YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

**“It is Only You That I Have Known”**

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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky *z"l*,  
whose *yahrzeit* falls on the 19th of Kislev.  
May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM  
be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements  
exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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In loving memory of my parents   
Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger *z"l*  
- Benzion Lowinger

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So says the Lord: On account of Israel’s three crimes and on account of the fourth, I will not forgive them. They sold the righteous for silver and the poor for the price of shoes. They are those who trample the dust of the earth atop the heads of the poor; they turn the humble away from the path. A man and his father visit the same girl to desecrate My holy name. They spread confiscated clothing beside every altar and drink wine bought with fines in the house of their gods. But I had destroyed before them the Amorite, whose height was as tall as cedars and whose strength was like that of oaks. Yet I obliterated their fruit above and their roots below. I brought you up from the land of Egypt and led you in the desert for forty years to inherit Amorite lands. I raised up into prophets some of your sons and into nazirites some of your young men. Is this not so, children of Israel? said the Lord. But you made the nazirites drink wine and ordered the prophets not to prophesy. Behold, I will hold you back in your place, as a wagon loaded with sheaves is held back. The swift will lose the ability to flee; the strong will not gather their strength; the warrior will not escape with his life. The bowman will not stand; the fleet of foot will not escape; the horse rider will not escape with his life. He who considers himself strongest among warriors will flee naked on that day, says the Lord.

Hear this word, which the Lord has spoken about you, children of Israel: About the whole family I brought up from the land of Egypt, it is only you that I have known from among all the families on earth, so I will visit all your sins upon you. Would two walk together if they had not met? Would a lion roar in the forest if it had not caught prey? Would a young lion raise its voice from its den if it had not seized prey? Would a bird plunge into a trap on the ground if it were not baited? Would the trap spring up from the earth if it had not trapped quarry? Would a warning horn blow in the city and the people not be afraid? Would disaster come upon the city were it not an act of the Lord? The Lord God does not do anything without revealing His secret to His servants, the prophets. A lion roars; who would not fear? The Lord God speaks; who would not prophesy? (*Amos* 2:6-3:8)

**I. “On Account of Three and On Account of the Fourth”**

The beginning of the prophecy in our *haftara*, "On account of Israel's three crimes and on account of the fourth, I will not forgive them," connects the prophecy to the preceding passages in *Amos*. The prophet speaks extensively about "the day of the Lord," the day when God will punish all the nations for their sins. Amos mentions in his prophecy Aram, the Philistines (Aza), Tyre, Edom, Amon, Moav, and Yehuda – seven (!) nations – before concluding with the sins of Israel. (From the perspective of Amos, who lived in the kingdom of Israel and whose prophecies are directed toward it, Yehuda is one of the "other nations"; it is only the kingdom of Israel and Shomron that is set apart in his prophecy.)

Why does God punish the nations only from their fourth sin?

The Rambam (following the Gemara in *Yoma* 86b) explains that this is due to God's mercy:

However, in regard to a community, [retribution for] the first, second, and third sins is held in abeyance, as it is stated: "On account of Israel’s three crimes and on account of the fourth, I will not forgive them." When a reckoning [of merits and sins] is made according to the above pattern, the reckoning begins with the fourth [sin]. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:5)

It is possible that every "sin" mentioned here is a generation of the sinful nation, and the prophet is saying God punishes for iniquities only in the fourth generation – as stated in the Ten Commandments:

For those who hate Me, I hold the descendants to account for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. (*Shemot* 20:5)

This is not only true with regard to the people of Israel. The Amorites in the days of Avraham were a sinful nation, burdened with iniquity, yet God said in the Covenant of the Pieces that He overlooks their sins; only in the fourth generation will He visit their iniquities upon them, and the land will vomit them up:

And the fourth generation will return here, for the guilt of the Amorites is not yet resolved. (*Bereishit* 15:16).

