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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

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**Shiur #25**

**The Prophecies of Amos: "The Hearken Sequence"**

Welcome to our second year of studying the prophecies of Amos of Tekoa. Although many of the passages that we will read, analyze and discuss — and use as springboards for broader inquiry into the prophetic message — stand alone, nonetheless, it is nearly impossible to separate these oracular declarations from the preceding ones. Therefore, I recommend looking back at last year's *shiur*im, which are available [**here**](https://etzion.org.il/en/topics/amos-and-hoshea).

As I pointed out in the [last](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-24-prophecies-amos-oracles-against-nations-conclusion) installment of the first year, the declaration of *Amos* 3:1-2 is an introduction to the "causal riddles" passage, which argues for the inevitability of prophecy. That passage is, in turn, the *peticha* (opening; or, to borrow a word from the world of medieval liturgical poetry, the *reshut*) for the larger "Hearken" sequence of oracles which takes us through chapter 5. In addition, it serves as an affirmation of Israel's special relationship to God which requires a (much) higher standard of societal ethics, not to mention theological fidelity. It is this raised bar which is the subtext of the first series of Amos's oracles – the oracles against the nations.

THE INEVITABILITY OF PROPHECY: THE TEXT (3:1-8)

**Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying:****You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.** Will two walk together, unless they have agreed? 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 hasn't taken anything? 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? Shall a shofar be blown in a city, and the people not tremble? Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it? For the Lord God will do nothing, if He has not revealed His counsel to His servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?[[1]](#footnote-1) 

This larger introduction is followed by two sets of prophecies, each beginning with the *leitwort* "*Shimu*" (Hearken), just as the opening verse does.

In this *shiur*, we will address the "introduction to the introduction", i.e. the two opening verses which serve as the justification for the rest of the "inevitability of prophecy" passage.

"*SHIMU*" — HEARKEN

**Hearken** to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

The opening word, *shimu*, is used in the earlier books of *Tanakh* (Torah and the historiographic Prophetic books, *Nevi'im Rishonim*) in two nearly polar contexts.

1. When Moshe addresses Korach at the beginning of his insurrection, he opens with ***“Shimu*** *na benei Levi,”* “Hearken now, sons of Levi” *(Bamidbar* 16:8).
2. When Ravshakeh reports the words of Sancheriv to the population of Yerushalayim, he begins with ***“Shimu*** *devar ha-melekh ha-gadol, melekh Ashur,”* "Hearken to the words of the great king, the king of Assyria" (*II Melakhim* 18:28).
3. When God rebukes Aharon and Miriam regarding their conversation about Moshe, He states (*Bamidbar* 12:6): *“Shimu na devarai,”* “Hearken now to My words."

These are all figures of authority and, contextually, ultimate power, declaring an unwelcome suggestion to a (hopefully) intimidated and subjugated audience.

Conversely, we hear individuals using the introductory *shimu* as a plea to be heard:

1. When Yosef presents his dreams to his older brothers, he calls them together with *“Shimu na ha-chalom ha-zeh asher chalamti,”* “Hearken now to this dream that I dreamt" (*Bereishit* 37:6). Although we might be tempted to view this relationship as a power struggle, Yosef is certainly not in the unequivocal power seat at this point with his brothers. Note that he does **not** use this formula when presenting the second dream.
2. Whereas the first example is arguable, there is no question that when the wise woman of Avel Beit Ma’akha calls out to Yoav from the other side of the wall, she is pleading with him to spare the town. She begins her declaration with *“Shimu, shimu”* (*II Shemuel* 20:16), requesting that Yoav come nigh so that she can plead for the town's salvation.
3. When Yotam escapes the fratricidal rampage led by Avimelekh of Shekhem, he goes to the top of Mt. Gerizim and utters the famous words of the parable of the trees. His declaration opens with “*Shimu elai ba’alei Shekhem,”* "Hearken to me, leaders of Shekhem" (*Shoftim* 9:7). He is in no position of power; as a matter of fact, when he concludes his speech, he flees the scene to save his own life.
4. Even when Shaul addresses his clan-members with “*Shimu na benei Yemini,”* “Hearken now to me, sons of Binyamin" (*I Shemuel* 22:7), he is pleading rather than ordering.

Significantly, Moshe never uses the *shimu* introduction when presenting law or prophecy, including the dire terms of the Rebuke in *Devarim* (28) and the famous Song of Moshe (*Devarim* 32). He only does so when speaking to the rebels of Korach's group (above) and to the "rebels" at Kadesh (*“Shimu na ha-morim,”* “Hearken now to me, rebels,” *Bamidbar* 20:10). Neither Shemuel nor Eliyahu — each of whom rebukes the people several times — uses the word; Elisha only uses it once, when foretelling the miraculous salvation of Shomeron from the siege and famine (*II Melakhim* 7:1).

