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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #32**

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

In [last week's *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-31-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we began our study of Amos's second "hearken" oracle, which started with a specific rebuke of “the cows of the Bashan,” the wealthy women of Shomeron. These women stand accused of manipulating their "masters" (i.e. husbands) into repeatedly gouging the poor to provide for their luxurious feasts.

We will now continue our study of this passage, completing this three-verse sub-oracle.

THE TEXT: VERSE 2

*Nishba Ado-nai Elokim be-kodsho*

The Lord God has sworn by His holiness

The punishment pronounced against the *parot ha-Bashan* is punctuated with a Divine oath, God swearing "by His holiness.”

This specific phrase is a unique one in the canon, although there are four other passages — all in the literary Prophets — which include Divine oaths in which God is described as swearing "by His X.” The X may be "Himself" (“*be-nafsho,”* *Amos* 6:8, *Yirmeyahu* 51:14), "the pride of Ya’akov" (“*geon Ya’akov*,” *Amos* 8:7) or "His right hand and His strong arm" (“*bi-ymino u-vizroa uzo*,” *Yeshayahu* 62:8). In commenting on the phrase later in Amos, *geon Ya’akov*, R. Eliezer of Beaugency suggests that this is a reference to the *Mikdash*. Surprisingly, he does not comment on the phrase in our verse, but it stands to reason that he would read it that way as well — that the oath in our verse is an oath that God is taking by the holiness of the *Mikdash*. This fits the meaning of *kodsho* in, for instance, *Tehillim* 150:1, among many other mentions throughout the Psalter.

These may be poetic expansions of "I have sworn by Myself" (*bi nishbati*)[[1]](#footnote-1) which first appears as God's response to Avraham's "success" at the *Akeida* (*Bereishit* 22:16), followed by two mentions in *Yirmeyahu* (22:5; 49:13), both of which spell doom. The latest mention (*Yeshayahu* 45:23) returns to a promising and constructive commitment. This phrase is, in turn, an intensified form of *“Chai ani,”* "As I live," which finds its most powerful and clear expression at the end of *Shirat Moshe* (*Devarim* 32:40): *“Ki esa el shamayim yadi, ve'amarti chai anokhi le-olam,”* "If/ when I raise My hand to the heavens [!] and declare 'I live forever.'" This phrase appears 23 times in the canon, with the overwhelming majority (16) in *Yechezkel*.

Perhaps predictably, the five mentions listed above (ours, elsewhere in *Amos* and in *Yirmeyahu*) are all divine oaths to punish — with the (inevitable) exception in Deutero-Isaiah (62:8), which is a pledge to effect an end to the nation's being pillaged.

The sense of all of these occasions is that the oath is to be taken with the utmost seriousness and God, as it were, is doing so Himself. Evidently, these "cows of the Bashan" and their manipulation of their "masters" into further abusing the poor to provide for their own insatiable appetites is seen as most grievous on high. To be sure, all of the societal inequities which Amos addresses are part of a horrendous picture; yet, the image of these pampered women pushing their aristocratic husbands further into abusive ways just to help them "party on" seems to push the limits of profligate behavior. Perhaps it is this extreme depravity and utter lack of empathy that drives the framing of their punishment with such a serious oath.

***“Hinei yamim ba’im”***

*Ki hinei yamim ba’im aleikhem*

Lo, behold, days are coming upon you

The apocalyptic introduction “*hinei yamim ba’im*” can almost be said to be coined by Amos. Besides the one mention in pre-monarchic literature (I *Shemuel* 2:31) in which the fall of the priestly House of Eli is prophesized and a single mention by Yeshayahu (39:6, parallel to II *Melakhim* 20:17), Amos uses the phrase three times. In his wake, Yirmeyahu uses the phrase fifteen times — but no other prophet uses it at all! An argument from context cannot be advanced: this phrase is a clear introduction of an eschatological prognostication and nearly all of the prophets engage in some form of eschatological speculation/ prophecy. As I've mentioned several times, it seems fairly clear that Yirmeyahu is inspired, at least in his rhetorical style, by Amos. After concluding our study of *Amos*, we will engage in several excurses about the book, including one examining the impact of Amos on later prophets. At that point, we will survey the numerous points of contact between Yirmeyahu and Amos.

