

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:  
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah  
for all who require healing, comfort and peace –  
those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.  
May God mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.  
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**Shiur #03: The Prophecies of Amos:  
Oracles against the Nations**

In this chapter, we will introduce Amos's famous prophecies against the surrounding nations, which make up the first twenty verses and comprise a "set-up" for his prime audience in Shomeron. From here on, it will be most helpful to follow the *shiurim* with an open *Tanakh*; in addition, the attached map of the Middle East during the First Commonwealth (courtesy of *Da'at Mikra*) will be most enlightening.

I'd like to assay three "panoramic" issues here before addressing the text itself. Amos delivers oracles against Aram, Peleshet, Tzor, Edom, Ammon and Moav, then Yehuda before zeroing in on Yisrael. Why does Amos deliver prophecies foretelling punishment specifically to these nations? Given the geopolitical realities of the day (see the previous *shiur*), we would expect him to indict Assyria. Not only is Assyria *not* the prime target of his threats, it is completely overlooked in this sequence. Egypt, whose fortunes during this era are perhaps diminished, is nonetheless a consistent presence on Yehuda's southwest border and the source of much geopolitical agitation during the First Commonwealth. Why does Egypt get a pass in this string of indictments? Egypt is certainly included in Yeshayahu's oracles against the nations (ch. 19) as well as those of Yechezkel (chapters 29-32) and Yirmeyahu (ch. 46).

We might understand that inclusion in this list is not determined by the significance or might of the accused nation, but rather by how they have directly attacked Yisrael. Damascus (Aram) and Ammon are accused of brutality against the Gileadites (ostensibly the eastern tribes), and Edom is accused of fostering his seething hatred for his "brother" (Yisrael?). Both Azza (Peleshet) and Tzor (Phoenicia) will be punished for their handing over some exiles to Edom. We

don't know who these exiles are and who the "brothers" of the treaty mentioned concerning Tzor might be. Given the context, we can assume that there were Jewish exiles who fled in these two opposite directions (south and north respectively) away from Edom, and the accused nation handed over the refugees for slaughter. We will examine each of these oracles independently further on; for now, suffice it to point out that none of these crimes is explicated anywhere in the Biblical canon. The brutality of Aram is foretold by Elisha (*II Melakhim* 8:7-15) but we never hear of that fearful prophecy being realized.

The lack of a corroborating historic record of these crimes leaves us with three choices. It may be that the brutal behavior of these neighbors was acted out towards other nations. Alternatively, it was used against *Am Yisrael* but these acts were not recorded in the historic narrative of *Melakhim*. A final possibility is to understand the oracle in a non-literal fashion. For instance, Radak (following an aggadic tradition) interprets the accusations against Azza and Tzor as well as that of Edom as being prophetic, aimed at the traumatic events of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. This approach is fraught with difficulties. Not only must we then identify "Philistines" and "Tyrians" during the Roman era, but we must find noteworthy brutality on their part during the period leading up to and following the destruction of Yerushalayim in 70 CE. The greatest difficulty with this specific resolution is that it has Amos prophesying destruction in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE for behavior that a nation will engage in eight centuries later.

### **An Important Aside – Oracles against the Nations**

As pointed out earlier, Amos is not the only *navi* to deliver God's message regarding the nations. Yeshayahu, Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel all have long series of *masot* (oracles) against the nations. Nachum's entire prophecy is directed towards Assyria and *Ovadya's* 21 verses are a prophecy foretelling the destruction of Edom. *Yona* is a unique case and we will address it further on in this section.

In spite of all of these oracles towards and against non-Jewish nations, it remains to be determined if the *navi* ever speaks to these peoples or their kings at all. In other words, when we read *masa Bavel* in *Yeshayahu* or *masa Nineveh* in *Nachum*, do we imagine that the Israelite prophet went to Bavel or Nineveh and spoke with the king, delivering God's threats and foretelling their destruction? There are significant indications throughout *Tanakh* that prophets were never sent to non-Jewish nations. The one obvious exception to this would be Moshe's agency to Pharaoh – but that was, of course, on behalf of *Am Yisrael*. In other words, prophets were not sent to deliver messages to the non-Jewish nations for their own rehabilitation or to put them on notice.

In *Devarim* (ch. 18), Moshe distinguishes between the “signs and omens” that the nations follow and the prophet, styled after Moshe, that God would send to Yisrael:

**9** When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. **10** There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that uses divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, **11** or a charmer, or one that consults a ghost or a familiar spirit, or a necromancer. **12** For whosoever does these things is an abomination unto God; and because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you. **13** You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God. **14** For these nations, that you are to dispossess, heed soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not suffered you to do so. **15** The Lord your God will raise up a prophet for you, from your midst, of your brethren; as you did with me; you shall heed him; **16** according to all that you desired of the Lord your God in Chorev in the day of the assembly, saying: “Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire anymore, so that I do not die.” **17** And God said to me: “They have well said that which they have spoken. **18** I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren, like you; and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him.”

