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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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***Shiur* #22**

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

As we discussed in the [last shiur](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-21-prophecies-amos-oracles-against-nations-continued), the punishments threatened against (or promised to) Israel are all within the military sphere, specifically a loss of ability on the battlefield. We addressed the seeming anomaly of a "light" punishment and then focused our attention on the transitional verse:

**13** Behold, I creak under you, as a cart creaks that is full of sheaves.

Now we will focus our attention on the sevenfold punishment itself:

1. Flight will fail the swift (*Ve*-*avad manos mi-kal*)
2. And the strong will not exert his strength (*Ve-chazak lo ye'ametz kocho*)
3. Neither will the mighty deliver himself (*Ve-gibbor lo yemalet nafsho*)
4. Neither will he stand that handles the bow (*Ve-tofes ha-keshet lo ya'amod*)
5. And he that is swift of foot will not deliver himself (*Ve-kal be-raglav lo yemalet*)
6. Neither will he that rides the horse deliver himself (*Ve-rokhev ha-sus lo yemalet nafsho*)
7. And he that is courageous among the mighty will flee away naked in that day (*Ve-amitz libbo ba-gibborim arom yanus ba-yom ha-hu*)

THE PUNISHMENT: WHERE IS THE ENEMY?

Before dissecting each of these curses on its own terms, it must be noted that these punishments are missing a key factor. Each of them reflects weakness, incompetence or faintheartedness on the battlefield. At no point, however, is there any mention of an enemy. We assume that the swift will not be able to flee from the enemy. We picture the strong not exerting his strength against an enemy. However, in none of these imprecations is there even a mention of an enemy, much less a description of the foe's successes and, we would presume, brutal rule after conquest. (We would assume this based on the diatribes against the neighboring nations in the six oracles that open the book, most of which either mention or allude to brutal crimes of war against the vanquished population.).

A FIRST PROPOSAL: RHETORICAL STYLE

Our first strategy in addressing this would be to suggest that perhaps this is the style of biblical imprecations — to focus on the cursed and omit mention of any human agency in the fulfillment of the curse. To wit, since the punishment is divine, it would be distracting and potentially misleading to introduce the human factor into the punishment.

This approach, however, does not stand up to even a cursory look through *Tanakh*. In the Covenant between the Pieces, Avra(ha)m is "promised" the bleak future that his seed will endure:

You shall surely know that your seed will be a stranger in a foreign land and **they will enslave and oppress them for four hundred years.** Indeed, I will judge *t***he nation for whom they toiled***…* (*Bereishit* 15:13-14)

We immediately see that the biblical text introduces the human oppressor into the scenario and "deals with them."

We might be tempted to write that off as disanalogous, seeing as we are looking for imprecations, and the Covenant between the Pieces is a promise of greatness that would, perforce, involve the tribulations of slavery and oppression.

When we peruse actual threats or curses affecting the nation, however, we again see that the enemy is front and center in the description.

In *Vayikra* 26, *Brit Sinai*, we are told:

If you do not listen to Me and do not fulfill all of these commandments…I will place My face against you, and you will fall **before your enemies; your foes will oppress you...** (*Vayikra* 26:14, 17).

Again, in *Brit Arvot Moav* (the other, longer rebuke), we read:

God will raise against you a nation from afar, from the ends of the earth, as the vulture flies; a nation whose language you will not understand. A brazen nation, who does not honor the elders nor shows any compassion for the young. He will devour the fruit of your animals and the fruit of your land until you are desolate; he will not leave you any grain, wine or oil, the offspring of your oxen and the young of your flock until he utterly destroys you. And he will besiege you at all of your gates until your high and fortified walls that you trusted fall; he will besiege you at all of your gates throughout your land which the Lord your God gave you. (*Devarim* 28:49-52)[[1]](#footnote-1)

We see that the enemy plays a central and active role in the curse. This is substantiated much more explicitly in the prophecies of Yeshayahu (re: Assyria) and Yirmeyahu (re: Babylonia) along with other literary *Nevi'im*.

It seems clear that the biblical idiom does *not* avoid making mention of the human agent of God's anger. To put it more mildly, prophecies in *Tanakh* spell out as clear a future as is appropriate. Typically, prophecies that are more immediate (such as the imminent Babylonian conquest of Judea in Yirmeyahu's time) are expressed in more explicit terms. On the other hand, prophecies that are distant (i.e. messianic and eschatological visions) are presented in murkier terms, such that many actual scenarios could be imagined as the fulfillment of said prophecy.