**II. “On Account of Israel’s Three Crimes and On Account of the Fourth, I Will Not Forgive Them.”**

The prophet's attitude toward Israel's crimes is different from his attitude toward those of the seven nations (including Yehuda) mentioned first. Regarding the seven nations, Amos mentions only the last sin – or put differently, he mentions four sins minus three (the three that God overlooked and did not punish), that is, one sin. In contrast, when it comes to Israel, the prophet mentions seven sins – corresponding to the number of nations mentioned – that is to say, four and another three:

1. they sold the righteous for silver
2. and the poor for the price of shoes.
3. they are those who trample the dust of the earth atop the heads of the poor
4. they turn the humble away from the path
5. a man and his father visit the same girl to desecrate My holy name.
6. they spread confiscated clothing beside every altar
7. and drink wine bought with fines in the house of their gods.

This may explain what he says later in the *haftara* about visiting Israel's sin upon them in an especially full and stringent manner:

It is only you that I have known from among all the families on earth, so I will visit all your sins upon you.

Corresponding to the seven sins, there are seven punishments:

(1) the swift will lose the ability to flee

(2) the strong will not gather their strength

(3) the warrior will not escape with his life.

(4) the bowman will not stand

(5) the fleet of foot will not escape

(6) the horse rider will not escape with his life

(7) he who considers himself strongest among warriors will flee naked on that day, says the Lord.

**III. The Connection Between the *Parasha* and the *Haftara***

At first glance, the *haftara* is connected to the *parasha* only in its first verse: "They sold the righteous for silver and the poor for the price of shoes," which alludes to the sin of selling Yosef found in the heart of our *parasha*. Was Amos referring to this in his complaint about Israel's crimes? It stands to reason that he aimed his words at the sins of the people of his generation, and I will expand on that below, but perhaps he saw them as "holding the deeds of their fathers in their hands" – that their sins stemmed from the ancient sin of selling Yosef. This explanation is difficult, however, as the prophecy focuses on Shomron, a central city in the territory of Yosef, and Yosef, who clearly did not participate in the sin of his sale, is the main tribe in the kingdom to which the prophecy is directed.

A stronger connection between the prophecy and the sale of Yosef appears in *Midrash* *Asara Harugei Malkhut,*[[1]](#footnote-1)a later midrashic text that discusses the ten martyrs, with no clear source other than the prophecy in our *haftara.* There, the verse in our *haftara* is interpreted as referring to the sale of Yosef itself:

Once he [the Roman emperor] was sitting and studying the Torah, when he found it written: "And one that kidnaps a person and sells him" (*Shemot* 21:16). He then went and plastered the entire building with shoes and stuck them to the walls… He said to them: On account of Yosef's brothers who sold him, as it is stated: "And they sold Yosef" (*Bereishit* 37:28). And it is written: "They sold the righteous for silver and the poor for [the price of] shoes." Therefore, that wicked man plastered the building with shoes so that they recognize for what they sold Yosef, as it is stated: "for shoes" – for the price of shoes…

When Yosef's brother saw this, they said to those Yishmaelites: Give us back that garment, for we sold him to you naked. And the Yishmaelites said: We will not return it to you. Until they added four more pairs of shoes… That wicked emperor knew that they had sold him for shoes, and he said to them: Accept the judgment of heaven.

**IV. Slave Traders, Grain Traders, and Those Who Came to the House of God**

Selling Jews in a slave market is one of the most serious offenses in the Torah, and is punishable by death:

If someone is found to have kidnapped another Israelite, enslaving or selling him, the kidnapper shall die. You must purge the evil from your midst. (*Devarim* 24:7)

Does the Torah link this sin to the sale of Yosef in our *parasha*? It is possible; there is a hint to such a connection in the juxtaposition of verses surrounding a parallel statement in *Shemot*:

One who wounds his father or mother shall be put to death. One who kidnaps a person shall be put to death, whether the victim has been sold or found in his possession. One who curses his father or mother shall be put to death. (*Shemot* 21:16-18)