In chapter 4, this distinction is made clear from another perspective:

**15** Take careful heed, for you saw no manner of form on the day that God spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire. **16** Lest you deal corruptly, and make for yourselves a graven image, even the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, **17** the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flies in the heaven, **18** the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth; **19** and lest you lift up your eyes unto heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, even all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them, and serve them, which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under all of the heavens. **20** But God took you and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of inheritance to Him, as you are this day.

Amos’s own words in chapter 3 support this contention:

**1** Hear this word that God has spoken against you, Israelites, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: **2** Only you have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all of your iniquities. **3** Will two walk together, unless they have agreed

to do so? **4** Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion give forth his voice out of his den, if he has taken nothing? **5** Will a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it? Will a snare spring up from the ground, and have taken nothing at all? **6** Shall the horn be blown in a city, and the people not tremble? Shall evil befall a city, and God has not done it? **7** For the Lord God will do nothing, unless He reveals His counsel to His servants the prophets. **8** The lion has roared, who will not fear? Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?

Later we will more fully examine these verses in their proper sequence, but broadly speaking, the implication of Amos's words is that God's "knowing a people" implies His communicating with them via prophecy. God knows only Yisrael – which is why the standard to which they are held is so much higher.

If this is the case, how are we to understand the many prophecies against (or regarding) the nations found in the canon? How are we to interpret God's command to Yirmeyahu (1:5): "I have made you a prophet to the nations"?

The simplest explanation is that the oracles were presented to an Israelite audience for one of several reasons, depending on the nature of the prophecy and the context of the presentation. There are prophecies that ridicule the idolatrous practices and beliefs of the nations (such as Yechezkel's pronouncement in 29:3 regarding Pharaoh, who claims that "the Nile is mine and I have made it for myself"). These were likely presented to an Israelite audience to demonstrate the folly of these beliefs in order to wean the audience away from them or to give the audience a feeling of intellectual and cultural superiority. The former would likely be in an environment where the Jewish audience was attracted to pagan beliefs and practices and the latter may have served as a mode of consolation for a downtrodden people.

Prophecies that foretell the fall of a nation were likely meant to impress the Israelite audience with God's providential awareness and control over world events and to establish the prophet's *bona fides*. Prognostications regarding the short-term success of nations (such as Yirmeyahu's words regarding Bavel) were explicitly intended to convince the audience to accept the Divine fiat and not to rebel against that plan. In other words, prophecies "addressed" to the nations are presented for the didactic and/or salvific benefit of Yisrael. The nations are merely the opportunity, the excuse, for teaching *Am Yisrael* a lesson.

### **The Challenge: Yona**

The axiom that God's prophets are exclusively sent to (or on behalf of) His people is adopted in one fashion or another by numerous commentators (classical as well as modern). This approach seems to face one insurmountable challenge. The story of Yona ben Amittai, in which the prophet from Gat Ha-

chefer (*II Melakhim* 14:25) is sent by God to prophesy against Nineveh, is the great counter-example of a prophetic mission to the nations. Yona's job is to inspire the people of Nineveh to repent their evil ways under the crushing threat of imminent divine destruction.

In truth, this is not the only anomaly in the story of Yona. The ethically sensitive behavior of the sailors, the remarkable enigma of Yona's attempt to flee God, the unprecedented success of the prophet in Nineveh, his disconsolate reaction to his own success – all these form the core of an internal biblical conundrum. How can the story of Yona be part and parcel of *Tanakh*, where the book describes actions divine and human, individual as well as collective, which are unmatched anywhere else in the canon?

It is precisely this collection of problems that motivates many commentators, including some within the traditional circles of interpretation (such as the Ga'on of Vilna), to regard *Yona* figuratively and to read the story as "prophetic fiction." That is to say, the story utilizes a historic figure (from *Melakhim*) in order to relate a message and a lesson (per the Ga'on, a metaphysical lesson via a parable). The sailors as well as the Ninevites are all foils in the story, which is really about Yona and God and their dispute about human repentance and divine forgiveness.

Within the overwhelmingly mainstream approach of traditional scholarship, which regards *Yona* as a factual account, we would have to regard the entire mission and its success as an unprecedented event in human history. In this one instance, the argument might go, God did indeed send a prophet to correct and rehabilitate a non-Jewish nation (and a sworn enemy of His people, at that!). That individuals and societies are potentially capable of remarkable turnarounds and worthy of salvation may also be the message that this story intends to broadcast. God cares about all of His creatures and gives every one of them another opportunity mend their ways. Nonetheless, if taken as historic, it would be the exception that proves the rule.

### **The Purpose of the Oracles**

As we have established that the oracles were never intended to be communicated to Aram, Azza and so forth, what is the purpose of their presentation?

One might be tempted, based on the passage towards the end of *Amos* (9:7, "Are you not like the sons of Cushites to me, Israelites?"), to argue that the oracles carry a universalistic tone. Just as God holds His people accountable for their shortcomings and iniquities, similarly he calls all peoples to task for their moral violations. In a sense, this would serve to comfort the aristocracy in

Shomeron – if for no other reason than the common human frailty of relishing others' downfall to soften the pain of our own lowered status. In other words, the impending doom hanging over the Northern Kingdom is evidence of God's displeasure with them. By seeing that God is similarly displeased with the behavior of the surrounding nations and that they will also be punished in kind, the decree against Shomeron no longer stands as such stark condemnation.

