YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

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In honor and appreciation of Rabbi Etshalom, dedicated by Asher Reimer

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**Shiur #34: The Prophecies of Amos: "The Hearken Sequence"**

In [the previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-33-prophecies-amos-hearken-sequence), we analyzed the beginning of the accusation against the cults of Beit El and Gilgal, reading of the facetious invitation that the prophet issues to the people to "come and rebel in Beit El and increase rebelliousness at Gilgal." This accusation, with the detailed description of the offensive offerings[[1]](#footnote-1), is followed by five passages which comprise six verses. Each of these passages concludes with the epistrophe *“Ve-lo shavtem adai, ne’um Hashem,”* "(Still and all) you have not (yet) returned to Me, says Hashem."[[2]](#footnote-2) In these two *shiurim* (this week and next) we will take an *a priori* look at these passages, reviewing the text and identifying the structural scheme underlying this section. In the subsequent *shiurim*, we will engage in more detailed analysis of the passages.

A WORD ABOUT EPISTROPHES

An epistrophe is a recurring phrase at the end of sequential passages. It is a rhetorical tool which has several aims. Like other repeating phrases (e.g. anaphora, a repeated phrase at the **beginning** of sequential passages) it makes memorization and group recital easier.

It should not surprise us to find examples in "public" *Tehillim —* i.e. psalms that were recited by those gathering (typically in the *Mikdash*) as the psalms were sung by the Levites.

A readily accessible example of this is *Tehillim* 136, which has 26 lines, each of which is made up of two even hemistichs. In all 26 lines, the second hemistich is *“Ki le-olam chasdo,”* "For His kindness endures forever," and it is clearly intended to be recited antiphonally (in call-and-response).

In addition, the use of an epistrophe creates a rhetorical rhythm which accentuates the message of the larger recitation, highlighted by the words of the epistrophe itself. There are several "popular" examples of this phenomenon in *Tanakh*.

In the last four verses of *Tehillim* 24, a "coronation" psalm declaring God's rule over the earth, there is an example of anaphora: “*Se’u she’arim rasheikhem, ve-yavo melekh ha-kavod,”* "Raise up your heads, gates, that the King of glory may enter." The end of each couplet is also repeated (with variation): “*Mi (hu) zeh melekh ha-kavod?”* "Who is (this,) the King of glory?" In this case, the epistrophe of “*Mi (hu) zeh melekh ha-kavod”* is part of the larger rhetorical scheme, matching the anaphora. (Parenthetically, this is a fairly clear indication of the intent of the composer that this be a publicly-recited psalm).

An even clearer example of epistrophe is found in *Tehillim* 118. In the middle of this thanksgiving hymn (vv. 10-12) there are three consecutive verses in which the composer defiantly commits to standing up against his enemies — no matter what:

*Kol goyim sevavuni* ***be-shem Hashem ki amilam***

all nations compass me about **in the name of the Lord**

**I will cut them off**

*Sabuni gam sevavuni*  ***be-shem Hashem ki amilam***

They compass me about, indeed, they compass me about

**in the name of the Lord**

**I will cut them off**

*Sabuni khi-dvorim do'akhu ke-esh kotzim*

***be-shem Hashem ki amilam***

The compass me about like bees,

they are quenched as the fire of thorns

**in the name of the Lord**

**I will cut them off**

The epistrophal call to arms gives the one reciting it a sense of intensifying commitment to the battle and a feeling of increasing confidence in God's help in that anticipated conflict. Beyond the mnemonic advantage which allows the members of the group to more easily remember the phrase — or, at the very least, to chant the second half of each line with the leader — there is also a socio-psychological benefit to be gained here, internalizing and strengthening the message to which the group is to subscribe.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We will find a similar effect in our passage — with a diametrically opposite feeling. Instead of intensifying a sense of thanksgiving (as in *Tehillim* 136) or of confidence and defiance (as in *Tehillim* 118), the intent here is to exponentially multiply the feeling of desperation felt by the prophet (reflecting the desperation of the Almighty, so to speak) and the sense of doom the people ought to be dreading at that point in time. "You did not return to Me… and you still did not return to Me… and after all of that, you **still** have not returned to Me…"

VERSES 6-11

The prophet recounts, in five passages, seven disasters that have befallen the people. These include famine (v. 6), drought (v. 8), plant disease (v. 9a), locusts (v. 9b), plague (v. 10a), war (v. 10b) and the earthquake (v. 11) with which the book was introduced ("two years before the earthquake"). Note that the first five of these are direct attacks at the agricultural bounty and lifeline of the people and are reminiscent of the plagues against Egypt. We will revisit this in the next *shiurim*.