The Torah draws a connection in these verses between the prohibition to sell a free man into slavery and the mitzvaof honoring one's parents, which appears before and after it. A large part of the sin of selling Yosef was the injustice that Yosef's brothers caused their elderly father, as is clear both from our *parasha* and from *Parashat Vayigash.*

It stands to reason that few people actually engaged in the slave trade, but Amos blames all of society for this offense and lists it as one of "the crimes of Israel." The slave trade, both in Israel (in those days when it was accepted) and in other nations, mainly involved selling freemen who had borrowed money and could not repay their debts: the borrower was sold as a slave to pay off his debt with the proceeds. The Torah itself permits such a reality, but only in the case of a debt arising from theft (and according to the plain sense of Scripture, only a theft that led to the stolen ox or sheep being slaughtered or sold) – not in the case of a debt stemming from an ordinary loan. Regarding an ordinary loan, the Torah limits the creditor's ability to recover the debt through seizure of the debtor's assets: it forbids seizing his millstones or his last garment, and it also forbids the creditor from entering the debtor's house to collect his assets. At the heart of the prohibitions related to debt collection stands the prohibition against selling the debtor into slavery in order to pay off his debt:

Do not take an upper or lower millstone as security for a debt, for that would be taking a person’s livelihood as security. If someone is found to have kidnapped another Israelite, enslaving or selling him, the kidnapper shall die. You must purge the evil from your midst… When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, do not go into his house to take his pledge. Wait outside while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, do not go to sleep with the pledge in your possession. You must return his pledge by sunset, so that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. This will be accounted to you as a righteous act before the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 24:6-13)

We also find that children were sold into slavery to pay off the debts of their fathers, which is a severe Torah prohibition:

A woman – the wife of one of the brotherhood of the prophets – cried out to Elisha, "Your servant, my husband, is dead! You know that your servant always feared the Lord. Now a creditor has come to take my two children away to be his slaves." (II *Melakhim* 4:1)

And there were some who said, "We have had to borrow money against our fields and vineyards to pay the king's levy. Is our brothers' flesh not like ours? Their sons akin to our own? And yet we must force our sons and daughters into servitude, and some of our daughters have already been forced in that way while we stand helplessly by. Our fields and vineyards have gone to others. (*Necḥemia* 5:4-5)

Let us return to our *haftara*, to the prophecy of Amos. In my understanding, this prophecy was not only addressed to the slave traders. Consider these words, toward the end of *Sefer Amos*:

Hear this, those who trample the poor, who would decimate the destitute of the land, those who say, "When will the New Moon pass so we can sell grain, and the Sabbath so we can open the storehouses, so we can diminish the weight of an ephah but enlarge the shekel, skew false scales, sell the needy for silver and the poor for the price of shoes? Let us sell chaff as grain." (*Amos* 8:4-6)

At the beginning of his prophecy, in our *haftara*, Amos refers to those who sell slaves, and at the end of his prophecy, he refers to those who buy them. But there, he lumps them together with grain merchants who take advantage of their abundance to dictate the market prices of the essential commodities of life, diminish the weight of an ephah of grain that they supply, and demand larger silver shekels in return. They cause the poor man, who is forced to accept the terms of the rich merchants, to pay beyond his means in order to bring home a meager amount of food for his household. Thus, he is forced to borrow money that he cannot pay back, and ultimately, he is sold into slavery for his debt. The grain merchants indirectly turn into slave traders, even though they never actually engage in that business. All of society, every businessman in his own way, though he claims innocence, is complicit in erasing the poor from the book of life and freedom.

It should be noted that according to the Rashbam's interpretation of the sale of Yosef, the brothers could also claim innocence in the matter of Yosef’s sale, since it can be understood from the verses that it was the Midianite merchants who removed Yosef from the pit and sold him to the Yishmaelites. The guilt of the brothers, who stripped Yosef of his robe and threw him into the pit like a naked slave who was being punished by his master, and thereby caused the Midianites to think they had stumbled upon a slave free for the taking, is only indirect guilt. Nevertheless, Yosef reproaches his brothers: "I am your brother Yosef, whom you sold into Egypt" (*Bereishit* 44:4).