All of this changes with the advent of literary prophecy. The four prophets who are part of the first wave — Hoshea, Amos, Yeshayahu and Mikha — all use the phrase with the same intent. It is neither a royal fiat nor a plea; their use of *shimu* is consistently a preparation to hear the prophetic word of the Lord. Yeshayahu uses it seventeen times,[[2]](#footnote-2) Hoshea twice, Amos five times and Mikha six times. To be sure, there is the sense of a divine decree, yet a prophet may also have a relationship with his audience in which he is pleading with them. It is as if the two earlier usages – of royal edict and, contradistinctively, petition — have been merged into the formulaic introduction of the prophet.

One final note about this metamorphosis: both Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel use the word liberally. As I will discuss in one of the appendices to this series, Yirmeyahu, more than any other later prophet, uses both the imagery and the language of Amos throughout his presentations, so the *shimu* introduction is not surprising at all. In the case of Yechezkel, this use may be related to the unique nature of Yechezkel's prophecies, which are often given from a great distance – such as his standing in Babylonia and speaking to the mountains of Israel (*Yechezkel* 36:1, 4) or to the "shepherds of Israel" (ibid. 34:7, 9).

Thus, when Amos, having concluded his "oracles against the nations" with the military downfall of Shomeron, turns to his audience with *shimu*, he is both proclaiming with the voice of authority and pleading with the voice of fear.

I have dubbed this entire section — the second section of the collection of Amos's prophecies — the "Hearken" (*Shimu*) section because the four appearances of that word in these three chapters help define his stance vis-à-vis his audience and the tone of the prophecies.

AGAINST YOU — *ALEIKHEM*

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken **against you**, children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

Whereas a conventional translation of the word *aleikhem* (beginning with an *ayin*) would be rendered "against you" or "about you," we may have to be more flexible in our reading here.

The words *al* (with an *ayin*) and *el* (with an *alef*), which usually mean "to" or "towards" are used somewhat interchangeably in *Tanakh*:

1. When Yehoyakhin comes out to surrender to the king of Bavel, we would expect the text to read *Vayetze* ***el*** *melekh Bavel*, but it surprisingly states “*Vayetze* ***al*** *melekh Bavel”* (*II Melakhim* 24:12), a phrase that would normally be translated "He came out against (to attack) the king of Bavel." Contextually, this is an impossible rendering, and we must read it as "He came out to the king of Bavel."

1. In Yirmeyahu’s diatribe against the false prophets (23:35), he states: *“Ko tomar ish* ***al*** *rei'eihu ve-ish* ***el*** *achiv,”* “Thus shall a man say to his friend and a man to his brother.” As Radak (ad loc.) points out, the word *al* there should be read as *el.* He provides another example from the beginning of the Book of *Shemuel, “Vayelekh Elkana…* ***al*** *beito,”* which should be understood as ***el*** *beito —* “Elkana went… to his home” (*I Shemuel* 2:11).
2. Parenthetically, attending to this flexible use of ***al*** and ***el*** may help us explicate a well-known passage in *Bamidbar*. When Moshe is commanded by God to take the stick and respond to the people's complaints (including, but not limited to, a lack of water), he is told: *“Vedibartem* ***el*** *ha-sela,”*which is commonly translated as "And you shall speak to the rock" (*Bamidbar* 20:8). There is, however, no precedent or analogue in *Tanakh* where a prophet is told to speak to an inanimate object. From the subsequent scenario, it may be more judicious to read it as if it said *Vedibartem* ***al*** *ha-sela* ***—*** to wit, "And you shall speak [to the people] **concerning** the rock."

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of examples in *Tanakh* in which these two prepositions are used interchangeably, and we ought to use a more flexible eye when reading *aleikhem* here.

As such, we prefer the reading:

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken *concerning* you…

The challenger will then ask: why doesn't the text simply use ***eileikhem*** (the possessive of ***el***)? Although we've already seen the flexible use of these two prepositions, the prophet may be gaining a rhetorical push and, just as we saw with *shimu*, the multivocality of the word serves his didactic program. By using ***aleikhem***, he also indicates that this declaration is "against you.” In other words, the Lord speaks *regarding* Israel, selecting Israel from all the families of the earth. At the same time, these selfsame words operate *against* Israel, as they attest to the special relationship Israel has been granted with God. This relationship "raises the bar" and implies a stricter brand of justice, as the prophet lays out in the next verse.

