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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #31**

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

In [last week's *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-30-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we concluded our study of Amos's first "hearken" oracle, which identified the core sin of Shomeron and declaimed the punishment they should anticipate.

We will now continue with our study of the series, moving to the beginning of Chapter 4 and the second *shimu* rebuke.

The first segment of this prophecy (verses 1-3) is directed at “*parot ha-Bashan,”* "the cows of the Bashan." We will focus on that passage in this and the next *shiur*.

Breaking the oracle at this point is justified by both textual markers and content. The passage under consideration concludes with the signature formula, *ne’um Hashem,* which we have seen before and which served as the conclusion to the sequence of Chapter 3.

In addition, the *parot ha-Bashan* are the focal point of this brief passage. The accusation is leveled against these women, in detail, and then the consequential punishment that uniquely awaits them is laid out with frightening imagery; the following verses shift the focus to the worship sites at Beit El and Gilgal. That indictment seems to be leveled at the men who both officiate and those who participate in that worship.

All of this will be analyzed in the *shiurim* which follow.

THE TEXT

VERSE 1: INDICTMENT

The indictment is made up of two sections: in the first, the prophet identifies a specific audience (more about them below); and in the second, he names their crime.

*Shimu ha-davar ha-zeh*

Hear this word

This introductory formula, which we have already discussed at the beginning of chapter 3, again focuses the audience on the **words** of the prophet. It is reasonable to suggest that his intent is to persuade the people of Shomeron to pay close attention to the specific words he is using, as opposed to just the general thrust of the rebuke and threatened punishment. As such, we will do the same, following this brief but relevant tangent.

WORDS THAT LIVE FOREVER

*Chazal* (BT *Megilla* 14a) maintain that there were scores of prophets who delivered God's word to Israel during the prophetic era; however, only those prophecies which were "needed for generations" were committed to writing and included in the canon. This approach, depending on how it is understood and adopted, may have significant impact on our study of the literary prophets.

Clearly, if we do not adopt this position at all, we would have to propose a different explanation for the relatively small canon of prophetic works in *Tanakh*, relative to the millennium of the prophetic era and the many circumstances that *Am Yisrael* was in that would reasonably call for the oratory of God's spokesman. We could suggest that in spite of that, only these few men (and Chulda?) were actually called and responded to God's call.

Alternatively, a more likely explanation is that there were many more prophets but that their words were either lost to us due to their not being written down — or sufficiently repeated — by their followers (if they had any). A variation on this is that these books were simply lost to the sands of time, much as ibn Ezra (and others) explain the mentions of "the book of Yashar", "the book of the wars of the Lord" and others.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is also possible that there were other books but that they contained confusing or problematic passages that led to their being banned by the Men of the Great Assembly, as we find nearly happened to the Book of *Yehezkel.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, if we follow the Sages' lead and identify those canonized texts as the **only ones** that carry import for generations, then our reading of this eloquent and stinging (and, at times, comforting) oratory ought to operate on multiple planes, sequentially and then, ideally, simultaneously.

First of all, we need to establish the proper meaning of the words — this is the first task of every student and every commentator. Secondly, the larger textual context and relationship between the various phrases, including syntax and structure must be clarified. Thirdly, the Sitz im Leben (real-world setting), including geopolitical, societal, military and religious (among others) settings must be identified to the best of our ability.

Finally, the serious student who takes the Sages' determination to heart should listen to these words to discern the message that they carry for generations, including — and this takes courage — our own. If we maintain that the wording of the prophecies has been deliberately chosen and carefully delivered — as we have been doing throughout our study — then we might also want to see how these deliberately-chosen words or phrases speak to us. I do not intend at any point during this course to suggest specific contemporary applications; for that, we would need another *navi*, or at the very least, a person of great stature with "broad shoulders." I mention it because each of us ought to "incline an ear" not only to the overall messages but to the carefully-chosen words and phrases and to see how they speak to us.

BACK TO THE TEXT AND “THE COWS OF THE BASHAN"

*…parot ha-Bashan asher be-har Shomeron*

…the cows of the Bashan who are on the mountain of Shomeron

As he has done numerous times, Amos uses farm imagery, comfortable to him from his own livelihood of which we are informed in 1:1 and will learn more in Chapter 7.

The "cows" here are clearly not bovines — certainly not his audience — but they prove to be the wealthy women of Shomeron. This brief passage is the only one in *Amos* that is directly aimed at the women in his audience, a somewhat uncommon phenomenon in prophetic oratory.[[3]](#footnote-3) He uses this imagery to depict an indolent animal who grazes (off others' land) and fattens itself up while not producing anything.