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Among the seven sins listed by Amos, we also find the sin of using the debtors’ property in the worship of God:

They spread confiscated clothing beside every altar and drink wine bought with fines in the house of their gods.

The prophet rebukes the worshippers of God, who come to bow down before the altar and offer libations of wine (the remnants of which they drink). The worship described here comes at the expense of the unfortunate debtors whose clothing was confiscated in payment of their debts; their creditors use their clothing to pad the ground when they bow down to God before the altar. The wine that the creditors bring to the Temple was collected as a fine (apparently interest) for their debts.

Many prophets warned against service of God that comes at the expense of the commandments of charity and justice, and firmly asserted that it is disqualified in God's eyes. Yeshayahu (1), Yirmeyahu (7), Hoshea (4) and Mikha (6) all spoke about this, and here they are joined by Amos. It should be noted that almost all of Amos's prophecy deals with defects in the charity and justice practiced by society in the kingdom of Shomron; he hardly mentions iniquities in the realm of God's worship in the sinful kingdom.

**V. More on the Slave Trade – The Difference Between Yoel and Amos**

In the order of the twelve minor prophets, the book of *Amos* comes after the book of *Yoel.* This placement is not by chance, for Amos opens his book with the same theme with which Yoel closed his:

The Lord roars from Zion; from Jerusalem He raises His voice. The heavens and the earth tremble. But the Lord will be a shelter for His people, a stronghold for the children of Israel. (*Yoel* 4:16)

These are the words of Amos of the herdsmen of Tekoa, who prophesied regarding Israel during the days of Uziya, king of Yehuda, and Yorovam the son of Yoash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. He said: The Lord roars from Zion; from Jerusalem He raises His voice: The shepherds' pastures are in mourning, and the peak of the Carmel withers. (*Amos* 1:1-2)

The prophet Yoel speaks extensively in the last chapter of his book about the invasion of the nations from the south, and the selling of captives from Jerusalem as slaves in the markets of the Middle East.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to the prophecy, God will bring them down to the Valley of Yehoshafat, judge them, and take His revenge from them for this despicable slave trade. Amos, as we have seen here, turns the attribute of salvation of which Yoel spoke ("But the Lord will be a shelter for His people, a stronghold for the children of Israel") into an attribute of severe judgment of Israel because of their sins ("The shepherds' pastures are in mourning, and the peak of the Carmel withers"). In Yoel's prophecy, the nations will be punished for selling Jews into slavery, whereas in the prophecy of Amos, the people of Israel themselves, who sell their brothers as slaves, will be punished with a double and redoubled punishment.

**VI. “It Is Only You That I Have Kown”**

Earlier, I cited the verse: "It is only you that I have known from among all the families on earth, so I will visit all your sins upon you," to explain why Amos lists only one sin for each of the other nations, whereas for Israel, he lists seven. There is a deep and important message in this verse, which must be understood in light of the state of the kingdom of Israel during the time of Amos. Amos prophesied (apparently for two years – until the earthquake mentioned in first verse of the book) in Shomron and in Beit El in the days of Yorovam the son of Yoash, about whom Scripture states:

In the fifteenth year of Amatzyahu son of Yoash, king of Yehuda, Yorovam son of Yoash, king of Israel, became king in Shomron for forty-one years. He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not turn away from all the sins of Yorovam son of Nevat, who led Israel to sin. He was the one who restored Israel’s border from Levo Chamat to the Arava Sea, fulfilling the word of the Lord, God of Israel, as He had promised through His servant Yona son of Amitai, the prophet from Gat Chefer. For the Lord had seen the depth of Israel's bitter suffering, with neither bond nor free left and no helper for Israel. But the Lord had not decreed to blot out Israel’s name from under the heavens, so He delivered them through Yorovam son of Yoash. As for the rest of Yorovam's history and all his deeds and heroic feats in battle, and how he restored Damascus and Chamat to Yehuda in Israel – they are recorded in the Book of the History of the Kings of Israel. (II *Melakhim* 14:23-28)