Let us take the case of Ya’akov’s blessing (*Bereishit* 49:10): “The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda.” It could be understood as a directive (or prognostication) that Yehuda will immediately take the reins of leadership of the brothers. Since, however, the section is prefaced with “I shall tell you that which will befall you in the end of days" (ibid. v.2), we understand that this is a "distant" prophecy. If the descendants of Yehuda believe that when the people finally request a monarch, he will be appointed from their tribe, we understand their assumption. When Shemuel nevertheless appoints the first "king" from the rival tribe of Binyamin, they have two options. They can either maintain that the prophet has violated "grandfather's command" (see Ramban ad loc.), a highly unlikely proposal; or they may reassess Ya’akov's words. This is, indeed, how history plays out and, to paraphrase Ramban, once the scepter comes to Yehuda, it never leaves that tribe*.* In other words, "murky" (i.e. distant) prophecies may be fulfilled in any one of a myriad of fashions and we only realize how they are to be fulfilled after the fact — if then.

That said, it is to be noted that even those distant prophecies, such as the Covenant between the Pieces and both rebukes in the Torah, while leaving the oppressor or invading army unnamed (to be identified at fulfillment, as above), still involve an active enemy. They do not describe a suffering nation without an enemy who generates the suffering. Furthermore, that enemy is destined to suffer for their role in persecuting Israel, though the oppression is divinely mandated.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our first proposal for solving Amos’s "victim-centric" rebuke does not stand.

A SECOND PROPOSAL: FRIENDLY FIRE

A second, farfetched idea omits the enemy totally from the scene; i.e. the Israelite army will be running from its own shadow. In other words, there is no enemy here because there is no enemy at all! Truthfully, this suggestion is not as outlandish as it may seem; we have several mentions, both prophetic as well as narrative, of armies defeating themselves with no active enemy attacking them. The rebuke of *Brit Sinai* (*Vayikra* 26:37) mentions "And they shall stumble, each over his fellow", presumably fleeing an enemy who isn't actively mentioned in the verse. In the story of Gidon's attack on the Midianite camp (*Shoftim* 7), where he uses his 300 men to generate a chaotic internal attack among 135,000 enemy soldiers, Gidon's "army" holds only lanterns, pots and shofars – no weapons (yet).

However, this would be hard to sustain in our case. The soldiers mentioned in our septad of weakness are experts in their particular area of warfare and are attempting to use either speed, courage or aim to attack, so there must be someone whom they are attacking. This is unlike the story of the friendly fire of the Midianites (*Shoftim*) or the flight of the Assyrian army (*II Melakhim* 19:35-36), each of which describes a surprising defeat without an active human enemy, using one of the two paradigms of such an unexpected turn of events. In one model (*Shoftim*), a strategy is utilized which sets the enemy against itself; in the other, divine intervention routs the camp and the Israelites are as surprised as the Assyrian enemy to find this out. Contradistinctively, our list of military weaknesses hints to a human enemy from whom Israel is fleeing, whom Israel is trying to strike, et cetera — all without success.

A THIRD PROPOSAL: LISTENING TO YESHAYAHU

Perhaps we can get a sense of the meaning of our punishment-sequence from the words of a younger contemporary of Amos. In the late 8th century BCE, in Jerusalem, the royal court is understandably concerned about the conquest of Judean cities by the mighty Assyrian army; Sancheriv has cast his eyes on the capital. Yeshayahu rebukes the members of Chizkiyahu's inner council (and, evidently, the king himself) who advocate seeking military protection from Egypt:

**12** Wherefore thus says the Holy One of Israel: because you despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and stay thereon; **13** Therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking comes suddenly at an instant. **14** And He shall break it as a potter's vessel is broken, breaking it in pieces without sparing; so that there shall not be found among the pieces thereof a sherd to take fire from the hearth, or to take water out of the cistern.

**15** For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: in sitting still and rest shall you be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength; and you would not. **16** But you said: “No, for we will flee upon horses;” therefore will you flee; and: “We will ride upon the swift;” therefore will they that pursue you be swift. **17** One thousand will flee at the rebuke of one, at the rebuke of five will you flee; till you be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on a hill. **18** And therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious unto you; and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have compassion upon you; for the Lord is a God of justice, happy are all they that wait for Him. (*Yeshayahu* 30:12-18)

An important exegetical note: the prophet paraphrases the people's crooked intent as *“Al sus nanus (*or *nanos)” —* which is translated (by some, as in the 1917 JPS translation used here): “We will flee upon horses.” This translation makes little sense in light of the divine "comeuppance" for this plan, *“Al ken tenusun,”* which would affirm their plan’s success! This is not much of a warning or punishment.

Therefore, we prefer the interpretation of Rabbi Yona ibn Janach, quoted by ibn Ezra (*Yeshayahu* 30:16) and developed more fully by Shadal ad loc. He reads *nanus* as anchored in the root *n\*s\*s,* a banner to be lifted high (Shadal suggests that it is related to the root *n\*s\*a,* to be elevated). The upshot is that the people take pride in their horses, but, in an ironic twist, they will have to flee from their enemies (perhaps using those selfsame equines). This interpretation is recommended by the second hemistich, “*Ve-al kal nirkav, al ken yikalu rodfeikhem,”* You were saying "we will ride” — not flee! — “on a fleet animal, but (instead) your enemies will be swift (to chase you).”

