**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:**

**THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #88:**

**The Prophecies of Amos:**

**DAY OF DOOM**

**THE FIFTH VISION (9:1-6)**

**PART 1:**

**INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

We are now beginning our study of the last chapter, in the common divisions, of *Amos*. This is, however, not the beginning of anything; it is neither the final *parasha* nor the final unit. That unit, as we have argued, begins at 8:9, and from there on, Amos is presenting components of his eschatological vision.

Some have argued that the vision that makes up the first *parasha* in chapter 9 is part of the sequence of the visions in chapters 7 and 8, referring to it as “the fifth vision.” According to that approach, this vision is no more of an *eschaton* than anything else in *Amos*. I believe that this is not the case. The significant distinctions between this vision and the four that preceded it are enough to mark it as part of a different “vision-scheme,” and, couched as it is within what we have argued are clear end-of-days scenarios, this chapter must be understood in that manner.

In this *shiur*, we will examine the overall text of the vision and point out the linguistic, contextual, and syntactic nuances that mark it as set apart from the earlier visions – and which put it squarely in Amos’s “distant vision” (as opposed to his proximate prophecies that speak to the rather immediate fate of the Samarian kingdom). Over the course of the next few *shiurim*, in which we will examine the vision in greater detail, we will also note how many of the themes in this vision are **expansions** and **intensifications** of themes mentioned earlier in the book. It is as if the proximate prophecies of Amos, directed at his 8th century BCE Samarian audience, are a microcosm of the eschatological visions. This *eschaton* either spells the end of the southern kingdom of Yehuda well over a hundred years later (as some *Rishonim* maintain – see Abravanel at the beginning of our chapter) or may point to a future as yet unrealized and which, we all hope, will remain an object of theoretical study.

For purposes of this presentation, we will look at all six verses together. In the next few shiurim, we will examine the language, imagery and so forth in greater detail.

THE TEXT

*Ra’iti et-A-D-N-Y nitzav al-hamizbe’ach* I saw the Lord standing beside the altar;

*Va-yomer: Hakh ha-kaftor* and He said: Smite the capitals,

*ve-yir’ashu ha-sipim*  that the posts may shake

*u-vetza’am be-rosh kulam* And break them in pieces on the head of all of them;

*ve-acharitam ba-cherev eherog* And I will slay the residue of them with the sword

*lo yanus lahem nas* There shall not one of them flee away

*ve-lo yimalet lahem palit*  And there shall not one of them escape.

*Im yachteru ve-she’ol* Though they dig into the nether-world,

*Mi-sham yadi tikachem* Thence shall My hand take them;

*Ve-im ya’alu ha-shamayim* And though they climb up to heaven,

*Mi-sham orideim* Thence will I bring them down.

*Ve-im yeichavu be-rosh ha-Karmel* And though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel,

*Mi-sham achapes u-lekachtim* I will search and take them out thence;

*Ve-im yisatru mineged einai* And though they be hidden from My sight

*Be-karka ha-yam* in the bottom of the sea,

*Mi-sham atzaveh et ha-nachash*  Thence will I command the serpent,

*U-neshakham.* and he shall bite them

*Ve-im yeilkhu va-shevi* And though they go into captivity

*Lifnei oiveihem*  before their enemies,

*Mi-sham atzaveh et ha-cherev*  Thence will I command the sword,

*Ve-haragatam*  and it shall slay them;

*Ve-samti eini aleihem* And I will set My eyes upon them

*Le-ra’ah ve-lo le-tova*  For evil, and not for good.

*Va-A-D-N-Y Hashem\* ha-Tzevakot* For the Lord, the God of hosts,

*Ha-noge’a ba-aretz va-tamog* Is He that touches the land and it melts

*Ve-avlu kol yoshvei vah*  And all that dwell therein mourn;

*Ve-alta kha-ye’or kula* And it rises up wholly like the River,

*Ve-shaka ke-ye’or Mitzrayim* And sinks again, like the River of Egypt;

*Ha-boneh va-shamayim ma’alotav* It is He that builds His upper chambers in the heaven,

*Va-agudato al eretz yesada* And has founded His vault upon the earth;

*Ha-korei le-mei ha-yam* He that calls for the waters of the sea,

*Va-yishpekheim* And pours them out

*Al penei ha-aretz* upon the face of the earth;

