**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012

לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Shiur #97:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF RETURN**

**JUDGMENT AND VINDICATION (9:7-12)**

**PART 2:**

**THE SIEVE OF JUSTICE (verses 8-10)**

In last week’s *shiur*, we began our study of Amos’s penultimate presentation. It is the conclusion of his work, followed only by an epilogue, which brings consolation into full view. As I argued in last week’s *shiur*, this prophecy of “judgment and vindication” is also, at its heart, an oratory of long-view relief and comfort against a background of potential rejection and rebuke. Indeed, as this passage unfolds, the tension between *segula* and *tzedek –* between the favored-nation status enjoyed by *Am Yisrael* and the divine “need” for justice *for* all and *to* all – is heightened.

THE TEXT

*Hinei einei A-D-N-Y Elokim (Hashem)*

Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD

The introductory word *hinei*, which we have seen numerous times in *Amos*, usually indicates a surprise. Avraham is told to stay his hand from Yitzchak, and then he lifts his eyes and *hinei* – “behold” – there is a ram (out of nowhere) stuck in the thicket, ready to take Yitzchak’s place on the altar. Examples of *hinei* are found in every book of *Tanakh*, and nearly all carry this same sense of the unexpected. *Amos* himself uses it 14 times – 5 of those in the four visions delivered (evidently) at Beit-El (7:1-9; 8:1-3). Another four of them appear, unsurprisingly, in the *eschaton* that comprises the last 19 verses of the book. We are not caught off-guard, as it were, to hear of surprises unfolding at the end of days. These passages often begin with *hinei yamim ba’im* – as did ours – so we are ready for something unexpected.

Reading through *Amos* – or, better yet, as a member of his original audience – we have the strong impression that what God demands of His people is much more than what He expects from others. This is already impressed upon us in the first set of oracles. The neighboring nations are ultimately called to judgment (after their first three sins, which God was willing to let be) for war-crimes of a most heinous nature. Pregnant women sliced open, refugees handed over to their brutal captors, treaties betrayed, enemy kings burned alive – these are the crimes for which the nations of Aram, Gaza, Edom, etc. are going to be exiled. When it comes to Yehuda, their crime is a lack of fealty to the Torah – certainly a much higher standard. And when the prophet zeroes in on his targeted population of Shomron, the indictment includes not one item but seven; the “3🡪4” pattern has become “3+4,” and the unethical behavior of the aristocracy and ruling house is called out.

The sense that any reader gets is that the standards of judgement are significantly more stringent when it comes to *Am Yisrael*, as Amos explicates just after his first rebuke of Yisrael:

You alone have I known from among all the families of the earth; **therefore,** I will visit upon you all of your iniquities. (3:2)

God, who not only took Yisrael out of Egypt but also took the Pelishtim from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir, judges all nations and will punish each of them. That isn’t the big surprise, as the first two chapters of *Amos* speak to that issue. The real surprise is this: Whereas their punishment may be final (if such is deserved), the house of Yaakov will never suffer an utter judgment. We will see this significant theological statement develop in these three verses.

The “eyes” of God is what translates, in medieval philosophic terms, into *hashgacha*, but not as is commonly used. Whereas in modern colloquy, *hashgacha* is used to refer to God’s **beneficent** intervention on behalf of someone of whom we approve, the *Rishonim* generally mean it as its literal intent – watching. God’s keeping His eyes, as it were, on a person, a family, a nation, or a Land means just that. It can mean that He is taking care, as in Moshe’s description of God’s relationship with *Eretz Yisrael*:

It is a Land that Hashem your God cares for, the **eyes** of Hashem your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:12)

But God’s eyes can also mean that He puts his attention to a person or clan to punish them. When both of Yehuda’s sons are killed by God, the text states:

And Er, the firstborn of Yehuda, was wicked in the **eyes of Hashem**, and he killed him…The thing which he [Onan] did was evil in the **eyes of Hashem**, and he killed him also. (*Bereishit* 38:7,10)

*Mishlei* states it simply:

*Be-khol makom* ***einei Hashem*** *tzofot ra’im ve-tovim.*

God’s **eyes** are everywhere, keeping watch upon the evil and the good. (*Mishlei* 15:3)

God’s providence is no guarantee of kindness, but it is a guarantee of divine attention. Whether or not that is good news for the one being watched depends completely on his, her, or their moral station.