Significantly, the issues of injustice and corruption make their way into Yeshayahu's oracle, even though they do not seem to be his central point of chastisement. The core message of *“Be-shuva va-nachat tivashe'un,”* "In sitting still and rest shall you be saved" suggests a passive foreign policy platform, "allowing" God to work His defeat of Assyria. Nonetheless, Yeshayahu does not omit the internal sins of Judean society (which make up the broader rebuke with which the book opens); indeed, he presents them as the breach in their walls, leading to incompetence on the battlefield and ironic turns in their fortune, outlined here.

The equation is quite straightforward and is best illustrated by this comment from *Talmud Yerushalmi (Pei’a* 1:1):

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: David's generation were all righteous, yet because they had *dilatorim*, they would go out to war and suffer casualties, as David says (*Tehillim* 57:5), “I am in the midst of lions;  I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts — men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords…”

However, the generation of Achav were idolaters; but because they had no *dilatorin,* they would go out to war and win.

Most dictionaries render *dilatorin* as "informers, sycophants," and that highlights the underlying message of this *aggada*. Regardless of spiritual and ritual impiety, when the troops are a cohesive unit with a sense of common trust, concern for each other's welfare and a unified mission, the army stands a much greater chance of succeeding, even when the odds are stacked against it; conversely, the best-trained, most well-equipped and numerous military which suffers from internal strife and mistrust cannot emerge victorious amidst its own divisiveness. This is a truism that we have seen played out numerous times, both locally and globally.

Yeshayahu's message is two-fold and he weaves it together masterfully. First of all, a society that allows for corruption at the highest levels of leadership will fail on the battlefield. Secondly, the particular foreign policy sought out by the court is doomed to fail and the monarchy should adopt a passive approach, trusting that God will defeat Assyria. The first point is eternally true and applies broadly; the second is a local directive, specifically addressing the threat from Assyria and the (non-starter of an) attempt to sign a treaty with Egypt. The second message is not relevant to our passage, but the first speaks volumes.

Earlier in this lecture, we considered punishments in *Tanakh* which play out on the battlefield and noted that, generally, an active enemy (sometimes named) is part of the prophecy. However, these punishments are all in response to ritual sins, moral lapses or — typically — whoring after idolatry. In these cases, to paraphrase the wording of the *Shoftim* cycle,[[3]](#footnote-3) we stray from God and He sells us to a foreign oppressor. That oppressor was God's agent of discipline (or anger; see *Yeshayahu* 10:5) against us, His wayward children.

When our failures are in the torn fabric of society, in the horrific gap between those in power and those who are disenfranchised, then we are our own worst enemy! The foe on the battlefield is **incidental** and not vital to the divine justice meted out to us. This is the point that Yeshayahu makes, and Amos as well.

This is not to suggest that Amos’s rebukes of Shomeron are solely about a corruption of justice and oppression of the poor by the elites. They are not, and there is plenty we have yet to study about idolatry and related sins. But, as noted in earlier lectures, the central point of Amos’s eighth "regional" oracle is to focus the prophetic spotlight on the sickness which pervades the societal structure in Israel. I earlier suggested that the seven accusations leveled against Israel are all about this topic, and the mentions of "every altar" and "the houses of their gods" (*Amos* 2:8) are incidental and not central to the rebuke.

CONCLUSION — FOR NOW

In considering the threatened punishment against Israel which takes us to the end of this oracle, we examined three proposals. The first, that the lack of an active (named) enemy on the battlefield is in the style of *Tanakh*, was quickly disproven. The second, that this is a case of an army’s collapse under its own weight without an enemy present at all, was also rejected based on contrasting it with narratives in *Tanakh* where that is exactly what happens. Finally, we looked at Amos’s contemporary in Jerusalem. The punishment outlined by Yeshayahu sounds eerily like ours and, like Amos, he invokes oppression as part of the root cause. This fits neatly with the scope and context of Amos’s rebuke.

In the next *shiur*, we will look at the structure and meaning of these seven punishments to discern an underlying message and to discover a yet stronger relationship between the indictments and their consequences.

**For Further Study:**

Re: *Yeshayahu* 30: A. Cohen, “*Elef Echad*,” *Beit Mikra* 17:4 (1972), p. 509

1. It is interesting to note that in the curses in *Vayikra*, military conquest comes at the beginning and is followed by curses against the land and its produce; this order is reversed in *Devarim*. A proper analysis of this change is worthwhile but beyond the scope of this *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, *inter alia*, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:5 and Ramban, *Bereishit* 15:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Shoftim* 2:11-20. The general scheme of the cycle is (1) idolatry 🡪 (2) foreign oppressor 🡪 (3) oppression 🡪 (4) crying out (not necessarily in prayer) 🡪 (5) God sending a *shofet* to redeem them 🡪 (6) they reform their behavior for the duration of the *shofet*'s life (at most). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)