*Hashem shemo* The Lord is His name.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT

At first blush, this vision is far more reminiscent of Yeshayahu’s inauguration than of anything earlier in *Amos*:

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim; each one had six wings: with twain he covered his face and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one called unto another, and said: Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory. And the posts of the door were moved at the voice of them that called, and the house was filled with smoke. (*Yeshayahu* 6:1-4)

As in Amos’s final “vision,” Yeshayahu’s inauguration-prophecy begins with the *navi* describing himself as “seeing.” In the earlier visions (chapters 7 and 8), Amos reports that God “showed me” – *ko hirani*. In *Amos*, God is standing atop (or next to – we’ll discuss that in the next *shiur*) the altar; Yeshayahu sees God sitting atop a throne. This throne is in the vicinity of the *mizbe’ach*,as can be seen from verse 6:

Then flew unto me one of the seraphim, with a glowing stone in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs **from off the altar.**

In Amos’s earlier visions, God was showing him items from the mundane world (locusts, fire, the plumb-line, and the summer fruit), but in ours, like in *Yeshayahu* chapter 6, God is seen in a place of royalty/sanctity. In both Yeshayahu’s vision as well as that of Amos, the shaking of the *sipim* (posts) is an integral part of the vision. In Yeshayahu’s vision, it is part of the tremor of revelation; in Amos’s vision, it is God’s directive to…? (The addressee of God’s commands in verse 1 is unclear – more on that in the next *shiur.*)

Furthermore, each of Amos’s earlier visions was comprised of an object (locusts, fire, plumb-line/wall, basket of fruit) that was then used in the dialogue between prophet and Master to deliver a message. In some cases, the imagery was sufficient (locusts, fire), and in the others, there was some sort of a word play that carried the message (the *anakh* and *keluv kayitz* – see shiur #69). In this vision, on the other hand, there is nothing about the setting or any objects present that symbolize the message. The message is stated, explicitly and with terrifying clarity, by God Himself.

Before moving on, it is prudent to note that there is a dispute among the *Rishonim* as to the assumed location of the *mizbe’ach* in this vision. Whereas some read it as the altar in Beit-El,[[1]](#footnote-1) others understand it to be **the** *mizbe’ach* in Yerushalayim.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps they understood this from, among other context clues, the close parallel to Yeshayahu’s prophecy, which, as noted above (from verse 6), was set in Yerushalayim.

There is one vital distinction between Yeshayahu’s vision and that of Amos. Yeshayahu’s vision was, as the text makes explicit, his inauguration, and the vision related to absolutely current circumstances:

Then said I: “Woe is me! for I am undone; Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts.” Then flew unto me one of the seraphim, with a glowing stone in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Lo, this has touched thy lips; And your iniquity is taken away, And your sin expiated.” And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, And who will go for us?” Then I said: “Here am I; send me.” (*Yeshayahu* 6:5-8)

It is placed near the beginning of Yeshayahu’s prophecies and expresses the *navi*’s reticence to accept his mission (akin to Moshe, Yirmiyahu, and Yona, among others, as well as, yes, Amos). Our vision, contradistinctively, appears within the context of Amos’s “distant vision” of an end-of-days scenario, following the famine “for the words of Hashem.” The rest of this vision similarly makes it clear that this is a “doomsday” vision. It is possible to maintain – as did some *Rishonim* –that this frightening prophecy was realized at a particular point in history. Alternatively, it might be posited as belonging to the distant future – and “end of history.” Parenthetically, that would also mean that it need not necessarily come about (more on this later).

STRUCTURE OF THE VISION

This vision is the longest single *mar’eh* in *Amos*, and its composite parts are readily identifiable. The first four verses are the vision, which is in turn made up of two parts. The first segment is the first half of verse 1 – the vision of God atop/aside the altar, commanding the terrible shaking of the (building?) (Land?). The rest of verse 1 and verses 2 through 4 are the terrifying consequences of this “shake-up” for God’s people. Note that this entire section is presented as a monologue; it should be imagined as enveloped in quotation marks.

God’s Name does not appear in this first section after the introductory *ra’iti et A-D-N-Y*. Unlike Amos’s earlier visions, the Name used for God here is only A-D-N-Y, a Name that Amos uses frequently. In the earlier visions, he uses A-D-N-Y with Hashem (vocalized “Elokim”); in this vision, only A-D-N-Y is used. As mentioned, there is no Name for God used in the rest of the first half, as this is entirely made up of God’s words.