This, however, is not a sustainable approach. First of all, the decrees against the surrounding nations *precede* that of Yisrael. This makes the possibility of an alleviative effect unlikely. Second, as we will see in the next two lectures, the oracles against Yisrael are far more detailed, both in the presentation of the accusation as well as the fates to which it is sentenced (and in yet a third way), than those of any of its neighbors.

The message of the above-referenced passage does *not* speak to moral equivalence or to a common standard; rather, it serves to note that *all* families of the earth are subject to God's judgement. God's baseline rule is that a nation that sins is exiled; whether it will ever happen to Aram or Tyre isn't ultimately the message to *Am Yisrael*. What they need to hear is that even those nations who have not had the opportunity to "know God" firsthand are judged.

### **What, then, of our oracular sequence?**

Following the rabbinic logic of "*Ha-kol holekh achar ha-chitum*," "All things follow the end" (*Berakhot* 12a), we can make sense of the series of prophecies by first looking at their culmination. The "3/4" pattern which is consistent in these prophecies makes its final appearance in chapter 2, verse 6:

Thus says God: For three sins of Yisrael, and for the fourth (or "for four") I will not reverse it...

As mentioned above, this prophecy is significantly longer and more detailed in three distinct ways than any of the first seven *nevuot*. The "3/4" pattern does not repeat after this and the next set of prophecies is of a decidedly different tone. It is clear that the prophecy against Yisrael is not only the conclusion of this series but its goal.

### **A Tangential Note**

Although we chiefly experience the study of *Tanakh* as *Torah she-bikhtav* (written Torah; see Rambam, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:12), we have to remember that many sections of *Tanakh* were always intended to be studied, reviewed and shared orally, such as Yehoshua's "song" (*Yehoshua* 10:12-14), *Tehillim* and many of the songs found in both historic and prophetic books. As a late Midrash

notes, the Book of *Eikha* was written as an abecedarian acrostic in order to make it easy for people to chant it orally (*Otzar Ha-midrashim, Pinechas b. Yair #17*). Moshe's song ("*Haazinu*") was intended to be memorized and recited occasionally by heart (*Devarim 31:19-21*).

In order to properly appreciate the words of the *navi*, we must not only read them carefully, but attend to the linguistic nuances, the geopolitical setting and the pastoral, royal or other imagery used. We must also put ourselves in the position of the contemporary audience (to the extent possible) to feel what the impact of the prophet's words might have been and to gain more clarity as to its intended message.

How would Amos's intended audience – the royal house and aristocracy of Shomeron – have responded to these admonitions and dire prophecies regarding the surrounding nations? Keep in mind that all of the nations mentioned were, at one time or another, enemies of the Israelite kingdom. Some of them no longer had regular belligerent interaction with the Northern Kingdom. For instance, Tyre had been a partner with Shelomo in building the *Mikdash* and, from all the evidence in the historic books of *Tanakh*, had not engaged in aggression against the Jewish people since. Nonetheless, a bordering country is always a threat and hearing about their impending downfall, destruction and/or exile has an impact. Truth to tell, that impact was likely a mixture of mean-spirited joy and understandable relief: the joy at hearing that a neighboring country, perhaps a military threat or possibly holding desirable land or resources, was slated for Divine punishment; the relief, again more understandable and less morally heinous, at knowing that the threat that that nation represented was no longer a concern as they would be either destroyed or exiled.

### **A Rhetoric of Illusion – and Entrapment**

Hearing that Aram, the perennial enemy of the Northern Kingdom, would soon fall and be exiled, would make the audience in Shomeron feel not only **relieved** but also, more significantly, **protected**. After all, if their greatest enemy is about to be destroyed by God, they have nothing to fear. God is protecting them.

A cursory look at the map (attached) of Yisrael and the seven neighboring nations provides an interesting perspective. Amos begins by denouncing Aram (northeast of Shomeron), moves to Azza (southwest), then Tzor (northwest), then to Ammon, Edom and Moav (all in the southwest). The audience in Shomeron would soon realize that they are not being protected – but rather, are being boxed in! The sense of comfort and protection is heightened when even Yehuda, the southern neighbor who claims legitimacy over all of Yisrael's sovereignty, is also excoriated and slated for punishment.

At this point, Amos's rhetorical sleight-of-hand is revealed. The greatest punishment is waiting for Yisrael, who have been rhetorically trapped by a sense of leisure and complacency. The impact of Amos's "For three sins of Yisrael" would be devastating and, one would hope, would shake his audience out of their spiritual lethargy.

In the next two lectures, we will analyze the specific oracles along with the rhetorical patterns utilized by Amos in delivering these eight prophecies.

For further study:

Steinmann, Andrew: "The Order of Amos' Oracles against the Nations, 1:3-2:16," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, 4 (1992) pp. 683-689.