The Bashan is on the eastern slopes of the Golan. While not exactly near Shomeron, the area is close enough that the audience should have some familiarity with it. The Bashan is known as a lush area, part of the territory that was captured from Og (*Bamidbar* 21) and which is given to the Makhir family of Menasheh (what we refer to as "half of Menasheh"). Although the image of cows grazing in the Bashan is pastoral and serene, that serenity is shattered when we learn where the "grass" upon which they graze comes from.

Worth noting is the apparent contradiction between *parot ha-Bashan* and *asher be-har Shomeron*. The prophet seems to be subtly pointing out how **very** wrong their behavior is. Not only are they feeding off of the misfortunes of others, they are in the entirely wrong place! Keep in mind that during several long stretches of time, Shomeron suffered terrible drought (e.g. *II Melakhim* 8:1) and the lush grasses and lazy grazing areas of Bashan are a foreign picture on the hill of Shomeron.

There is a stinging subtlety to this rebuke. If one lives in the Bashan, where there is wealth ("grass") aplenty, then living a luxurious life may be morally corrupt but ethically on the up and up. Living in drought-ridden Shomeron, however, is a different story, and this speaks not only of an overly-pampered life but also of a continued divide between the haves and the have-nots. The disenfranchised not only have nowhere to "graze,” they become the fodder of these despicable bovine women of the Samarian aristocracy.

*Ha-oshekot dalim ha-rotzetzot evyonim*

That oppress the poor that crush the destitute

Before analyzing this couplet, it is curious that these words, which are part of the indictment against the *parot ha-Bashan*, are placed in the first half of the verse. The *etnachta* (Masoretic pausal mark) appears under the word *evyonim*, indicating the halfway mark of the verse. The *etnachta* is usually placed at the end of one idea as an indicator that the second matching, responding, opposing (etc.) idea will now appear. We would expect the *etnachta* to appear in our verse under the word *Shomeron*, which completes the identification of the audience (first half) and then the next passage to begin with *ha-oshekot dalim*, signaling the beginning of the indictment.

The inclusion of our couplet in the first half carries with it an intensified chastisement. It is the case that these fat, indolent women behave badly, but it is more than that. As a result of their**ongoing** bad behavior, they are now **defined** as oppressors of the poor and crushers of the destitute. In other words, the first half of the verse is, indeed, completely devoted to identifying the audience. Who is that audience? The cows of the Bashan, residents of Shomeron, oppressors of the disenfranchised and crushers of the indigent. To be accused of a crime is one thing; to be rebuked as a chronic offender is a worse measure; but to be **defined** by your bad acts — what a powerful sting that must be!

The words *ashuk* (which we've seen before, in the first *shimu* oracle against Yisrael, 3:9) and *ratzutz* appear as a word-pair in several places in *Tanakh*, though they do appear independently in numerous contexts.

n *Devarim* 28:33, in the middle of the terrible curse against the people, we read:

*Vehayita rak ashuk ve-ratzutz kol ha-yamim.*

You will only be oppressed and crushed for all days.

In *Hoshea* 5:11, we find what seems to be a double-edged reference to the verse from *Devarim*:

*Ashuk Efrayim, retzutz mishpat*

(Which may mean) Efrayim [Shomeron] is oppressed, its judgment crushed

(Or may mean) Efrayim oppresses and its judgment [on behalf of the oppressed] is crushed

This ambiguity is likely deliberate, hinting that as a **result** of the oppression of the poor in Efrayim, that kingdom **will then be** oppressed and crushed by the outside enemy. In other words, the "base" meaning here is a reference to the bad behavior inside Shomeron, but the use of the passive participle of *ashuk* (instead of the active *oshek*, as it is in our passage) hints to the poetic justice (*midda ke-neged midda*) which will play out in Efrayim's immediate future.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Note that these two contemporaries, Amos and Hoshea, utilize the word pair from *Devarim* to refer to Yisrael's oppression of the poor, whereas in the original, the setting is clearly about *Am Yisrael’*s **being oppressed by others**. This very clever turn of context carries with it a more powerful sense of rebuke: that which God warned you would come about as a terrifying punishment for you — that is how **you** are treating **your own**!

As we pointed out, this definitional phrase which identifies the audience as crushers of the lowly is part of the first half of the verse. The use of the "ongoing present" (*oshekot* and *rotzetzot*), as opposed to the imperfect (*she-asheku* and *she-ratzetzu* or something of that sort) indicates that this behavior is ongoing and a regular part of life in Shomeron, not an occasional lapse of ethics and a one-time abuse of power.