The use of a septad (listing of seven items) fits Amos's overall rhetorical strategy; we have seen his use of “sevens” from the opening oracle of “for three sins of the nation and for the fourth” which became, in the case of the target audience in Shomeron, “for the three sins and for the four…”, followed by a listing of seven specific crimes. This is followed by a listing of the seven kindnesses which God has done for the people and the seven-fold punishment they will receive consequently.

Amos interprets the misfortunes detailed here as divine chastisement with an aim at getting the people to consider their behavior and mend their ways — to no avail. In other words, even if the people may have experienced them as punishment, Amos teaches them that they were instructive along the lines of “spoil the rod…” and weren’t (yet) the punishment for their crimes. As such, we should read these as events which have **already happened** and which, therefore, should connect on an emotional and experiential level with the audience.

THE TEXT: VERSE 6

*Ve-gam ani natati lakhem:*

And I also have given you:

The rationale for reading this four-word phrase as independent becomes clear as the verse unfolds. Amos describes two things that God has "given" the people – "cleanness of teeth" and "lack of bread." As such, the opening phrase should be seen as distributive and applying to both sides of the subsequent parallelism.

*Nikyon shinayim be-khol areikhem*

*ve-choser lechem be-khol mekomoteikhem*

cleanness of teeth in all your cities

and want of bread in all your places

The famine which the people have already experienced is explained here not as Divine punishment, per se, rather as a divine "inspiration" to get the people to return to God and to mend their ways.

The meaning of *nikyon shinayim* (cleanness of teeth) is clear here, both in its internal sense as well as from the parallel with *choser lechem*. It is, however, an unmatched phrase in *Tanakh* (*hapax legomenon)* and an unusual way to describe a famine. There are enough famines in *Tanakh* that there is a broad lexicon from which to choose, including some that appear further on in this oracle. What is the rhetorical strategy employed by Amos here in choosing *nikyon shinayim*?

The word *nikyon* in the construct form (cleanness of, *nikayon shel*) appears in only one other context. When Avimelekh, who has taken Avraham's "sister" into his palace, protests his innocence to God, he states: *“Be-tom levavi u-venikyon kapay asiti zot,”* "I did this (taking Sarah) with an innocent heart and cleanness of hands," i.e. without evil intention nor any actual wrongdoing. This phrase, in turns, reminds us of the high bar set for he who may ascend to the mountain of God:

*Mi ya'aleh be-har Hashem u-mi yakum bi-mkom kodsho*

Who may ascend the mountain of Hashem and who may stand in His holy place?

*Neki khapayim u-var leivav…*

(only) one who is clean of hands and pure of heart… (*Tehillim* 24:3-4)

Avimelekh's protest of innocence is used to idealize the one who may approach God — after all, this foreign king not only receives a life-saving prophecy from God via a dream, he is also able to respond to God and defend his actions in that vision. Hence, the Psalmist takes a familiar, although surprising image (considering the person) to describe the threshold of ethical purity demanded for anyone who wishes to approach God at His holy mountain.

With all of this in mind, the prophet describes the famine they have just experienced using this hauntingly familiar phrase, *nikyon shinayim*. It is not a "cleanness of hands" which the people of Shomeron can claim, and it is not their claim to make. The divine response to their unstated claims of innocence (*nikyon kapayim)* is *nikyon shinayim*. Keep in mind that Amos's voice is the "roar" from the same holy mountain[[4]](#footnote-4) that requires *nikyon kapayim* of those who wish to ascend.

Amos's rhetorical strategy in this first of the five passages seems clear. He points out that the people's own moral failings are the root cause of the (devastating?) famine they have just experienced. He then makes it clear that the expected reaction on their part is not the path they have chosen and that this leads to the next stage of the process.

What is the expected and desired response?

