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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #59: The Prophecies of Amos: On the Heels of *Hoi***

**Part I**

In the previous *shiurim*, we studied the *hoi* rebuke of the self-satisfied of Shomron (*Amos* 6:1-7). Now, we turn our attention to the punishment that awaits them as a consequence of their hedonistic and narcissistic lifestyle. This punishment, presented as a Divine oath, comprises the next four verses.

In this *shiur*, we will study the text of the first two of these verses, and next week we will address the last two. In our analysis of each phrase, we will address some unusual rhetorical, linguistic, and syntactic features that may help us discover a deeper texture of the prophetic message.

**THE TEXT**

**The Oath in *Tanakh* – Invoking God’s Name**

*Nishba Hashem Elokim be-nafsho*

The Lord God hath sworn by Himself

In *Tanakh*, an oath usually involves invoking God’s Name, as if associating the veracity of the claim with the truth of God’s existence. There is likely a secondary (if not primary) reason for including God’s Name in an oath – to declare to the skeptical or non-believing parties (perhaps litigants) that the one taking the oath is prepared to accept God’s punishment if his words are less than true.

This invocation takes one of several formulations. A common form used in the prophetic histories is *ko ya’aseh Hashem ve-kho yosif* (or some variation thereof), appearing 9 times in *Shmuel* and *Melakhim* and once in the concurrently composed *Ruth*.

A popular formula is *chai Hashem*, properly rendered as “as *Hashem* lives,” which again associates the truth of the statement made by the one taking the oath with the truth of God’s being (eternally) alive. This short oath-formula appears 41 times in *Tanakh*.

The appearance of *chai Hashem* is manifested in two distinct but related manners. Sometimes it appears as an actual oath taken by someone who wants to have his word trusted. The preponderance of these occurrences appears in David’s camp (16) and with Eliyahu and his acolyte, Elisha (11). The only prophet to use this formula (with one exception; see below) is Yirmiyahu, who uses it 8 times, and a ninth in referencing people making false oaths:

*Ve-im “Chai Hashem” yomeiru, lakhen la-sheker yishave’u.*

And if they declare, “As *Hashem* lives,” surely they swear falsely.

Of the other 8 mentions in *Yirmiyahu*, all but one are references to other people taking oaths, the only exception being when Tzidkiyahu swears to Yirmiyahu that he will spare him (38:16).

The one mention in the prophetic canon outside of *Yirmiyahu* is in *Hoshe’a* 4:15, in an oracle reminiscent of Amos’s rebuke in 5:5:

*…ve-al tavo’u ha-Gilgal ve-al ta’alu Beit Aven ve-al tishav’u “Chai Hashem.”*

…and no longer come to Gilgal, nor make a pilgrimage to Beit Aven, and do not swear “as *Hashem* lives.”

Perhaps the most overt indicator of the use of God’s Name in an oath is found in *Vayikra* 19:12:

*Ve-al tishav’u be-shemi la-shaker, ve-chilalta et shem Elokekha.*

And do not swear falsely by My Name, as you will profane the name of your God.

All of the above refers to people taking oaths, using God’s Name to boost their credibility. But God also takes oaths, beginning with His commitment to Avraham, which is “upgraded” from promise (*Bereishit* 12:1-3) to covenant (ibid. chapters 15 and17) to oath (ibid. 22:16-18). This oath is repeated to Yitzchak (ibid. 26:3), and although it isn’t explicitly restated to Yaakov in *Bereishit*, he is included as a beneficiary of that oath throughout the rest of the Torah. That oath, which originally comprised a commitment to make Avraham’s nation great and that they would be a source of blessing for all of the families of the earth, narrowed in focus from *Shemot* on and referenced only the giving of the Land (see, *inter alia*, *Devarim* 34:4). The original oath, which was never repeated per se but only referenced afterwards, was introduced with the formula *bi nishba’ti*. Most translations render this “By Myself have I sworn.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

An even more “personal” form appears in *Bamidbar* 14:21, in the aftermath of the sin of the people in their reaction to the report of the scouts. After acceding to Moshe’s plea to spare the people, God adds:

*Ve-ulam chai ani, ve-yimalei kevod Hashem et kol ha-aretz.*

But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of *Hashem.*

Rashi, R. Joseph Kara, R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, Radak, and Seforno (among others) all read this formula as an oath.[[2]](#footnote-2) This same formula appears 4 verses later and, with a slight variation, towards the end of Moshe’s song (*Devarim* 32:40). Subsequently it appears once in *Yeshayahu*, twice in *Yirmiyahu*, once in *Tzefanya*, and sixteen times in *Yechezkel*.

In sum, we find not only various formulations for an oath when a person invokes God’s Name; we also find God Himself swearing that He will keep a promise and using His own Name as affirmation of that pledge.