Amos again uses the less-than-common cognomen of A-D-N-Y, stressing Hashem’s lordship over all; it is again followed by the Tetragrammaton (although read as *Elokim*), assuring that God’s abiding love for all of His creatures will also be part of the judgment process.

*Ba-mamlakha ha-chata’ah*

are upon the sinful kingdom

*Ve-hishmadeti otah*

and I will destroy it

*Mei-al penei ha-adama*

from the surface of the ground

Most of the *Rishonim* maintain that the “sinful kingdom” referenced here is Shomron, Amos’s targeted audience throughout. This approach is anchored, naturally, in how the previous verse is read. If it is part of rebuke against the immediate assemblage, then it stands to reason that they are the “sinful kingdom.” If, however, we view the previous verse as setting up and ultimately solidifying Yisrael’s treasured status among the nations, then we may see the matter differently. This interpretive causal chain is clear in the *Rishonim*. However it is viewed, it must be read in harmony with the follow-up phrase – “I will not destroy the house of Yaakov.”

Rashi identifies the sinful kingdom as the house of Yehu (i.e. Yerovam), to the exclusion of Yehuda.

R. Yosef Kara modifies this a bit and seems to view both kingdoms as being part of the greater “Beit Yaakov.” God will destroy the kingdom of the north, but not totally.

Ibn Ezra, who also views the “sinful kingdom” as Yisrael, makes a different, and clever, divide to reconcile the verse. He notes that the cause for Yisrael’s wayward behavior was their kings and leaders (a subtle theme throughout *Amos*). As such, He will destroy the *mamlakha* – i.e. the royal house – but not all of Beit Yaakov. Radak adopts this approach as well.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency, however, reads the statement of this clause as a general providential reality. God is watching *every* sinful kingdom and will destroy them; however, unlike the absolute destruction that will befall other sinning nations, *Am Yisrael* will be exiled and oppressed but not obliterated.

R. Yitzchak Abravanel, as he already signaled in his interpretation of the previous verse (see last week’s *shiur*), continues in this direction. He asserts – in clear response to the mainstream interpretive tradition of the *Rishonim* – that the “sinning kingdom” is *not* Ephraim (=Yisrael). Rather, this entire verse is intended to speak about the high station that Yisrael occupies before God. God will obliterate (“in an instant”) any *other* nation that sins before Him, for His “eyes” are on the sinning kingdom. The Abravanel argues from both *Tanakh* and post-Biblical history, pointing to the many nations that have risen and fallen and disappeared.

It seems that the previous verse, equating *Am Yisrael* with other nations, would argue in favor of R. Eliezer’s approach – that this is a broad statement of how God’s providence operates with all nations, without distinction. But the point the ibn Ezra makes is most powerful and should also be understood here. I would argue that Amos is presenting, to his audience and to the eternal readership, a truth about nations that is at once harsh and comforting. The oligarchic position of identifying the state with the king – “*l’etat c’est moi”* – is pointedly refuted here. The kingdom may be destroyed, but the people will live on. This is, of course, only the case for Beit Yaakov. In other words, the eternal and unbreakable covenant between the people and Hashem is exactly that – a bond between the *people* and God. They may be exiled (i.e. a destruction of sovereignty) and they may be oppressed – but they will not be destroyed. Abravanel’s position, as enticing as it is, seems a bit forced here.[[1]](#footnote-2)

*Efes*

except that

This word, making its only appearance in *Amos* with this meaning, is used to signal a reservation or limitation on something said before. For instance, after the scouts sing the praises of the Land:

***Efes*** *ki az ha-am ha-yoshev bah...*

**Nevertheless** [or, in some translations, “but” or “however”], the nation that dwells there is strong… (*Bamidbar* 13:28)

Amos is signaling a slight retreat from his earlier statement. The implication of the previous clause was that all sinning nations will be extirpated. “However,” “yet” – God will not utterly destroy Beit Yaakov.

