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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

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**Shiur #03: Early Prophecies (III)**

**Prophecies of "The Day of the Lord"[[1]](#footnote-1) – Yoel vs. Amos**

**Another polemic with ancient prophecies**

In the middle section of *Sefer Amos*, Chapters 4-6, we find another explicit polemic between Amos and the people of his generation, who were convinced that God was with them and that He would continue to light their way even from the deepest darkness. Even great and catastrophic wars would ultimately lead to "the day of the Lord" with salvation and blessing for God's people, by virtue of His choice of them and love of them.

It was this against this perception, which relied on the words of true prophets, that Amos, the cattle driver-prophet[[2]](#footnote-2) of Tekoa, cried out and pleaded:

Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and thus the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you say. Hate evil, and love the good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Yosef… Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light. As if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; and he went into the house and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? Even very dark, and no brightness in it? (*Amos* 5:14-20)

In other words: God will be with you if you are worthy of it, through righteousness and justice. God's choice of Israel, the nation’s special status as *segula* (treasure), and God's love for them – all of this is true but will not be sufficient on the "day of the Lord," which Amos portrayed in terms of darkness, trouble, and destruction, from which no salvation would sprout. This was the stark dispute between the disciples of the ancient prophecy and Amos.

Do we have any explicit source offering the opposite position of the ancient prophecy concerning "the day of the Lord"?

Perhaps the Men of the Great Assembly[[3]](#footnote-3) (in the early Second Temple Period) had this controversy in mind – over the prophecies of "the day of the Lord,” and its meaning – when they placed *Sefer Amos* after *Sefer Yoel* in their ordering of the *Trei Asar*.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the latter part of Yoel's prophecy we find:

The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be delivered; for in Mount Tzion and in Jerusalem there shall be a remnant, as the Lord has said, and among those who are left, some whom the Lord shall call. (*Yoel* 3:4-5)

Both Yoel and Amos envision the "day of the Lord" as "darkness and gloom," but the critical questions are whether this gloom will give rise to salvation, to whom, and how.

The "day of the Lord" at the time of the Exodus was characterized by "gloom and darkness" for the Egyptians and salvation for Israel; the "day of the Lord" at the time of the destruction of the Temple brought disaster upon Israel.

It is clear even from the prophecies of those generations that Yehuda and Jerusalem would remain as a remnant following the destruction of the kingdom of Israel-Shomron. This is stated explicitly four times in *Hoshea*;[[5]](#footnote-5) it is hinted to throughout Amos's prophecies about Efrayim, Shomron, and Beit-El;[[6]](#footnote-6) it is almost explicit in *Yeshayahu*;[[7]](#footnote-7) and it also fits well with the prophecy of *Yoel*. The gap between Yoel and Amos might perhaps be explained by the fact that all the prophets foresaw the destruction of the kingdom of Israel-Shomron, and a remnant in Mount Tzion and Jerusalem.

However, the conclusion of Yoel's prophecy[[8]](#footnote-8) points to a deeper and more fundamental chasm separating Yoel and Amos, leading to their juxtaposition in the order of the books of Tanakh. The question is whether salvation will come from within the darkness, or only afterwards (and who can tell how long afterwards?):

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision![[9]](#footnote-9) For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon have become black, and the stars withdraw their shining. And the Lord shall roar from Tzion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shall shake; but the Lord will be a refuge to His people, and a stronghold to *Bnei Yisrael*. So you shall know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Tzion, My holy mountain; then shall Jerusalem be holy, and no strangers shall pass through her any more. And it shall be, in that day, that the mountains shall drop down sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the brooks of Yehuda shall flow with waters; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and shall water the valley of Shittim… But Yehuda shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation. And I will hold as innocent their blood that I have not held as innocent; and the Lord dwells in Tzion. (*Yoel* 4:14-21)

The conclusion of the prophecy in Yoel is clear: out of the very midst of the terrible darkness of the "day of the Lord," God's roar will emerge from Tzion for the salvation of His people, and His Presence will be revealed in Jerusalem.

The prophecy of Amos, in contrast, opens with the terrifying vision:

And he said: The Lord roars from Tzion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem; and the pastures of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel shall wither. (*Amos* 1:2)

Further on, Amos declares:

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light. (ibid. 5:18)

In Amos's prophecy, the "day of the Lord" is complete darkness, with no hope of salvation. On the other hand, at the end of the *sefer*, Amos mentions the future redemption in a manner similar to the conclusion of *Yoel*:[[10]](#footnote-10)

Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that sows seed, and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will return the captivity of My people, Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and the fruit thereof. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given them, says the Lord your God. (*Amos* 9:13-15)

This being the case, what is the great difference between them?