*Ve-lo shavtem adai ne'um Hashem*

and you have not returned to Me says Hashem

The unexpected preposition *ad* modifying the verb *shuv* (return) is used exclusively in the context of returning to God. In all other situations of returning to a person, place or situation, the Bible uses the more familiar preposition *el*, which is best translated as "towards." To be sure, *el* is occasionally used in the context of the relationship with God. For example, Malakhi implores the people: “*Shuvu elai ve-ashuva aleikhem,”* "Return towards Me and I will return towards you" (3:7); the penultimate verse in *Eikha* is “*Hashiveinu Hashem eilekha,”* "Return us, Lord, towards You…" (5:21) Even though the popular translations here would render the word as "to", as in "Return us, Lord, to You," this is, perhaps, a bit of a blurred meaning. It may be argued that the difference between returning *ad Hashem* and returning *el Hashem* is exactly that: are we returning all the way to God (and arriving at this lofty "destination") or are we turning **towards** Him, implying a (possibly long) road to go before achieving the intended destination?

We are tempted to assign the use of these two prepositions as used in this context to different time periods and to an evolving linguistic pattern. Indeed, the frequent mentions of returning *ad Hashem* appear in the Torah[[5]](#footnote-5) and early prophetic works[[6]](#footnote-6); whereas returning *el Hashem* appears in *Yirmeyahu[[7]](#footnote-7), Eikha[[8]](#footnote-8), Zekharya[[9]](#footnote-9)* and *Malakhi*[[10]](#footnote-10) (all from the Babylonian and/ or Persian period).

This may hold up regarding the "early" use of *ad,* with one exception. In the autobiographical third chapter of *Eikha*, Yirmeyahu implores the people of Yerushalayim: “*Nachpesa derakheinu… ve-nashuva* ***ad*** *Hashem.”[[11]](#footnote-11)* However, there are enough counter-examples of returning *el Hashem* in earlier books to force us to revisit this explanation. The verse that opens Hoshea's final prophecy, “*Shuva Yisrael* ***ad*** *Hashem Elo-hekha*” (14:2), cited above, is immediately followed with the directive “*Kechu imakhem devarim ve-shuvu* ***el*** *Hashem*.” In Shelomo's dedicatory prayer at the inauguration of the *Mikdash*, he twice mentions the anticipated situation where *Am Yisrael* is downtrodden (even in exile) and “*Veshavu eilekha,”* "They will return 'towards' You."[[12]](#footnote-12) This preposition is used in reference to returning "towards" God in *Devarim*[[13]](#footnote-13) and *Shemuel*[[14]](#footnote-14) as well.

I'd like to propose another explanation for the *ad/ el* usages.

When the intent of the text is to describe, inspire or exhort towards a **move** back to proper worship, to obeisance to God's commands and away from the undesirable situation, it uses the preposition *el*, indicating direction. To wit, the people are to turn away from the current context in which they find themselves (or which they have created for themselves) and chart out a new direction — towards Hashem. Whether coming from exile (as in the *Malakhi/ Zekharya* context, as well as that foretold in the two mentions in *Devarim*), from defeat and captivity (Shelomo's prayer), or eschewing the idolatrous fetishes which Shemuel addresses, the nation is adjured to change orientation and direction. They are exhorted to turn away from the exilic/ subjugated/ idolatrous life and to turn towards Hashem. This in no way implies an achievement of that goal, but a shift in direction. That is, perhaps, why the preposition *el* is more common in exilic and post-exilic texts as much of the nation is outside of the Land.

In any case, the call to return *ad Hashem* means "to return all the way to Hashem," i.e. not just to intend a positive change, but to "arrive" at the proper relationship. This is what Amos presents as the ideal and the goal of these afflictions. The crucial word in all of this is, of course "not" — “*Ve-****lo*** *shavtem,”* “You have **not** returned to Me.” Does this imply that the people do not even make a move, a shift that might be called *el Hashem*? Perhaps, but that isn't Amos's point here. This famine should have brought the people back, should have reestablished their value system and their loyalties, but it does not accomplish that, nor do the next four disciplinary disasters.

We will look at those four in next week's *shiur*, after which we will take a broader and deeper look at this passage.

1. Which were either offensive in form or due to the lopsided priorities of the people; see the last *shiur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have added in the two parenthetic phrases reflecting the **sense** of the verse, beyond the literal translation of the words. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Consider the many medieval liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) that utilize this tool; we are most familiar with them from *Selichot*, the *Kinot* of Tisha Be-Av and *piyyutim* added into the service of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Amos* 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g. *Devarim* 30:2, 4:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.g. *Yeshayahu* 19:22; *Hoshea* 14:2 and, of course, our five passages. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 3:1, 4;1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 5:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 3:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 3:40. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *I Melakhim* 8:33, 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 30:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *I Shemuel* 7:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)