The use of *efes* here may argue in favor of Abravanel’s take, that the “sinning kingdom” is anyone *except* for Yisrael.

*Ki lo hashmeid ashmid*

I will not utterly destroy

The introductory *ki* here means “that” or, with more force, “indeed.” It is followed by the infinitive + conjugated verb, which is used liberally in *Tanakh* for stress; it is usually translated with a prefaced “indeed.” The pattern here, however, is unusual, as the infinitive + verb is preceded by a negative (*lo*), which is invariably placed between the infinitive and the verb. For example, in defining the *shifcha charufa*, the text says *hofdei* (infinitive) ***lo***(negative) *nifdata* (conjugated verb). The meaning is: “in reality, she wasn’t (fully) redeemed.” Paul points out that it only three cases does the text place the negative before the infinitive:

*Lo mot temutun* (the serpent to the woman, in response to her claim that they were banned from even touching the tree that is “in the middle of the garden”) - “You shall absolutely not die” (*Bereishit* 3:4).

And, perhaps more to our point, in *Tehillim*:

*Ach lo padoh yifdeh ish* (in ruminating about death) – “No brother can (possibly) redeem his brother [from death].”

In these two cases, along with ours, the effect of the negative before the verb-stream is stress of the strongest type. “You will absolutely not die!” “No man could possibly redeem his brother from death” and…”I will absolutely never destroy the house of Yaakov.” The particular form here serves as a measure of consolation and relief.

*Et beit Yaakov*

the house of Yaakov

By referring to the nation as Beit Yaakov – a not-infrequent name for *Am Yisrael*, but one that Amos only used once – he again brings “loose threads” of his earlier prophecies together here. When he mentioned Beit Yaakov the first time, it was in introducing an indictment against the altars at Beit-El:

Hear and testify against **the house of Yaakov**, says the Lord GOD, the God of (the) hosts, that on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Beit-El, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end, says the LORD. (3:13-15)

As I suggested there, the use of Beit Yaakov is intended to remind the people of two things. First of all, the phrase should evoke the awareness of the national covenant forged at Har Sinai, introduced with the words *ko tomar le-****veit Yaakov*** (*Shemot* 19:3), a covenant that is founded upon absolute loyalty to God – which was violated at Beit-El. Adding to that, the special relationship that the nation has with that location is rooted in Yaakov’s vision there and subsequent sanctification of the place. The second thing that Beit Yaakov should remind the people of is our common history and lineage – as a family. Keep in mind that throughout the book, the common thread of Amos’s rebukes has been against the oppression and abuse of the disenfranchised members of the nation by their leaders and by the upper class. As such, “Beit Yaakov” was a fitting title to use for the people in that rebuke.

Our penultimate prophecy, posed as it is to offer consolation and a measure of hope to the people, restores Beit Yaakov to its cherished place as a term of honor and a reminder of the relationship of the people to their ancestors and the eternal covenant that Hashem made with Yaakov.

*Ne’um Hashem*

says the LORD.

This phrase, used regularly by Amos, signals the end of an idea. Until this point, in verses 7-8, we have been told of God’s providence and how it operates – all kingdoms are accountable to the Almighty, but the *people* of Israel will outlive all of them.

*Ki hinei anokhi metzaveh*

For lo, I will command

These next two verses serve as the explication of the previous statement. God has committed to destroy the sinning kingdom. This includes, *contra* Abravanel, Yisrael (and ultimately Yehuda as well). On the other hand, Beit Yaakov will not be wiped out. We now hear how this tension will be resolved. Unlike other nations, whose success and even survival is fully dependent on their sovereignty, *Am Yisrael* has the mechanism to weather an exile, a dispersion, and even subjugation. This is why Amos began this prophecy with an evocation of the Exodus. In spite of the fact that the tribes were on foreign soil for hundreds of years and enslaved and oppressed – and suffered from infanticide for a period – they survived and were able to (re)claim independence and sovereignty in the Land.

God has already “commanded” in this *eschaton*. In verse 3, He threatens to command the serpent to bite those who try to hide from Him at the bottom of the sea. In the next verse, He promises to command the sword to kill the captives who are “fleeing” His presence.