REGARDING THE WHOLE CLAN – *AL KOL HA-MISHPACHA*

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole **family** which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

The word *mishpacha,[[3]](#footnote-3)* which is used over 170 times in *Tanakh*, nearly always connotes a clan, such as the subdivisions of the tribes, as in “a man or a woman or a *mishpacha* or a tribe" (*Devarim* 29:17). Similarly, for the lottery identifying Akhan, we find:

And Yehoshua arose early in the morning and brought Israel nigh by their tribes, and the tribe of Yehuda was marked. He then brought nigh *mishpachat Yehuda*, and he marked *mishpachat ha-Zarchi*; and he brought nigh *mishpachat ha-Zarchi*, and Zavdi was marked. (*Yehoshua* 7:16-17)

(This is one of the few instances where the word is used to denote an entire tribe).

Except in rare poetic flourishes (e.g. *Tehillim* 96:7, ibid. 22:28), the word is generally used to mark specific clans or sub-clans, as noted.[[4]](#footnote-4) In *Bereishit* alone, the word is used to mark larger groups, even nations. Curiously, the first instance of the word in all of *Tanakh* refers to a genus of animals, as the animals exit the Ark “*le-mishpechoteihem*,” “by their families” (*Bereishit* 8:19). Significantly, when Avraham is charged with his mission, he is told that he will be (or ought to be) a blessing and “Through you will all *mishpechot ha-adama* (the families of the earth) be blessed" (*ibid.* 12:3). This exact phrasing is repeated once more in *Bereishit*, when Yaakov is promised the Abrahamic blessing at Luz/ Beit-El: "Through you will all the families of the earth (*kol* ***mishpechot ha-adama)*** be blessed – and through your seed" (28:14).

We will return to the unusual use of *mishpacha* here at the conclusion of this *shiur.*

WHICH I BROUGHT UP OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole family **which I brought up out of the land of Egypt**, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

The mention of the Exodus here is not only surprising, it is (and this may be a bigger surprise to us) relatively rare in the rhetoric of this first generation of literary prophets.

Although Yeshayahu alludes (perhaps) to the Exodus in some of his eschatological visions (e.g. 11:15), he makes no explicit mention of the event.

Hoshea, in his romantic evocation of the good old days, suggests that when God deprives the nation of all of her material goods and leads her back to the desert, the love between God and the people will be rekindled "as the day that she came up out of Egypt" (2:17). Later on, he declares that "Israel is a young lad and I love him, and from Egypt I summoned my son" (11:1) and he speaks in the name of God as "I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt" (ostensibly, the One who led you out of Egypt — 10:10, 13:4). Most directly, in Hoshea's brief historiosophical recounting of God's kindnesses to the people, he explicitly makes mention that "with a prophet God brought Israel up out of Egypt" (12:14).

Mikha references the Exodus twice. The first time, amid his own historiosophical *riv* (suit) against the people, he explicates: "For I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery" (6:4), again among the kindnesses which He has done for the people. (The *riv* is against the people for their ingratitude.) Finally, Mikha invokes the Exodus as a model for future redemption: "As in the days of your leaving Egypt, I will show you wonders" (7:15).

It is Amos, alone among his colleagues, who returns to the Exodus theme several times as an explicit historic event which carries implications for the present nation and their moral standing before God.

At the beginning of Amos's oracles against Israel (at the conclusion of the "oracles against the nations," 2:7), he lists the Exodus as the first of the seven kind acts that God has done for His people – repaid with their treachery towards each other, as we saw in the past *shiur*im.

In our passage, as we will see forthwith, Amos references the Exodus as the event which demonstrates God's special relationship with His people. This relationship indicates a higher standard and greater expectations of the nation and, perhaps, a special type of expectation, which the nation has miserably failed to live up to.

Finally, in the last collection of prophecies in the book, Amos mentions the Exodus as just another national movement directed by God, as He brought the Philistines from Crete and the Arameans from Kir (9:7). When we get to the final chapter, we will consider this seeming turnabout in Amos's position, regarding Israel as just another nation. For now, we will focus on his singling out the special status of the people which derives, at least in part, from the event of the Exodus.

