, with the aim of stealing from the house. In other words, all eight of the usages of *machteret-chatar* that we’ve seen so far have a consistent meaning – to dig, unseen (typically under cover of darkness), into a place in order to steal something from that house. *Yechezkel* 8 is the one minor exception, as he is told to burrow in in order to see something that would normally be inaccessible to his eyes – a form of *hezek re’iyah*, to borrow from the beginning of *Bava Batra*. Either way, the meaning is consistent.

All of which brings us to the other two usages, both in prophetic rhetoric. One of those is ours and the other is in *Yona*; neither of which fit the meaning we’ve established so far. In our passage in *Amos*, the people are envisioned as burrowing into She’ol (metaphorically or otherwise) in order to escape God’s eyes, as it were. This is consistent with the meaning we’ve established in one sense – they do not want to be seen. On the other hand, they are not looking to get *to* somewhere, in order to steal something. They are, rather, looking to get *away* from somewhere, to hide in the dark place. Why does Amos use *chatar* here? He could have used the verb *chafor* (dig) or *chavo* (hide), both of which are attested in the text. The latter, although it may be more apt,[[2]](#footnote-2) might be rejected on grounds of repetitiveness, since it is used in the next verse (*im yeichavu be-rosh ha-Karmel*), but *im yacheperu le-She’ol* would have seemingly fit more smoothly here.

Before proposing a solution, I’d like to point out one more anomaly about this phrase. The preposition that we would expect here would be “if they tunnel **into** She’ol” – *im yachteru* ***le-****She’ol* – but our verse reads *im yachteru* ***be-****She’ol* – “if they tunnel **within** She’ol.” It is possible that this unexpected preposition is used to match the rest of the double couplet:

*Im yachteru* ***be-****She’ol…*

*Ve-im ya’alu ha-Shamayim* [note – not *la-shamayim*]

*Ve-im yeichavu* ***be-****rosh ha-Karmel*

*Ve-im yeisatru mi-neged einai* ***be-****karka hayam*

The two verbs used in verse 3 of necessity take the preposition ***be*** (one cannot “hide to the top of the Carmel” or “hide from My eyes to the bottom of the sea”), and that impacts on our clause as well.

Yet there may be something else lurking below the surface here. Let’s first take a look at the one remaining use of *chatar.* It is certainly the one that is the poorest fit with the meaning we’ve established so far.

When the heroic sailors in *Sefer Yona*, insistent on saving their boat without sacrificing the Hebrew prophet, try in vain to navigate the stormy waters back to shore, the text reports:

***Va-yachteru*** *ha-anashim le-hashiv el ha-yabasha ve-lo yakholu, ki ha-yam holeikh ve-so’er aleihem*

Nevertheless, the men **rowed hard** to bring it to the land; but they could not; for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. (*Yona* 1:13)

The consensus of English translations (as well as the Aramaic Targum Yonatan) is represented here – “rowed hard” – which is a far cry from any meaning associated with the verb in the original. Yet it seems the only one that contextually fits.

The *Rishonim* attempt to explain how “rowing” can be represented by *yachteru*.

Rashi sees the use of the word as an analogy: “They toiled and worked hard *like someone who was digging a tunnel.*”

R. Yosef Kara sees it literally: “They were *digging* with their oars in order to bring the boat back to dry land due to the strong wind, but were unable” (similarly, ibn Ezra).

Radak expand on the use of the word: “They held onto the oars in order to bring the boat out (?) to dry land; for someone who holds the oar and moves it in the sea is like someone who is “digging in the sea”…

R. Eliezer of Beaugency has an intriguing observation:

*“Va-yachteru* – this way and that to find some way to bring the boat back to dry land so that [Yona] wouldn’t go with them and wouldn’t flee [with them] from the presence of God, because they thought that in that way they would repair the sin of his flight and that God would favor them.

It seems that he is sensitive to the unusual verb here. We would have expected *va-yashutu* (a boating term) or a word depicting hard work, as the translations would have it. He apparently feels that the choice of *va-yachteru* is intended to bring us back to that original *machteret*, a breach where someone is sneaking in and to avoid being seen. As such, the use of that verb tells a story about the sailors and their efforts. They are trying to remove the “thief” who is trying to escape into – **and within** – their boat (*va-yered* ***bah***– “he went down into [the boat]” – Yona 1:3).

R. Eliezer echoes that approach in his commentary on our verse:

*Im yachteru*: A *machteret* is in the depths; similarly, it is the way of boatmen, since they operate in the depths of the waters like people tunneling into houses, he calls it *chatira*, as in “the men ‘dug” to return to dry land” [the verse in Yona].