Hashem uses a range of intermediaries to fulfill His will – a wind, a fish, a tree, and a wind all act as God’s agents in the Yonah story. Here, God will command…whom? What? It seems that the very vagueness of the passage indicates that He will move history along to accommodate His design, as we will see. The command may also extend to the next verse and may again refer to the sword that will kill *kol chata’ei ami*.

*Va-hanioti ve-khol ha-goyim et Beit Yisrael*

and shake the house of Israel among all the nations

This is the promise of more than mere exile or even dispersal. It is the threat of wandering, wherein the nation will undergo a period of being shaken from nation to nation. The use of the verb *no’a* here evokes the image of the beginning of this *eschaton*, in which people will “…wander (*ve-na’u*) from sea to sea…to seek out the words of Hashem.” This cleverly ties the two visions together, as we have argued throughout. This may even be seen as a further explication of the “wandering” from that vision; if the people give up on finding the words of Hashem and revert to their ways, they will be subjected to a more severe form of wandering with more disastrous consequences.

*Ka’asher yinoa ba-kevara*

as one shakes with a sieve

This metaphor is an unusual one. The grain is the people, but is it all of the people, including their sinning leaders? We will get a clue in the next phrase.

*Ve-lo yipol tzeror aretz.*

but no pebble shall fall upon the earth.

As ibn Kaspi points out, this is the opposite of the usual intent of a sieve. Normally, the farmer puts grain into a sieve in order to get the pebbles out, but here not one pebble will fall to earth. Radak explains that there are three groups among the people, symbolized by grain (the righteous), the dirt and detritus (the wicked, including the leaders), and the pebbles (those for whom there is still hope). He alternatively suggests that the purpose of the sieve here is to rid the collected grain of the bad seeds, which will fall out to the ground.

R. Eliezer of Beaugency takes a different approach here. He understands the grain to be the leadership; as happens with grain in a sieve, they will fall out. It is the “pebbles” – the poorer and lesser people – who will remain. Not one will fall to the ground.

Abravanel interprets *tzeror* not as “pebble,” rather as “bundle,” as in *Devarim* 14:25. His take is that no one who is part of the national body will fall to the ground. This follows Abravanel’s general approach to this prophecy (see above). He concedes that some members of the nation will be killed, per the next verse, but he maintains that the nation, *qua* national body (the *tzeror*), will not fall.

*Ba-cherev yamutu kol chata’ei ami*

All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword

The sword features prominently throughout these end-of-days prophecies. Three of the eight mentions of *cherev* in *Amos* are in this chapter. The sword is portrayed throughout as God’s vehicle for punishment at the hands of the enemy.

There is no way to read this phrase as referring to any other nation; these are *chata’ei* ***ami****.* The sense of these verses together is that there is a multi-step process through which God will deal with His people. First of all, He will direct events such that they will be exiled among the nations, which will sift out those that need to be ejected. Then, those who are beyond hope of rehabilitation will be killed outright by the sword. Who is beyond help? Those who deny that there is anything wrong. The obstinance and refusal to admit to being “off-course” and the confidence that “all will be alright” (see e.g. *Yirmiyahu* 7 and *Amos* 6:1) makes *teshuva* impossible for reasons that are self-evident.

*Ha-omerim lo tagish ve-takdim ba’adeinu ha-ra’ah*

who say,“Evil shall not overtake or meet us.”

This is not exactly moral blindness; rather, it is a denial of *sekhar va-onesh*, of God’s justice and His commitment, as it were, to reward the just but also to punish the wicked. In the absence of a moral rudder – which, as we have seen throughout the book, Amos’s audience has given up – only fear of punishment will provide an opening for return. If the people are convinced that nothing bad will befall them (notice how “God” isn’t in their lexicon), then how are they to return? Given that they are beyond hope, the sword will catch up with them. After all is said and done, the nation will survive and will ultimately return – although we will only hear of this return in the epilogue to Amos’s book.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will address the last two verses of this prophecy and we will see the reestablishment of the fallen Sukka of David.

1. One wonders to what extent the vicissitudes that Abravanel experienced in his public life, witnessing firsthand the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, may have contributed to this perspective on all other kingdoms and peoples. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)