YOU ONLY HAVE I KNOWN

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: **You only have I known** of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

The verb "*yada*" in *Tanakh* is sometimes used to refer to awareness (as in *Bereishit* 19:33), but is also used to refer to an intimate, immediate and immanent connection. The most famous example of this meaning is to have sexual relations, as in "The man *yada* his wife, Chava" (*Bereishit* 4:1). For one individual to "know" another implies an exclusive merging which not only binds two together, but indicates an exclusion of all others. Buber, in his *Darko shel Mikra*, suggests that the essential meaning of the word in biblical Hebrew refers not to knowledge, as in cogitation, but rather contact:

In the language of the Bible…it refers to the contact between him (the "knower") and the object which is "known"… However, this notion of the contact of the "knower" is elevated to a unique and sublime level without parallel when referring to the relationship between God and His creatures; with His prophets whom He intends to dispatch (*Shemot* 33:12, *Yirmeyahu* 1:5); with Israel when preparing the nation for His mission (*Amos* 3:2, *Hoshea* 13:5); or with "regular" people who are wholehearted and trusting who take their refuge in Him (*Nachum* 1:7, *Tehillim* 31:8, *Tehillim* 37:8).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Buber uses this approach to explain the final verse in the opening psalm (*Tehillim* 1:6):

For the Lord *yode’a* the way of the righteous…

The Exodus is the great act which generates that special relationship between God and His people. The first statement of the Decalogue says as much: “I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (*Shemot* 20:2). As a number of Rishonim point out, the import of the declaration is that God is "your God" by dint of the Exodus — it is His claim to us. "They are my slaves" (*Vayikra* 25:55).

Since Israel experienced this exclusive closeness with the Divine, the opportunities for national spiritual excellence and moral perfection are infinitely greater; but therein lies the rub. This opportunity indicates an expectation which He does not — we might even suggest cannot — have of the other nations and, as such, "I will visit upon you all of your iniquities."

BACK TO THE *MISHPACHA*

Hearken to this word that the Lord has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all **the families of the earth**; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

Amos makes a second mention of *mishpacha*, again using a meaning that virtually disappears after *Bereishit,* nation. More significantly, Amos makes a nearly explicit reference to the Abrahamic mission, in which Avraham is charged to be the source of blessing for "all the families of the earth". As mentioned above, this phrase *mishpechot ha-adama* appears only three times in *Tanakh:* twice in the Abrahamic cycles (to Avraham and Yaakov) and here! Why does Amos, of all prophets, bring us back to Avraham with the use of *mishpacha*?

I'd like to suggest that a close look at Avraham's career reflects not just a commitment to monotheism (although we have no explicit stories of him battling paganism per se), but also (and perhaps more prominently) someone with a strong sense of loyalty to his family, both new and old. This includes his adopted son, Lot; his rejected son, Yishmael; and his treaty partners, Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei. Avraham is to be a blessing to all of the "families" of the earth because he demonstrates the proper way that family ought to operate, the fierce protection of family members and steadfast refusal to "give up" on them. His ethical majesty is informed by his commitment to kin. Witness his commitment to Sara, in spite of her barrenness; he only agrees to take a concubine to fulfill the divine mandate of having a great nation after Sara asks him to. Witness his insistence on Yitzchak’s marrying within the family and his unwavering patronage of Lot.

Perhaps this is why Amos, of all prophets, uses *mishpacha* to describe the nation. This nation that comes out together from Egypt, forged as one in the crucible of slavery, should hold the welfare of each of its members as a core value. When we read about the abuse of power, the gouging of the poor and trampling of the downtrodden (as we saw in chapter 2 and will see further on), we see that the *mishpacha* has forgotten not only its mission, but its common history and essential responsibility of each member towards the others.

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In the next two *shiurim*, we will analyze the *peticha* to the *shimu* passages, as Amos argues for the necessity and inevitability of prophecy among the "nation of prophets."

1. 1 Paul (*Mikra Le-Yisrael*) suggests that vv. 3-8 follow vv. 1-2, as the latter describe the divine selection of Israel and the former the selection/ appointment of the prophet. A close look at the text indicates that the two are not operating on the same plane; the first two verses speak of a history between God and His people which has raised them to an august position carrying greater responsibility and moral accountability. What I have dubbed "the inevitability of prophecy" speaks to the nature of things – that just as anything that happens in the natural world has its cause, similarly, when grander events take place, God is the power behind it; and He always notifies His prophets of this. This second passage will be the focus of the next *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To be more precise, it is used seven times by Yeshayahu of Yerushalayim and ten more times in the latter half of the collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Koehler and Baumgartner (*Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2001, pp. 1620-1621) mention a tentative association of *shifcha* (maidservant) with *mishpacha*, based on the Ugaritic and Punic *sh-p-ch.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One curious adaptation of the word is found in *Yirmeyahu* 15:3, where he refers to four types of divine judgment as *mishpachot* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Buber, *Darko Shel Mikra,* p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)