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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:  
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #06:  
The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles Against the Nations (continued)**

In these next three *shiurim*, we will study the first four oracles in Amos's sequence of prophecies against the nations. The rationale for this division is as presented in the last *shiur*. In brief, Amos presents two long oracles followed by two short ones; he then continues this pattern until the surprising eighth prophecy against Yisrael. As such, we will devote these next *shiurim* to the first set. Aram, the first nation "addressed" by Amos, will be the focus of this *shiur*. Aram plays a critical and central role in the geopolitical reality of Yisrael during this period. Aram's mention at the top of the list is due partially to the geographic boxing scheme we outlined earlier; it is also informed by Aram's position as the most frequent enemy Yisrael faces during this period. A brief background sketch of Aram and the role it plays in regional warfare during 100 or so years, from roughly 850 to 750 BCE, will give us a broader understanding of the specifics of the oracle. This includes not only the *pesha* (see below) that seals Aram's fate but also the nature of that fated punishment.

**ONE PRELUDE – "PESHA"**

Amos's oracles are all built on the scheme of "*Al shelosha pishei X*," "For the three sins of **X**." The consistent use of *pesha* (singular of *pishei*) is worth noting; analyzing it may help shed light on the nature of the crimes of which the nations are accused. This, in turn, will serve to focus the spotlight on the real goal of the prophecy sequence: the oracle against Yisrael, which begins with the identical formula.

The lexicon of evil in the *Tanakh* is understandably varied. Here are some of the synonyms for sin:

- A) *Chet*, error: a sin generated by neglect or by ignorance of circumstance or of the law. *Shoftim* 20:16 describes the skill of an archer with the term "*lo yachti*," "never missing the mark." It is used similarly in modern Hebrew.

- B) *Avon*, intentional wrongdoing: a sin of full volition. (Note that it begins with a letter *ayin*, unlike *aven*, which begins with an *alef* but has a similar connotation.)
- C) *Zadon*, transgression: a sin which expresses inner passion or anger.<sup>1</sup>
- D) *Ma'al*, trespass: a sin which appears exclusively in the realm of sancta: using sanctified materials for one's own mundane purposes or taking an oath to acquit oneself of a debt one really owes. When Akhan surreptitiously takes from the spoils of Jericho, this is *ma'al*. As a borrowed use of the word, when a married woman has an affair, this is considered *ma'al* against her husband (cf. *Bamidbar* 5:12).

*Pesha*, however, denotes a wrongdoing of a very different nature. The four preceding terms refer to sins of neglect or appetite, but they are all about the act itself; the term *pesha*, on the other hand, speaks more to the relationship between the violator and the one (or One) whose command is being violated. *Pesha* is used in *II Melakhim* 3:1, as the king of Edom refuses to continue to pay tribute to the Israelite kingdom; to wit, he is rebelling against the authority of Samaria over his country.<sup>2</sup> This is why *pesha* has been traditionally understood as “rebellion” (cf. Rashi, *Shemot* 34:7).

What does this mean for Amos? We have seen the application of the “messenger formula” (*ko amar*), a word or phrase which has its genesis in human relations, adapted for the Divine. Rebelling against an overlord or king becomes a model for understanding rebellion against God. The sin isn't driven so much by appetite – certainly not by ignorance or lack of awareness – but by a desire to declare autonomy and subvert the control exerted by the liege.

However, we must consider the first use of *pesha* in a legal framework in *Tanakh*. The Torah legislates that if an unpaid watcher claims an item has been stolen and the owner disputes the claim, they go to *Elohim* (halakhically understood as the court) to affirm the claim, presumably with an oath. In 22:8, the Torah presents a general rule: “For all matters of *pesha*, regarding an ox or a donkey, for a lamb or a garment which he claims ‘that is it’; for any case when *Elohim* find him culpable, he shall pay twofold to his fellow.” Violation of the contract by a watcher is considered a *pesha*. Although we could probably present a tortured reading to conform to the idea of rebellion presented above, a straight reading of the text doesn't bear this out. *Pesha* here seems to be the violation of a contract, which adds a fresh wrinkle to our reading of the texts in *Melakhim* cited above. The vassal relationship so frequently found in Ancient Near Eastern texts is about power but also about a contract. We have found numerous contracts from the period of the First Commonwealth and before which stipulate what the lord will

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Bereshit* 25:29, in which the term is used for the stew Ya'akov prepares as well as the act of preparation; BDB renders the root “seething,” which can be used in describing cooking as well as internal passion.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *II Melakhim* 3:7 and *ibid.* 8:20

provide for the vassal and the tribute and fealty that the vassal is to show his liege.