Amos's first two uses of this passage preface dire threats. In our case, the punishment against the Shomeron’s "cows of the Bashan" is pronounced; in the second mention, a prediction of a famine for the word of God ensues. As if to "repair" his use of “*hinei yamim ba’im*,” the inspiring and hopeful coda of Amos (to which we will devote significant energies) also begins with “*hinei yamim ba’im,”* but it seems to be just that: an attempt to turn the phrase around from its conventional and original context and implication. In other words, this phrase usually spells doom (as it does in the first mentions in *Shemuel* and *Melakhim*/ *Yeshayahu*). Yirmeyahu effectively revolutionizes the use of the phrase. In 12 of the 15 mentions in *Yirmeyahu*, the phrase introduces tidings of good news;[[2]](#footnote-2) it is as if Yirmeyahu takes the hint from Amos's final use[[3]](#footnote-3) and appropriates the phrase to introduce good news, about the upcoming redemption from "the northern lands"[[4]](#footnote-4) or about the new covenant with Yisrael.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In any case, the way that Yirmeyahu uses it (and the appearance in *Amos* 9) seem to mean that one day — at some indeterminate future date — these good things will finally come about. This contrasts with the foreboding use which first appears in I *Shemuel* 2 and the parallel appearances in *Yeshayahu* and II *Melakhim* 20. The sense of those verses is that the subsequently stated punishment is nigh and that these days are coming right quick.

Amos has doubled down on the threat aimed at these wealthy, pampered women. Not only has God sworn "by His holiness,” but this punishment is coming soon and is, so to speak, right around the corner. Consider this: the punishment section of the sub-oracle against the "cows of the Bashan" is all of two verses. The first half-verse is exclusively made up of these "overkill" phrases, so there must be a level of intensity that Amos wants to express and impress here. As we read the actual threat, we can understand this intensity.

**“*Venisa*…”**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Venisa etchem be-tzinot* | *ve-acharitekhen be-sirot duga* |
| You will be taken away with hooks(?) | and your residue(?) with fish-hooks(?) |

As can be seen from the translation attempt here, there are quite a few words and terms in this tenebrous passage that are close to indecipherable, not easily rendered into English nor easily understood.

The verb *(ve)nisa* is fairly straightforward. Built on the root *nun-sin-alef*, it means "to carry/ lift up;" in this case, the passive voice renders it: "You will be hoisted by….”

The word *tzinot* (singular *tzina*) is a bit more challenging. BDB suggests three meanings. One of them is "coolness,” attested once in *Tanakh* (*Mishlei* 25:13) – that certainly doesn't fit here. "Hoisted by coolness" makes no sense.

Another meaning proposed is "shield,” by far the most common use in *Tanakh*: e.g. the "shield carrier" walking in front of Golyat is called *nosei ha-tzina*. King Shelomo fashions two hundred golden shields (“*matayim tzina zahav shachut,”* I *Melakhim* 10:16), and *tzina* often appears in tandem with *magen* (e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 46:3; *Yechezkel* 23:24). In our case, however, that doesn't seem to be the preferred meaning, as being “hoisted by shields" is a bit of an unusual imagery. In addition, the second half of the phrase seems to place *tzina* in a different context.

BDB makes a third suggestion (although listing it first), which is "hook or barb (of fishing-spear?)," referencing only our verse.

How one arrives at this meaning is unclear, except perhaps by arguing that *tzinot* is a variation on the masculine plural *tzinim* in the famous passage in *Mishlei, “Tzinim pachim be-derekh ikeish”* (22:5), which is rendered "Thorns and snares are in the crooked path” or “…in the path of the crooked.” This is further informed by the second half of our phrase, which references some fishing setting. Hence, *tzinot* become "fish-hooks.” The image of these women being hoisted up and away by fish-hooks is a reasonable one and a powerful punishment.