I would like to suggest that this is the background behind Amos’s deliberate use of this verb here. Yona effectively gave a new wrinkle to *yachteru* – it not only means sneaking **in,** but also sneaking **away**. This also offers a local explanation for the unexpected preposition ***be-****She’ol*. Someone who is trying to break **in** in order to take something and get out – the classic *machteret* – is trying to get in **there;** that’s where the desired item is to be found. On the other hand, someone who is trying to get in to get **away** isn’t aimed at that particular place – ***le-She’ol*** – but to just find somewhere within which to burrow ever deeper and remain interminably out of sight – ***be-****She’ol*.

***Mi-sham*** *yadi tikachem*

From there shall My hand take them;

The image of God’s hand coming down into She’ol to take these aspiring fugitives is something of an ironic twist on *Hoshea* 13:14, *mi-yad She’ol efdeim* – which is broadly translated as a rhetorical question: “Shall I redeem them from the grave?” All of the classical commentaries, however, render it as a statement of past kindnesses: “I **did** redeem them from the grave.”

What isn’t clear is what God will do with them after He has taken them. This will be true in the first three of these images – until we meet the snake that will bite those who try to hide at the bottom of the sea. As suggested in last week’s *shiur*, perhaps this all leads to the “real” punishment, stated in verse 4:

“I will command the sword and it will kill them”

It is also possible that the verb *lakach* here is leading us to the next prophetic figure whose story plays a role in Amos’s poetry – see the next section.

***Ve-im*** *ya’alu ha-shamayim*

And though they climb up to heaven,

In *Melakhim* II 2, the story of Eliyahu’s ascent to heaven is presented within the literary pattern of 3+1 with which we are already familiar from *Amos* (chapters 1-2). Elisha doggedly follows Eliyahu from Gilgal to Beit-El to Yericho, each a stop where Eliyahu bids farewell to his students, until they reach the Yarden, where he will leave this earth. In that story, which is titled ***be-ha’alot*** *Hashem et Eliyahu ha-Shamayim –* “When Hashem raised Eliyahu **up** to the heavens” – the verb *lakach* is used six times, in three pairs. Twice, the students tell Elisha that Hashem is “taking your master from your head today” (vv. 3, 5). Twice, Eliyahu talks about his own impending ascent as “my being taken” (*elakach –* v. 9; *lukach* – v. 10), and twice, the word is used in reference to “taking” Eliyahu’s cloak – once by Eliyahu (v. 8) and once, after Eliyahu’s ascent, by his disciple Elisha (v. 14). In both cases, the cloak is used to effect a split of the waters.

I would like to suggest that the use of *yadi* ***tikachem*** at the end of the previous clause leads into this clause and connects the Yona-image to the Eliyahu-image of going up to heaven.

Even though Eliyahu did not go up to heaven to escape from God, he did demonstrate a willingness to run away from his mission and even, like Yona, a desire to be rid of his mortal coil rather than continue his mission (*Melakhim* I 19:4).

These two figures, Eliyahu from two generations before Amos and Yona, an older contemporary of his, were well-known for the stories of their attempts to flee God’s mission. They serve as extreme examples and are useful, rhetorically, for Amos’s purpose in describing the impossibility and futility of flight from God.

***Mi-sham*** *orideim*

From there I will bring them down.

This final verb – *orideim* – says it all. This is not merely (if at all) a vertical direction; their high post will not stand for them and they will be brought down.

One final point before leaving this verse. The two stories of Yona and Eliyahu, as we see, are subtly interwoven into this verse, as well as the next (as we will discover in next week’s *shiur*). Just as the use of *yadi* ***tikachem***in the “She’ol unit” bridges to the Eliyahu allusion, similarly the ominous *orideim* turns us back to She’ol.

Another obvious and powerful example of the 3+1 literary pattern in *Tanakh* is found in the opening verses of *Yona*. When he gets up in response to God’s command, instead of going “up” towards Nineveh, his commanded destination and intended audience, he “goes down” three times:

***Va-yered*** *Yafo…****va-yered*** *bah…****yarad*** *el yarketei ha-sefina…va-yishkav* ***va-yeradam****.* (*Yona* 1:3, 5)

The first three all mean “go down” using the same root as ours – *yarad*. Yona goes down to the port, down into the boat, and down into the hold. The final word – the “+1” – is “went to sleep,” but instead of using the expected *va-yishan*, the text deliberately uses *va-yeradam*, where the root is *radam*. The near homophone produces the desired effect – (1) down, (2) down, (3) down…to (4) sleep (wishing to die).

God promising to “bring down” anyone who tries to escape to heaven is a clever way of reintroducing the Yona story into the second clause, just as Eliyahu was subtly brought into the first clause via the use of *yadi* ***tikachem***.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will examine verse 3 and see how the themes and allusions of verse 2 are brilliantly continued.

1. See Shadal ad loc. for a survey of approaches to this abstruse phrase. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, e.g. *Shmuel* I 13:6; 14:11, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)