Perhaps we might view *pesha* as something a bit more nuanced than simply rebellion, which almost carries a petulant “You can’t tell me what to do!” with it. There are violations generated by a desire to eat that which is forbidden, to take that which one covets, etc. There are further violations that are driven by a refusal to accept or live by the terms of the contract to which one has (voluntarily or otherwise) become obligated. In the case of divine service, this may mean a sinful act motivated by a refusal to accept the Sinaitic Covenant and all that it implies. A watcher who steals the item is violating the essential contractual understanding and obligations between the guardian and the owner.

Let us return to Amos. As we have noted, the crimes of which the first six nations are accused fall under the general heading of “war crimes.” In the previous *shiur*, I suggested that this implies a categorical imperative, a divine law which need not be explicitly commanded but which all people are expected to understand and for which they are ultimately held accountable. I would like to add to that observation here. The war crimes listed here are either acts of gratuitous brutality on the battlefield or treachery in handing over refugees to the predatory army chasing them. Perhaps the use of *pesha* here by Amos (which he uses later on in the book as well) indicates an assumed understanding between combatants, a sort of ancient Geneva Convention. That there were rules of war in the ancient world should come as no surprise to us. *Devarim* 20-21 presents several restrictions by which the Israelite army is bound. Similar or parallel restrictions are found in numerous archival material from the period in question, both from Egypt and Mesopotamia. We might suggest that the brutality of cutting open pregnant women and so on is deemed a violation of the commonly held ethics of warfare. Perhaps, and this has been suggested, Amos is the one who introduces, in God’s Name, the notion of ethical restraints in war by which even non-Jews must abide. Those acts of treachery easily fall into this category. Whatever understanding Tyre and Philistia had with the refugees that fled to their borders was violated when the respective nation handed them over to Edom.

This nuanced understanding of Amos’s use of *pesha* will have to be reexamined when we address the sins of Yehuda and then Yisrael. We will leave it for those later *shiurim*.

## **ARAM: BEGINNINGS**

Aram is listed in the postdiluvian genealogy. In *Bereishit* 9:22-23, we read: “The sons of Shem were Elam, Arpakhshad, Ashur, Lud and Aram. The sons of Aram were Utz, Chul, Geter and Mash.” This places Aram squarely in Mesopotamia. Avraham is an Aramean himself, as he is bidden by God to go to Canaan while living in Charan (*Bereishit* 12:5). The next we hear of Aram is when Avraham’s

slave goes to Aram Naharayim to find a wife for Yitzhak (*Bereishit* 24). A century later, Ya'akov flees there to seek sanctuary and marry the daughter(s) of Lavan, who is now identified as living in Paddan Aram. Aram is referenced again in the story of Bilam. From the testimony of the text and significant support from archival Near East texts, it appears that Aram was a large area that was made up of warring tribes with no centralized power for centuries. The prototypical Arameans are wanderers (Lavan a herdsman, Bilam a wizard for hire), and indeed the area is characterized by nomadic life. Consider the declaration recited upon bringing the first fruits, "My father was a wandering Aramean" (*Devarim* 26:5). The farmer speaks of the long road from the birth of the nation to this point, where he comfortably resides in the Land of Israel and is able to bring his produce to the Temple. Arameans are the paradigmatic wanderers.

One thing is quite clear from the Torah and early post-conquest history: Aram did not have a strong kingdom or army, and David conquered the entire area, maintaining garrisons all the way to the Euphrates. In *II Shemuel* 8, Aram-Damesek joins forces with Aram-Tzova against David; the city state ("polis") system which Yehoshua finds in Canaan seems to be the norm in Aramea as well.