Köhler and Baumgartner[[6]](#footnote-6) make four suggestions, each of which has something to recommend it. First of all is “prickles,” leading to fishing hooks, as BDB has it. Secondly, they suggest "rope, cord" based on an Akkadian cognate. This certainly fits the image, as the women are being hoisted away by ropes. The third proposal is shield, simply because it is the common meaning in the canon and is a feminine noun, leading to the plural *tzinot*.

Finally, they suggest basket, based on the parallel *sirot [duga*] which means "pots.” In addition, a basket in Aramaic is a *tzana*; this suggestion is made by Shalom Paul.[[7]](#footnote-7) He bases it on ibn Janah, ibn Balaam and R. Eliezer of Beaugency, who all take it to mean "basket.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although Köhler and Baumgartner tend to reject these last two meanings, I'd like to propose support for Paul's take. In *Zekharya* 5:6-7, the prophet envisions a basket, carrying a woman out and away. He is told that the woman represents the evil, leaving Yerushalayim. She is in an ephah, which in this context is a basket, and there is a block of lead carried (*niseit*) in the basket. The similarity to Amos's vision is too strong and it may be argued that Zekharya takes some of the elements of this image from Amos. In that case, the women who are being punished here are likely seen as being hoisted up and away — and out — in baskets.

***“Acharitekhen”***

What are we to make of *acharitekhen*? Literally, it translates to "your (feminine plural) residue," but what does that mean? The use of the feminine is understood, as it is addressed to the women of Shomeron. Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, ibn Ezra and Radak all render *acharitekhen* as "your children"; Rashi defends this interpretation, basing it on Dunash b. Labrat 's rendering, following *Daniel* 11:4. R. Eliezer of Beaugency (and, in his footsteps, Malbim) interpret *acharitekhen* as "your end" — in other words: your destiny. Paul proposes, based on 8:10 and 9:1, that *acharitekhen* means "every last one of you,” although neither of those verses seem to support his meaning. Again, we are faced with an inscrutable term.

***“Sirot duga”***

Whoever or whatever *acharitekhen* are, they are destined to end up in *sirot duga*. Most of the Rishonim see *duga* as related to fishing and assume that *sirot duga* are small fishing vessels, shaped like pots (to keep the fish inside). Ibn Ezra and R. Eliezer of Beaugency have a different take; above, we saw that the vague word *tzina* is defined by *sirot duga* and the novel translation of "fish-hooks" emerges. These two commentators move in the opposite direction. Reading *tzina* in its "proverbial" meaning of "thorns,” they interpret *sira* as another form of prickles, based on *Nachum* 1:10. *Duga* is, in turn, read not as related to fishing, but rather as connected to the verb *yidgu,* to take possession. In other words, they will be hoisted by thorns and their children will end up skewered and firmly held on thorns. Of course, those who interpret *tzina* as basket, informed by *sira*, read this stage of the punishment as entirely in the realm of fishing.

THE TEXT: VERSE 3

*U-fratzim teitzena isha negdah*

And each woman will go out (of the city) at the spot where she is

through the breaches in the wall

The syntax here is somewhat awkward and hard to translate (even if we had a clear grasp of the meaning of the words) in a straight word-for-word sense.

The general image is of a city whose walls have been breached and these women will either be taken out or will leave (of their own accord?). In either case, they will go out through the gaping holes that the enemy will make in the walls of the city. There will be so many openings in the walls that every woman will have a "ready-made exit" *negdah* — right where she stands — and she will go out of the city through there.