The fierce debate does not concern the End of Days, nor the darkness of the "day of the Lord.” Rather, it concerns the question of whether, out of the midst of the darkness of the "day of the Lord,” the roar of salvation will be heard (as at the time of the Exodus) and salvation and light will emerge – i.e., in that same generation, and in that same historical context (as indeed happened in the days of Yarovam and Uziyahu) – or whether the reality is that there is no hope for the generation (as in the case of the generation of the wilderness, or the generation following Yarovam and Uziyahu), and that for them, God's roar from Tzion will be a roar of destruction, and the promised salvation will come only at some other time, in a different manner, for some other generation.

From Amos's words it is clear that his listeners include disciples of prophets who speak like Yoel and await with anticipation the "great and terrible day of the Lord,” full of faith that it will give rise to salvation and deliverance for Israel, in their own generation.

The juxtaposition of the prophecy of Yoel to that of Amos hints to this fiery debate, indicating that the roar that will emerge on the "day of the Lord" may also herald complete destruction for that generation. This is the painful lesson that we must learn from the final verses in *Yoel*, which serve as a framework (introduction and conclusion) for *Amos*.

**Who was earlier – Yoel or Amos?**

Yoel's prophecy[[11]](#footnote-11) has no date,[[12]](#footnote-12) and *Chazal* and Rashi disagree as to its chronological place. Some maintain that Yoel preceded Amos; others argue that his prophecy was later.

If Yoel prophesized earlier than Amos, this would mean that Amos turned the implication of "the day of the Lord" from salvation to disaster – as in the relationship between the ancient prophecy and the prophecies of Hoshea and Amos.

If Yoel comes after Amos, then he comes to give hope: despite Amos's terrible vision, a roar of deliverance and salvation might emerge from the darkness of "the great and terrible day of the Lord,” as at the time of the Exodus from Egypt.

Perhaps we can make room for both possibilities. Based on its character and style (the centrality of the House of God and the *kohanim*; repayment for the dissemination of *Am Yisrael* amongst the nations), the prophecy of Yoel would seem to come after the prophecy of Amos, responding to it with a roar of salvation. However, it is clear from Amos's words that similar prophecies were uttered by others before and during his time, and he counters them with the roar of destruction. We must therefore conclude that the debate over the "day of the Lord" and God’s roar was already waged in the days of Amos (according to his own testimony, and on the basis of the introduction and conclusion of his *sefer*) and continued for many generations afterwards (all the way to our times, in fact).

Proof of this is to be found in a verse from *Yirmiyahu* describing a three-fold roar:

Therefore, prophesy against them all these words, and say to them: The Lord roars from on high, and utters His voice from His holy habitation; He roars mightily over His holy abode; He gives a shout like those who tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. (*Yirmiyahu* 25:30)

In Amos's time, as in Yoel's time (as well as the times of Hoshea and Yeshayahu), it was clear that Tzion and Jerusalem would survive and would not be destroyed. In contrast, most of Yirmiyahu's prophecies foretell the destruction of God's holy abode (*naveh*) in Tzion and Jerusalem. As a result, God's roar will no longer emanate from Tzion and Jerusalem, but rather from "His holy abode on High" – in other words, the "heavenly Jerusalem.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus we come to understand that anyone who, in the latter part of Yirmiyahu's life, maintained the position of the prophets who had preceded him – and who had been true prophets in their time – was now perceived by Yirmiyahu, in his own generation, as a "false prophet." Jerusalem would not be saved in this generation; the roar of deliverance would be kept for some other generation.

Indeed, all of this is stated explicitly in many places in *Sefer Yirmiyahu*.[[14]](#footnote-14) The prophetic verses referencing God's roar attest to the fierce debate: When does God's roar appear for destruction (Shomron in Amos's prophecy, Jerusalem in Yirmiyahu's), and when does it appear for a remnant, for deliverance and salvation (Tzion and Jerusalem in Yoel's prophecy)?

This debate over the possibility of redemption and salvation for that same generation (in the time of Amos and Hoshea, as in the time of Yeshayahu and the time of Yirmiyahu) was not conducted before a public mired in "harlotry, wine, and new wine,”[[15]](#footnote-15) but rather before servants of God (the "religious public,” as we might call it today). Amos continues his tirade against "those who long for the day of the Lord" and speaks out in God’s Name against those who serve Him –

I hate – I despise – your holidays; I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your meal offerings, I will not accept them, neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, and let Me not hear the melody of your harps. Let justice well up like water, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” (*Amos* 5:21-24)

The next verse[[16]](#footnote-16) also points to a controversy within the "religious" ranks:

Did you bring Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel? (ibid. 5:25)

However we interpret this prophetic stance in relation to the books of *Shemot*, *Vayikra,* and *Bamidbar*,[[17]](#footnote-17) we cannot miss the fundamental, trenchant debate among the servants of God as to the proper manner of service – or at least its proper prioritization.