Significantly, Amos himself makes mention of Aram's beginnings (9:7):

God says: "Are you not like the sons of Cushites to me, Israelites? I brought Israel up out of Egypt and the Philistines from Kaftor and Aram from Kir."

Amos places Aram's beginnings in Kir (for possible geographic identifications, see "For further study"), which is evidently in northern Mesopotamia. However, since Israel comes out of Egypt as a conquering nation, the same may be true of Aram. The Arameans are a wandering people for centuries, but at some point towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE or later, there is a population that moves south and west from Kir and conquers or consolidates the peoples of Aram, forging the Aramean state. During the period after Shelomo, when the Israelite kingdom(s) lose their control over the region, evidently Aram consolidates power and forms a single kingdom based in Damascus. For the first time, in the period of Achav (c. 850 BCE), Aram is presented as a threatening neighbor with a strong and confident army. For the first time, we hear of kings of the house of Ben Hadad and Chaza'el.

This is anticipated in *I Melakhim* 19, when God instructs Eliyahu to anoint Chaza'el as king over Aram; Chaza'el will be the one who will (unwittingly) act as God's executioner, killing those Israelites who worship Baal. From this point on, through the period of Elisha, Aram is the most significant enemy and nearly all of Israel's foreign interactions are with Damascus. The two great wars in which

Achav leads his troops to battle<sup>3</sup> – including the one which costs him his life – are against Aramean aggression. From the Aramean general Na’aman’s visit to Elisha to be cured of his *tzara’at* and Elisha’s visit to Aram to anoint Chaza’el while the current king Ben Hadad is dying, through Chaza’el’s threshing of Gilead (see below), Aram stands as a constant threat to Samaria.

### THE TEXT

**3** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Damascus, and for four I will not reverse it: because they have threshed Gilead with sledges of iron. **4** So will I send a fire into the house of Chaza’el, and it shall devour the palaces of Ben Hadad; **5** And I will break the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from Bikat Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beit Eden; and the people of Aram shall go into captivity unto Kir, *amar Hashem*.

### THE CRIME

The ultimate crime with which Aram is charged here is having “threshed Gilead with sledges of iron.” On the face of it, it is hard to understand what is so heinous about this act – indeed, what is wrong with it at all? Threshing land would mean turning it over, a form of plowing. Evidently, the Gilead mentioned here is not the hills on the northern East Bank of the Jordan, but the people residing there. There are Israelite tribes who settle on the East Bank, and Gad resides in Gilead. This crime seems to reflect an event that takes place a good hundred years earlier, as recorded in *II Melakhim* 13:3-7.

**3** And the anger of God was enflamed against Israel, and He delivered them into the hand of Chaza’el king of Aram and into the hand of Ben Hadad the son of Chaza’el continually. **4** And Yehoachaz besought God, and God listened to him; for He saw the oppression of Israel, how that the king of Aram oppressed them. **5** And God gave Yisrael a deliverer, so that they went out from under the hand of the Arameans; and the children of Yisrael dwelt in their tents, as beforetime. **6** Nevertheless they did not depart from the sins of the house of Yeravam, of which he made Yisrael sin, but walked in those ways; and there remained the Ashera also in Samaria. **7** For there was not left to Yehoachaz of the people only fifty horsemen, and ten chariots, and ten thousand footmen; for the king of Aram destroyed them, and made them like the dust in threshing.

This brutal simile making the armies of Samaria “like the dust in threshing” (*ke-afar ladush*) is picked up by Amos as he describes Aram’s fourth sin. At this

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<sup>3</sup> Of which we are told; Achav also fights in at least one war *with* Aram, against Ashur, at Qarqur in c. 853 BCE.

point, it seems that the crime is a brutal and perhaps unnecessary treatment of their Israelite enemies taken as captives in war.

Yet there may be something even uglier lurking behind this description.

In *II Melakhim* 8, we learn of the prophet Elisha's visit to Damascus, capital of Aram. The king of Aram, Ben Hadad, is ill. (Note that Chaza'el's father and son were both named Ben Hadad. The reference here is to the senior Ben Hadad. His son Chaza'el, the prince, refers to his own father as "your son" when he addresses Elisha, the prophet, to express subservience.)