The second half is set off from the first. Verse 5 shifts to the words of the prophet, praising God. In verse 5, he again invokes A-D-N-Y, but this time adds “Hashem.”

Verses 5 and 6 complete the vision with a “cosmic hymn,” in the same spirit as the earlier hymns at 4:13 and 5:8-9. This paean is itself broken into two clearly distinct parts. Verse 5 praises God for His power, speaking of God’s immanence and relating directly to the destruction foretold in the preceding verses. Verse 6 speaks more transcendentally about God, with His power over the sea (or Sea) made manifest as part of the destruction. He concludes the section and the entire passage with *Hashem shemo*, a common signature for Amos.

The two sections seem to be sufficiently distinct from each other. Nonetheless, there are clear contextual and literary markers that bind them together.

In verse 2, the verse that seems most hyperbolic of the descriptions (and evokes *Devarim* 30:11-13), the image is of people burrowing under the earth to hide from God or ascending to the heavens to – escape Him? In any case, that is the image. As we will discuss further on, verse 3 is an explication of verse 2, which “makes it real.” In chiastic fashion, the one “climbing up to the heavens” has actually gone to the top of the Carmel to hide in one of the caves there. The one who is “burrowing under the earth” is really someone who is trying to hide under the sea.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, the full phrases:

Though they dig into the nether-world, Thence shall My hand take them; And though they climb up to heaven, Thence will I bring them down.

And though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel, I will search and take them out thence; And though they be hid from My sight in the bottom of the sea, Thence will I command the serpent, and he shall bite them.

may be charted as the following chiasmus:

1. dig into the nether-world, b) climb up to heaven,

b1) hide themselves in the top of Carmel, a1) hid from My sight in the bottom of the sea

In verse 5, God is praised as One who “touches the earth and it melts.” The image of melting earth in *Tanakh* is most often associated with mountains, evoking Sinai. (See, inter alia, *Shoftim* 5:4-5 and psalm 68, and, famously, psalm 114.) The image of God touching the earth, causing it to melt, is the response to the one who tries to hide in a cave on Carmel.

In verse 6, God’s power over the sea is praised, bringing to mind the one who “digs into the nether-world” – in other words, the one who “hides from My sight in the bottom of the sea.” In short, the hymn (vv. 5-6) relates directly and gives support, as it were, for the threats (vv. 1-4).

One final note about the vision. God announces that there are five avenues of flight that the people will attempt, each doomed to failure.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the case of three of them, God merely announces that He will find them there and “take them” – under the earth, in the heavens, and in the caves of the Carmel. For the other two, He will command one of His agents of death to attack. Regarding the fourth one, we are not all that surprised – the undersea monster known as *nachash* (see, inter alia, *Yeshayahu* 27:1). Added to that the report of God commanding the fish to swallow Yonah and then commanding him to vomit Yonah onto dry land and the image is a familiar one, even if other-worldly. The final one, which echoes the exposition of this list in verse 1, has God sending the sword after them, such that there will be no survivors. Besides the oddity of imagining a sword as acting under Divine agency,[[5]](#footnote-5) the nature of the attempt to flee in v. 4 is striking:

And though they go into captivity before their enemies, Thence will I command the sword, and it shall slay them; And I will set My eyes upon them For evil, and not for good.

It is as if even being taken into captivity is an (un)intentional attempt by the people to flee God’s presence – and nonetheless, He will find them there and the sword that He commanded will slay them there.

Each of these passages deserves more detailed attention, and in next week’s *shiur* we will begin doing attending to that, beginning with an assessment of the *mizbe’ach*, its location (see above), and its significance.

1. This seems to be the opinion of ibn Ezra in his second commentary and R. Eliezer of Beaugency; see also Paul, *Mikra Le-Yisrael*, p. 138, and Hakham, *Da’at Mikra*, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi, following the Targum, as well as R. Yosef Kara and Radak. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Each of these evokes a reticent prophet – Eliyahu hiding in the cave, Yonah fleeing God by sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Amos, as we have noticed several times, seems to have an affinity for the number five in his rhetoric. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. But see *Yechezkel* 14:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)