This forum will not allow for a full explanation of the prophetic reasoning that reconciles the internal contradiction in what is written here – on the one hand, that Yorovam did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord (i.e., he continued worship of the calves over the Temple in Jerusalem), while on the other hand, God helped him, because of His mercy for Israel, and brought the kingdom to unprecedented power and to an expansion of its borders beyond Damascus and Chamat. It would not be surprising if the feeling was that God has mercy on His chosen people and gives them victory and power regardless of their actions, whether they are good or evil. In the days of abundance, wealth, and peace of Yorovam son of Yoash, no one saw the danger around the corner. No one saw it, except the prophet Amos.

In prophecy after prophecy, Amos struggles with the illusion of a chosen people who enjoy immunity for their crimes because of God's love for them:

Woe, you who are settled secure in Zion, who rest assured on Mount Shomron, who are called "chief among nations"; the House of Israel flocks to them. Yet go to Kalneh and look, and from there to Chamat Raba; go down to the Philistine Gat. Are you better than these kingdoms? Is their territory greater than yours? (*Amos* 6:1-2)

The people of Israel are complacent and trust in their position as "chief among nations," a nation of treasure. The prophet tells them to consider Aram and the Philistines, whose kingdoms were destroyed, and says that Israel's fate will not be better than theirs:

Are you not to Me like the children of Kush, O children of Israel? Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt as I brought the Philistines up from Kaftor and Aram from Kir? (*Amos* 9:7)

In the years of the exodus from Egypt and Israel's ascent to the land of Israel, God also redeemed the Arameans and the Philistines, the people of the island of Kaftor (Crete), and He also brought these nations to the land. The prophet makes it clear that the kingdom of Israel is also liable to be destroyed as those kingdoms were, despite having been helped in the past, and that Israel has no valid reason to rely on their having been chosen.

In our *haftara*, Amos says this in a different way: the nation of Israel is indeed the chosen nation, but having been chosen does not grant them immunity from calamity; rather, it is a reason for added strictness and more severe demands.

Indeed, not many years after Amos's prophecy, the house of Yehu collapsed, Yorovam the son of Yoash being its fourth king, and the kingdom of Assyria took over the Middle East and the kingdom of Israel. Not long after that, Shomron was destroyed and its inhabitants were exiled to the ends of the Assyrian kingdom.

**VII. Seven Questions and One Answer**

The *haftara*, which began with the seven nations judged together with Israel, with Israel's seven sins and their seven punishments, ends with seven questions:

(1) Would two walk together if they had not met?

(2) Would a lion roar in the forest if it had not caught prey?

(3) Would a young lion raise its voice from its den if it had not seized prey?

(4) Would a bird plunge into a trap on the ground if it were not baited?

(5) Would the trap spring up from the earth if it had not trapped quarry?

(6) Would a warning horn blow in the city and the people not be afraid?

(7) Would disaster come upon the city were it not an act of the Lord?

All of these questions have one meaning: things do not happen "by chance," without cause and without consequence. Israel's grave sins will have consequences, and God will not leave them without a suitable recompense – the collapse of the royal house and the destruction and exile of Shomron. However, the prophet adds:

The Lord God does not do anything without revealing His secret to His servants, the prophets. A lion roars; who would not fear? The Lord God speaks; who would not prophesy?

God does not deal despotically with His nation. He informs His prophets of planned punishments and the prophets then warn the people, making it possible for them to correct their actions. God's secret, the severe calamity to come, is as frightening as the roar of a lion, and the people must listen to the words of the prophets and take all measures to prevent the calamity by correcting their sinful ways.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This idea is also found in the *piyyut*,"*Eleh Ezkera*," recited at the end of the *Avoda* section in the Yom Kippur *Musaf* service. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is discussed at length in our study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayishlach*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)