7 And Elisha came to Damascus; and Ben Hadad the king of Aram was sick; and it was told to him, saying. "The man of God has come here." 8 And the king said to Chaza'el: "Take a present in your hand, and go meet the man of God, and inquire of God by him, saying: "Shall I recover of this sickness?" 9 So Chaza'el went to meet him, and took a present with him, even of every good thing of Damascus, forty camels' burden, and came and stood before him, and said: "Your son Ben Hadad, king of Aram, has sent me to you, saying: 'Shall I recover of this sickness?'" 10 And Elisha said to him: "Go, say to him: 'You will surely recover;' however in reality God has shown me that he will surely die." 11 And he settled his countenance steadfastly upon him, until he was ashamed; and the man of God wept. 12 And Chaza'el said: "Why are you weeping my lord?" And he answered: "Because I know the evil that you will do to the Israelites: you will set their strongholds on fire, and you will slay their young men with the sword, and you will dash their little ones to pieces and rip up their pregnant women." 13 And Chaza'el said: "But what is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?" And Elisha answered: "God has shown me that you will be king over Aram." 14 Then he departed from Elisha, and came to his master, who said to him: "What did Elisha say to you?" And he answered: "He told me that you will surely recover." 15 And it came to pass on the morrow, that he took the coverlet, and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, so that he died; and Chaza'el reigned in his stead.

Since we never hear an explicit report of the Aramean king committing such atrocities, it is tempting to believe that Elisha's tears are an overreaction – and, perhaps, even temper Chaza'el's conquest protocol when he successfully invades Samaria.

However, the text that describes the conquest would seem to belie this understanding:

...for the king of Aram destroyed them, and made them like the dust in threshing.

Is this a description of the fate of the Israelite soldiers, or is the chronicler alluding to the terrifying vision of Elisha and its realization when Chaza'el takes power?

## THE PUNISHMENT

The punishment is made up of three components:

- 1) **Destruction of the royal houses by fire:** So will I send a fire into the house of Chaza'el, and it shall devour the palaces of Ben Hadad
- 2) **Desolation of major (royal?) cities:** And I will break the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from Bikat Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beit Eden
- 3) **Exile of the population:** and the people of Aram shall go into captivity unto Kir.

Fire is a common motif in war, both in war imagery and in actual warfare throughout *Tanakh*. The burning of the fortresses and royal houses is the first step towards the destruction of the kingdom. Although the king involved in this crime was likely the Chaza'el of Elisha's time, the Ben Hadad royal name remains; thus, we find the parallelism of Chaza'el and Ben Hadad.

The city of Damascus is a well-fortified wall city; breaking the bolt (another common biblical image) represents a destruction of the defenses of the capital city, rendering it vulnerable to attack. The "one who sits" and the "one who holds the scepter" are references to leaders, and the cities mentioned are either royal cities or provincial capitals. Bikat Aven literally means "vale of iniquity" and is similar to "Beit Aven," used, by Amos himself (among other *nevi'im*) to refer in a degrading manner to Beit El. The reference is likely to the Beqaa valley in southern Lebanon, at the southwestern reaches of the Aramean kingdom. Beit Eden has been identified with Tel Ahmar, which is approximately 320 km northeast of Damascus. Bikat Aven and Beit Eden form a merismus encapsulating the entire Aramean empire – an Aramean version of "from sea to shining sea;" or in *Tanakh* terms, "from Dan to Beer Sheva."

The final step in the punishment is a complete erasure of Aram's evolution (presented above) as they are sent back to their point of origin: "unto Kir."

### For further study:

**Kir:** Yoel Elizur, "Kir, Birthplace of the Arameans: A New Look" in: *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21 (2012), pp. 141-152 [Heb.].

**Chaza'el and Elisha:** Elchanan Samet, *Pirkei Elisha*, Yedioth Ahronoth: Sifrei Hemed (Tel Aviv: 2009), pp. 595-599 [Heb.].