Only afterwards does Amos turn his attention to the idolators of Israel, who will carry their idols with them into the terrible impending exile, "beyond Damesek.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, this time the prophet is not talking about neighboring kingdoms, such as Aram Damesek, which could cause great damage to Israel but could not exile them. The kingdom of Israel stood firm, and God gave Yehoash and his son Yarovam their stunning, complete victory over Chazael and his son, rulers of Damesek. Now, the prophet was speaking of a kingdom capable of exiling Israel (as well as Damesek) to the distant north. Nowhere does Amos mention the name Ashur[[19]](#footnote-19) (likewise the early chapters of *Hoshea*, 1-4, and the chapters in *Yeshayahu* that address Uziyahu, 1-6), but his descriptions unquestionably hint to it (as do Hoshea and Yeshayahu). This great power, which still lay beyond the horizon, was already casting a dark shadow in prophetic visions in the days of Yarovam ben Yoash and Uziyahu, even before the beginning of the downfall.

**Appendix**

The debate concerning God's roar – for destruction or for salvation – is hinted to in a *sugya* in the Gemara that understands the word "*layla*" (night) as hinting to exile, which is as dark as night:[[20]](#footnote-20)

R. Eliezer says: The night consists of three watches, and over each and every watch, the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion – as it is written, “The Lord roars (*yish’ag*) from on high; from His holy dwelling He makes His voice heard. He roars mightily (*shaog yish’ag*) over His dwelling place…” [The three-fold repetition of the root *sh/a/g*, meaning “roar,” hints to the three watches of the night.] (*Berakhot* 3a)

The Sages of the Mishna and Gemara sought a way to detect, at historical "changes of the guard"[[21]](#footnote-21) during the night of exile, the third roar – that of the prophet Yoel: the roar of salvation and the remnant of Tzion and Jerusalem, for which all Jews throughout our exile pray. And every night is a miniature model[[22]](#footnote-22) of the great night of exile.

As long as we hear only God's roar in *Amos* and *Yirmiyahu*, it is a sign that the time for the "morning star" (*ayelet ha-shachar*) to break through the darkness has not yet come. But one who merits to hear God's roar in the prophecy of Yoel will also connect with the day and night, light and darkness, as at the beginning of *Masekhet* *Berakhot* in the Yerushalmi:[[23]](#footnote-23)

It is told of R. Chiya the Great and R. Shimon ben Chalafta who were walking in the valley of Arbel at dawn and they saw the morning star piercing the sky. They said, “Such is the redemption of Israel: at first it comes little by little, but as it continues it grows bigger and bigger.

To the best of my understanding, the figure who was best attuned to hear the Divine roar of Yoel’s prophecy, from within the dark night of exile, was the Vilna Gaon. According to his disciples,[[24]](#footnote-24) he would say: "The redemption will start slowly, gradually. Perhaps even only one person from a city, or two from a family… But if it is possible, six hundred thousand Jews must be brought to *Eretz Yisrael* (for this will be the decisive point countering the forces of evil)….” Inspired by his teaching, his disciples merited to set the "beginning of the redemption" in motion in *Eretz Yisrael* and especially in Jerusalem.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The Rambam (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:29) learns from Yoel's prophecy (concerning the locusts) that “the day of the Lord" can appear several times in history, since "any day when there is great salvation, or great tragedy, is called 'the great and terrible day of the Lord.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is no coincidence that Amos and Yirmiyahu are dispatched on their prophetic missions "from following the flock," i.e., from the outlying villages on the periphery, and it is not by chance that Amos emphasizes (7:14-15) that he does not belong to the prophetic class and has never made a living from prophecy: "I was not a prophet, nor was I the son of a prophet, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore-trees. And the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to My people Israel” (*Amos* 7:14-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See my article, "*Anshei Knesset ha-Gedola hem Chotmei ha-Amana be-Ma'amad Ezra ve-Nehemia*," *Mishlav* 36 (5761), pp. 5-20, and on my website. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The final ordering of the books of *Trei Asar* might have been decided only after Malakhi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1:7; 3:5; 4:15; 12:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 3:9; 4:1; 5:15; 6:1-6; 7:9-17; 8:14; 9:8-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 6:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 4:14-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I believe that the "valley of decision” (*emek ha-charutz*) refers to the Kidron valley, which is a deep gorge surrounding Jerusalem from the northeast and east. The interpretation that associates the name with cheese (*charitzei ha-gevina*) dates to the Second Temple Period but, despite its ancient origin, has no solid basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Yoel* 4:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The "Valley of Yehoshafat" (ibid. 4:2,12), as a well-known name in Jerusalem, alludes to a period later than Yehoshafat's reign; the kingdoms of Assyria (Ashur), Babylon, and Persia are not mentioned in *Yoel*, and the Greeks buy slaves from Yehuda (ibid. 4:6); the enemies are the neighboring nations – Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia (ibid. 4:4), Edom, and Egypt (ibid. 4:19). All of this suggests a period that precedes the ascent of Assyria or comes after the return to Tzion. The accounting of the recompense for the dispersion of the nation among the nations and the division of the land (ibid. 4:2) would seem to support the latter option.