The second half of the verse is made up of four simple words, but there is nothing simple about the phrase they form:

*Ha-omerot la-adoneihem havia ve-nishteh*

[The "cows”] who say to their masters: "Bring and we will drink!"

The continued use of the ongoing present (*ha-omerot* instead of, for example, *she-ameru*) indicates, again, a repeated pattern of behavior which has become "normal life" among the idle rich in Shomeron. This half of the verse details **how** and **why** they oppress the poor and crush the destitute. Before we fully analyze the words *havia ve-nishteh*, which hold the key to explaining the mechanics of that oppression, the straightforward reading of this text is frightening. These women crush the poor when they insist that their "masters" bring them (food? drink?) for a party. We need go no further to be horrified by the abuse of their position, but further we will go.

They speak "to their masters." From the context, it's clear that the referent here is their husbands, who are generally called *ish* or *ba'al* in *Tanakh*. It is not unheard of for a woman to refer to her husband as *adon* (witness Sara's words “*V-adoni zaken,”* "But my master [Avraham] is old," *Bereishit* 18:12) but it is nearly unmatched in narrative. In other words, for the text to refer to a woman's husband as *adon* is not found anywhere else.

The only possible exception is *Shoftim* 19:26, where the text, in relating the end of that tragic night for the concubine in Giva, relates that "she fell at the door of the house where here *adon* was [and lay there] until it was light." This second example is of doubtful relevance, since, as a concubine, the (despicable) man in question could hardly be referred to as "her husband," although, perhaps for lack of a better word, he is called her *ish* once in the narrative.[[5]](#footnote-5) Still, he is never her *ba'al*. In addition, there are three members of their ill-fated traveling party: the man, his servant and his concubine. Since his status, vis-à-vis the servant, is *adon*, it is an easy fit to ascribe that title to him in relation to his concubine as well.

The odd usage here may be hinting to yet another sinful aspect of their behavior. Give that the next indictment is aimed at the idolatrous worship in Beit El and Gilgal, we may propose that the feasting that these "cows" are urging their husbands to enable is of an idolatrous nature. We've already seen a conflation of the ethical crimes of abusing the poor and the religious treachery of idolatry in the first indictment against Yisrael (2:8) where the judges (or wealthy) are accused of celebrating near foreign altars with wine seized in judgment while lying on garments taken as pledges (from the poor). Hence, the unusual *adoneihem* here may be alluding to the obeisance which these women are aiming at; the *adon* is their husband, but the *adon* hinted to is their new master, Ba'al.

The two-word quote of the women (to their "masters"), *“Havia[[6]](#footnote-6) ve-nishteh!”* seems simple on the face of it; they are demanding that their husband bring wine for them to drink. To do so, their husbands gouge the poor in order to provide for their "entitled" wives. However, *havia* may refer to bringing food (as in Yitzchak’s words to Esav, paralleled with Rivka's words to Ya’akov, throughout the story in *Bereishit* 27). In that case, *ve-nishteh* either means "and we will drink", meaning, "bring food and drink", or else *ve-nishteh* means "that we will feast", keeping in mind that a *mishteh* in *Tanakh* is a feast, highlighted by but in more means limited to, the consumption of wine.

In any case, these "cows of the Bashan" stand accused of manipulating their husbands into further oppressing and gouging the poor in order to provide their sumptuous feasts and to cater to their (idolatrously associated?) appetites. The many rhetorical stings and digs which Amos utilizes further heightens our sense of horror at the miscarriage of justice and abuse of the downtrodden in Shomeron.

In the next *shiur*, we will study verses 2-3 to see the unique punishment awaiting these vile women.

1. See, *inter alia*, ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 17:14 (long commentary). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BT *Shabbat* 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also *Yeshayahu* 2:16-23, although the prophet does not address the women of Tziyon directly in that passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yehuda Kil, *Daat Mikra, Trei Asar,* Vol. 1, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 19:13. The description of him as “*ish ha-isha ha-nirtzacha,”* "the man of the murdered woman" (20:4) is of little value, since he is trying to paint himself in far more innocent colors than the text would have it. In that spirit, it accords him the title *ish,* which is immediately refuted by his own words *“Bati ani u-filagshi la-lun,”* "I and my *concubine* came to lodge", followed by his admission of cutting her up into pieces. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A fragment from cave 4 in Qumran renders it *haviu* in the plural. LXX renders it that way; however, our received text seems more likely, as it is quoting what each woman says to her "master" — in the singular, of course. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)