There are, however, only two places where God swears “*be-nafsho*” – here and in *Yirmiyahu* 51:14. Although a number of the medieval commentators (ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beuagency, and Radak) read *Nishba Hashem Elokim be-nafsho* as essentially synonymous with *bi nishba’ti* of *Bereishit* 22:16, the obvious question looms: Then why not just use *bi nishba’ti* here as well? To that end, Rashi interprets here: “With awareness and intent” – implying that this oath is (more?) well-planned and intended than others. The theological problems that this approach raises are clear, but perhaps this does catch the rhetorical intent of the variation. This oath is fully aimed at its audience and has taken into account all of their sins, large and small, and all of the failings of their lifestyle, as detailed above.

The next clause in our opening verse strengthens this approach – that the sense of intent is intensified by the extended uses of God’s Name.

*Ne’um Hashem Elokei Tzevaot*

Saith the Lord, the God of hosts

The use of *ne’um* here should not surprise us. Amos uses it 21 times in his 9 short chapters; compare that with Yeshaya’s total of 12 (in the first 39 chapters), 4 in *Hoshea* and 1 in *Mikha*, among Amos’s contemporaries. It should also not surprise us by now to see that Yirmiyahu, as he is wont to use features of Amos’s rhetoric quite liberally, uses *ne’um* 176 times, and his later contemporary Yechezkel also uses it quite a bit to introduce or conclude prophecies (85 times). Even Zekharia (12 times) and Chaggai (5 times) use it much more than their forebears. It seems that Yirmiyahu picked up this feature of Amos’s oratory and from there it become popular among the latter-day prophets.

The word means “utterance” and is used to underscore that it really is that person (or, in almost every case, God) that is speaking.

Defining God as “*Elokei Tzvaot*” is, again, not unusual in Amos; he uses *Tzevaot* 9 times. This Divine Name has clear military implications and sends a sense of an “aggressive” (belligerent?) God, one Who is prepared to do battle against His enemies – even though they may be His own people. The association of *Tzevaot* with “hosts” and the celestial bodies is not far off of this mark, since *Tanakh* views the stars as being aligned in battle, as if to say that they are God’s “front line” of attack (see, e.g., *Shoftim* 5:20). This also accords with earlier mentions in *Amos*, where his “cosmic hymns” (4:13 and 5:8) made mention of constellations as part of God’s great power.

This swelling sense of adversarial power, conscripting the heavenly bodies to war against *Bnei Yisrael*, is underscored by the next word, an unusually harsh sense of rejection:

*Meta’ev anokhi et ge’on Yaakov*

I abhor the pride of Jacob

The verb *ta’ev* is understood in two different ways by the *Rishonim*. Most, beginning with Rashi, read it as a variation of *ta’ev* with an *ayin* (instead of the *aleph* in our case). Similarly, BDB includes it as a secondary meaning, as a variation of *ta’ev* (with *ayin*).[[3]](#footnote-3) Both Biblical lexicons (see note 3) acknowledge this to be the only instance of *ta’ev* (with *aleph*) with this meaning.[[4]](#footnote-4)

However, beginning with ibn Ezra, followed by R. Eliezer of Beaugency as well as Radak, a variant interpretive stream takes hold. Ibn Ezra reads *meta’ev* as taking on its usual meaning with *aleph* – to long for. He reads the root generally as meaning “to be finished,” in the sense that a real longing completely consumes the person longing. In that same sense, God is “finished” with these people. R. Eliezer and Radak read it as one of the numerous verbs in Hebrew that take on a meaning and its opposite – such as *ikar* (root, but the verb means to **up**root) or *sharesh* (same as *ikar*) – such that *ta’ev* means “to long” and this appearance of *ta’ev* means “to give up on,” as a sense of no longer longing. In this case, the use of the word may be read sardonically.

***Ge’on***[[5]](#footnote-5) ***Yaakov***

The phrase *ge’on Yaakov* appears four times in *Tanakh* – twice in *Amos* (here and ahead in 8:7), once in *Nachum*, and once in *Tehillim*. In *Tehillim*, the referent seems to be the Land of Israel:

*Yivchar lanu et* ***nachalateinu et ge’on Yaakov*** *asher ahev*

He chooses our inheritance for us, the pride of Yaakov which He loves.

On the other hand, the reference in *Nachum* would seem to mean something about sovereignty over the Land, which the prophet promises that God will restore.

In the later reference in *Amos* (which we will return to when we get to our study of chapter 8), *ge’on Yaakov* appears to be an appellation for God (paralleling our verse, where God swears by His own Name). Ibn Ezra quotes the Karaite Yefet b. Eli (seemingly approvingly in this case) that the phrase refers to the *aron* (citing *Yechezkel* 24:21, dependent on *Tehillim* 78:61). Radak allows for both possible translations, modifying the latter to the *Mikdash*.

Let us test the four proposed meanings in our context. What is it that God has sworn to reject/abhor?

Can it mean the Land of Israel? Hardly, as that would fly in the face of the rest of Amos’s (and all other prophets’) rhetoric. Just the opposite; it is the sanctity of the Land that has been defiled by the sinful and unethical behavior of the nation being rebuked.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It can hardly mean the *Mikdash* (or *aron*). Neither of these are present in Shomron. Just the opposite is the case. Part of the previous rebuke, the premise for this Divine oath, cuts to the **lack** of the sancta in Shomron. Certainly, the other meaning in the later Amos-reference – God’s Name – is impossible. God is not abhorring/rejecting His own Name.