    Yoel's prophecy (Ibid. 1:13; 2:1,15; 3:5; 4:1-2, 6-8, 12, 15-16, 18-21) is directed mainly towards Yehuda and Jerusalem: the House of God and the *kohanim* are at the center of the fasting and eulogy in the prophecy of the locusts (chapters 1,2); Mount Tzion and Jerusalem are at the center of the prophecy about the nations and the salvation (chapters 3,4), and no mention is made of any king – leading most scholars to place Yoel later, during the Second Temple Period. However, his Hebrew is for the most part quite ancient, and for this reason there are some who date his prophecy (or parts of it) to an earlier time. See *Encylopedia Mikra’it*, "*Yoel, Sefer Yoel*", vol III, pp. 575-577; Y. Kaufman, *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit* vol III, pp. 334-347, dates Yoel to the beginning of the reign of Menashe. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Following David's selection of Jerusalem as the permanent resting place for the Ark of the Lord (*Shmuel* II chapters 5-7, and especially 15:25-26, where David chooses to return the Ark to "its holy abode" despite having left the city himself because of Avshalom), there is no longer any possibility of the Divine Presence wandering elsewhere in *Eretz Yisrael*. If there is no appropriate place in the "earthly Jerusalem," it can only move "on High," to the "heavenly Jerusalem." [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, *Yirmiyahu* 4:10, end of 23; 28; 32, and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Hoshea* 4:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Along with its commentators – see, for example, Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Abravanel and Malbim write that in the conditions of the wilderness it was almost impossible to offer sacrifices, and the main expression and manifestation of the service of God was "righteousness and justice." Radak (commenting on *Yirmiyahu* 7:22) points out that there is no mention of sacrifices in the Ten Commandments – the essence of the Covenant and of the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The segments devoted to sacrifices seem to occupy a central place in the Torah, in contrast to the words of the prophets (see especially *Amos* 5:25; *Yirmiyahu* 7:22-23), but if we read *Parashat Mishpatim* as a precondition for the sections regarding the *Mishkan*, the instructions of the Torah sound exactly like the words of the prophets. See my book (with Rav Shaul Baruchi), *Mikraot – Parashat Mishpatim, “Madua kadma parshat Mishpatim le-parshat Teruma?”* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Amos* 5:26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Y. Kaufman (*Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit* vol III, pp. 21-22) proves from this absence that the prophecies were recorded as spoken, without any "perspective processing" by later writers: even where it was clear who was being referred to, they did not add the name "Assyria." [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Yaakov went into exile twice with a revelation "in a vision of the night" (*Bereishit* 28:11-16; 46:1-4), while on his return from Charan, his struggle at Nachal Yabbok took place at the end of the night and salvation came "with the dawn" (*alot ha-shachar*) (32:24-31). The Exodus from Egypt also occurred from the middle of the night until the morning (*Shemot* 12), and the sea was split "during the morning watch" (ibid. 14:24). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Such “changes of the guard” took place when *Eretz Yisrael* was conquered by the Persians – Muslims – Crusaders – Muslims – Ottomans – and finally the British, with the Balfour Declaration, when the roar of deliverance was finally heard. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. We recite a blessing at *Shacharit* and *Ma’ariv* over the changeover of light and darkness, and after the *Shema*, we recite the blessing “… Who redeemed Israel” together with mentioning the Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:1 (2c). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. R. Hillel Rivlin of Shklov, *Kol ha-Tor*, chapter 1,15. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Kol Ha-Tor*, end of chapter 5. See A. Morgenstern, *Meshichiut vi-Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem 5745), pp. 133-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)