The ease that the enemy will experience in pillaging the city and its women speaks to the overwhelming defeat that the kingdom is soon to experience. Note how this is presented in almost direct apposition to the description of the conquest of Yericho (*Yehoshua* 6:20): “*Vaya'al ha-am ha-ira ish negdo,”* “Each man entered the city from where he stood.” This means that each soldier doesn't have to look for a workable entrance, as the walls have come tumbling down. This inversion, describing the women of Shomeron as being taken/ going out easily, as if the wall protecting Samaria were completely obliterated (or as if there were never a wall there to begin with) is painful and seems to point to a reversal of Yisrael's fortunes.

In addition, the use of this odd syntax, “*U-fratzim teitzena”* (instead of the expected *ve-teitzena ba-peratzim,* they will go out through the breaches) seems to be alluding to a deeper message. The breaches in the walls of the city are the result of the breaches that these women have created in the society; the greater distancing between the haves and the have-nots and their exploitation of this chasm to their own venal benefit.

*Vehishlakhtena ha-Harmona*

and they will throw them out (?) to the Harmon (?)

The first of these two difficult words is, in its unusual form, a *hapax legomenon*, but its meaning is more or less accessible. The root *shin-lamed-khaf* in the causative (*hifil)* means "to cast down" and appears dozens of times in the canon (for instance, when Yosef is "cast down" into the pit or when Pharaoh orders that the Hebrew babies be "cast down" into the Nile). The odd suffix, employing the relatively rare feminine plural imperfect ends up meaning "you (feminine plural) will cast them (feminine plural) out/ down." This is, of course, quite difficult. Who is the subject here who is going to do the casting out, and who is the object? This is likely why the Septuagint renders it in the passive voice, as if it were written *vehoshlakhtena*; i.e. "you (feminine plural) will be cast out.”

In any case, the verb here could be interpreted literally – as "you/ they will be cast down" and refer to their going down from the mountain of Shomeron (R. Eliezer of Beaugency); or it may refer to their being cast down socially (Rashi). It may also be a reference to exile. Alternatively, it may allude to dead bodies being thrown out of the city, as Amos states (8:3): “*Rav ha-peger, be-khol makom* ***hishlikh*** *has,”* "The dead bodies shall be many; in every place [they are] **cast down** — silence!"

***Ha-Harmona***

The final word in this set is absolutely unmatched in *Tanakh*; the inevitable result is a multiplicity of approaches to resolve its meaning. Some have suggested that it is a form of *armon* (palace); the Malbim goes so far as to connect it with the word "harem" (this is an extravagant suggestion). It is most likely, however, following ibn Ezra, that "Harmon" is the name of a location outside of Shomeron, the location to which these women will be exiled (or their carcasses will be tossed). Interesting in this regard is the novel explanation of R. Joseph Kara. He reads *Harmona* as an extravagant form of *harim*; to wit, they will be cast down on to the mountains (somewhat similar to the interpretation of *vehishlakhtena* suggested by R. Eliezer of Beaugency, above).

*Ne'um Hashem*

Says the Lord

This sub-oracle, exclusively targeting the "cows of the Bashan,” has its own signature form. This not only serves to mark this three-verse passage as somewhat independent, it also fortifies the intensity which was introduced with the divine oath and the threatening apocalyptic introduction “*hinei yamim ba'im*.”

In the next *shiur*, we will begin our study of the rest of this *shimu* oracle, with its focus on the idolatrous cults at Beit El and Gilgal.

1. Radak (ad loc.) explains that "the oath is as if He said 'As I live' (*chai ani*), in other words, I have sworn by My essence, as I live and exist forever, similarly, My oath shall endure". [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alternatively, it introduces bad news for the enemies of Yisrael and/ or Yehuda; see, *inter alia*, 51:47, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is based on the assumption that this is indeed part of the original Book of *Amos*; we will elaborate on this subject when we get to the end of our study of Chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 16:14; 23:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 31:27, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill, 2001), p. 1037. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mikra leYisrael: Yoel, Amos*, (Jerusalem: 1994), p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Eliezer of Beaugency associates it with the word *tzintzenet* (*Shemot* 16:33) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)