All of that leaves us with two possible translation strategies here. Either the meaning used later by *Nachum* is at play here or it is an enigmatic phrase with some other meaning, unattested elsewhere.

One methodological note: It is always preferable to keep consistent meanings within words and phrases in *Tanakh*, at least within one literary period and genre. As such, we would prefer to read this as carrying the same meaning as *Nachum* (who is not too distant in time from Amos, as his entire prophecy is aimed at Nineveh), rather than propose a new meaning.

It seems that *Nachum*’s meaning works perfectly well here. God is rejecting the sovereignty of Shomron and is prepared to send these hedonistic aristocrats into exile (as above, verse 7). The parallel clause, immediately below, supports this interpretation.

*Ve-armenotav saneiti*

And I hate his palaces

The use of the verb *sanei* here reinforces the broad interpretation of *ta’ev* above, as it is the palaces of the “Yaakov” that He hates. This also gives strong support to our interpretation of *ge’on* *Yaakov*, above.

*Ve-hisgarti ir u-melo’ah*

And I will deliver up the city with all that is therein.

The verb *hasger* (the causative form of *sagor*, to close up or close in) is generally understood to mean “hand over,” as in handing refugees over to their masters. For instance, in the opening chapter of *Amos*, in his oracle against the Pelishtim:

*…al haglotam galut shelema* ***le-hasgir*** *le-Edom*

… Because they carried away captive a whole captivity, to **deliver them up** to Edom.

The first instance of this verb is in *Vayikra,* where it appears numerous times (primarily in ch. 13) in the context of the laws of the *metzora*, who is quarantined (*musgar*). It appears twice more in *Bamidbar*, in the narrative concerning Miriam’s *tzara’at*.

Perhaps the instance that speaks most directly to the broader use of the word is in *Devarim* (23:16):

*Lo tasgir eved el adonav asher yinatzel eilekha me-im adonav*

You shall not deliver to his master a servant who is escaped from his master to you.

In all of the recurring instances of the verb (in the causative), the referent is a person or people. David asks God whether the people of Ke’ila will *yasgiruni* (hand me over) to Shaul (*Shmuel* *I* 23:11), and the Egyptian slave makes David’s men promise that they will not *tasgireini* (hand me over to my Amaleki master) as a condition of his helping them find the Amalekite raiders who raided David’s camp (ibid. 30:15).

In our verse, however, the sense is that the object of the “handing over” is the material goods of the city, not its people. First of all, its people will have already been exiled (per verse 7); second, the mention of *ir u-melo’ah* (the city and all that is therein) points to wealth and goods. The closest use of *hasger* to this is in *Eikha* (2:7):

*…****hisgir*** *be-yad oyev chomot armenoteha*

… He hath given up into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces.

This passage almost seems built on ours, as it is preceded by a rejection by God of His altar (=*ge’on Yaakov*?).

The mention of “the city” may mean that this punishment will only impact on the citizens of Shomron and its environs, or it may refer to every city (including, e.g. Jezreel) where Amos’s audience lives.

*Ve-hayah im yivatru asarah anashim be-vayit echad*

And it shall come to pass, if there remain ten men in one house,

*Va-meitu*

that they shall die.

This verse is intrinsically tied in to the one that follows.

The “ten men” in one house could be survivors of the attack of the previous verse. Even if so many (10 being a critical mass of a group; see e.g. *Bereishit* 18:32) remain together, they will still have no hope; all of them will die. Whereas most of the *Rishonim* see these ten as having survived the sword of the enemy but then being killed by a plague, Rashi reads that these ten escaped both sword and plague and then will be burned up in the house, as the following verse may suggest (see our next *shiur*).

Some of the commentators point to the threat invoked above (5:3), in which ten percent of those who “go out” will survive (see Rashbam, ad loc.).

As we will also see in the next two verses, the “house” plays a central role in this oath – more on that in the next *shiur* as well.

**For Further Study:**

Gaon: T. Katzir (Katz), *Mi-Ge’on Ha-Yarden Le-Geonat Ha-Kitah*, The Academy of the Hebrew Language (website) - <http://tinyurl.com/y4948kzm>

Abba Bendavid, *Lashon Mikra U-Leshon Chakhamim* (Tel-Aviv, 1967), p. 147.

1. New English Translation (NET) has “I solemnly swear by My own Name,” not a literal translation but perhaps catching the intent more clearly. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, however, Ramban ad loc., who vociferously disagrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brown, Driver Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (2nd edition, 1951), p. 1080; similarly Koehler-Baumgartner, 2001, pp. 1672-1673. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some scholars, predictably, propose that there was an errant or deliberate textual emendation and that the original was written with *ayin*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word *ga’on* in *Tanakh* means “pride” or “exaltation.” The word has taken a circuitous and wild etymological ride to its current meaning of “genius.” See For Further Study. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)