YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)
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BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE: THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS

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Shiur #04
The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles against the Nations (Cont.)

In this lesson, we will analyze the rhetorical style of these prophecies, specifically the opening formula of each. In the next lecture, we will study the overall pattern of the oracles and identify the underlying message of this pattern. In the following lectures, we will study the substance of the first seven of these oracles and then we will, in the final lecture of this series, complete our study of this section, analyzing the final oracle in the section – the prophecy against Yisrael.

Each of the oracles follows a common pattern – a pattern which is then greatly expanded in the final, culminating oracle against Yisrael.

The pattern (I strongly recommend opening to *Amos* 1:3) is:

> *Ko amar Hashem: "Al shelosha pishei **X** ve-al arba'a lo ashivenu; al* **Y…**"
> Thus says God: "For the three sins of **X**, and for the fourth (or "for four") I will not reverse it. For **Y…**"

Schematically (see the chart at the end of this lecture), it looks like this:

1) *Ko amar Hashem*
2) *Al shelosha pishei* **X**
    a. *Ve-al arba'a lo ashivenu*
3) *Al* **Y** (sin)
4) Punishment

This is followed by the specific punishment or punishments that God will mete out against **X**, a specific nation or city-state.

There are other nuances to the pattern, but we will begin by analyzing this formula.

"*Ko amar*": The Messenger Formula

The short phrase "*Ko amar*" ("Thus says") appears nearly 500 times throughout *Tanakh* although, predictably, only once in *Ketuvim* (outside of *Divrei Ha-yamim*). The phrase is always used when a messenger reports the words of his superior/ dispatcher, who has authority over the audience as well. Although our brains are trained to anticipate "Hashem" after these two words *("Ko amar Hashem*"), this isn't always the case and therein lies the rhetorical power of this common phrase.

Oddly, the first two occasions of this phrase in *Tanakh,* the only ones to appear in *Bereishit*, seem to gainsay this interpretation. When Ya'akov sends his tribute to Esav, the message he sends with his messengers is "*Ko amar avdekha Ya'akov*," "Thus says your servant Ya'akov" (*Bereishit* 32:3). Later, a message is sent to Ya'akov from Yosef in Egypt (ibid. 45:9): "*Ko amar binkha Yosef,*" "Thus says your son Yosef." We will return to these apparent counter-examples below.

In *Shemot*, all but one of the ten instances of "*Ko amar Hashem*" are presented at critical junctures in the Moshe-Pharaoh standoff. Moshe uses it when he first addresses Pharaoh, before each of the plagues which have any sort of warning (see *Between the Lines of the Bible*, Vol. 2, Ch. 7) and before the ultimate plague of *Makkat Bekhorot*. Pharaoh himself uses it when he increases the burden on the Hebrew slaves (5:10).

There are only two more instances in the Torah, both in *Bamidbar*. The Jewish nation, traveling through the desert, sends a message to the Edomites, requesting passage through their land. This message is prefaced with "*Ko amar achikha Yisrael,*" "Thus says your brother Yisrael" (20:14). The Yisrael/ Edom exchange mirrors the Ya'akov/ Esav dialogue in *Bereishit* 32. The one vital difference is *avdekha* becomes *achikha*. The subject ("servant") has become a peer ("brother"). Finally, when Balak's messengers are rebuffed by Balaam, he sends a more impressive delegation of agents who begin their entreaty with "*Ko amar Balak.*"

There are 58 occurrences of the messenger formula in the historical books of the prophets (*Yehoshua*, *Shoftim*, *Shemuel* and *Melakhim*), which include several human dispatchers: Yiftach, Achav and Tzidkiyahu; as well as foreign kings who are at war with Israel, such as Ben Hadad (*I Melakhim* 20:3, 5) and Sancheriv (*II Melakhim* 18:19) Otherwise, nearly all of the instances of "*Ko amar*" in the prophetic books have God as the dispatcher.

What is revealing about this formula is the central role it plays in the works of the "literary prophets" (see lecture #1). In the books of *Yeshayahu*, *Yirmeyahu*, *Yechezkel* and the twelve "minor prophets," the phrase appears nearly 380 times. Outside of Yeshayahu, however, it always prefaces God's words and does not reflect a message from any human. The one exception to this is a single mention in *Amos* (of all places!) which has the unprecedented "*Ko Amar Amos*" (7:11). That is an anomaly, as the priest at Beit El, Amatzya, is reporting Amos's

“treacherous” words to King Yeravam. We will return to this odd phrasing and the entire interaction later in the series.

The (near) complete absence of “*Ko amar*” in reference to anyone but God after Yeshayahu is unusual. We will address this anomaly below. We must note that “*Ko amar*” introduces a human’s words in *Divrei Ha-yamim,* and this too demands an explanation. If a theological development in the late First Commonwealth makes “*Ko amar*” exclusive to God, why revive it during the Second Commonwealth?

I would like to propose a solution to the fluctuating usage of the messenger formula. Evidently, the phrase was commonly used in the second millennium BCE by a herald who was reporting the king’s commands. We have ample evidence from Ancient Near Eastern texts that this formula, or something akin to it, was used in the region to deliver a “divine” message (such as in Mari A.1968) or a royal edict.

Both uses of this phrase in *Bereishit* are meant to counterbalance another part of the introductory message. In Ya’akov’s case, he sends a message to Esav which comes from “your servant,” a term of subordination. However, by having the messengers introduce it with “*Ko amar*,” he communicates a position of power to his brother. This “mixed message” introduces a tense rife through their exchange and their ultimate their face-to-face meeting.

When Yosef sends for his father, he is at once “your son” and Viceroy of Egypt. “*Ko amar binkha Yosef*” expresses this tension. On the one hand, it is the loving son making arrangements for his elderly father to travel; on the other hand, it is the ruler (de facto, if not de jure) of Egypt who summons him.

When we get to the first uses of this formula in *Shemot*, it accurately portrays the battle going on between Moshe and Pharaoh. Their polemic over the status of the Hebrews is clearly a theological dispute. Does the God of the Hebrews have power in Egypt? Pharaoh’s response is that He does not, and the plagues and wonders are Moshe’s rebuttal of Pharaoh’s position. The one “*Ko amar Paro*” highlights the “normal” use of the phrase, which only further intensifies Moshe’s refrain of “*Ko amar Hashem*.” To deliver God’s threats to Pharaoh is brazen enough; to preface them with the messenger formula effectively states that Moshe is delivering a message to the (semi-divine) king of Egypt from his sovereign, the God of the Hebrews. Truth to tell, the three words “*Ko amar Hashem*” say it all, when delivered to any human king who sees himself as superhuman, putting him in his place.

The formula continues to be used in both manners until near the end of the First Commonwealth. Whether it is due to a heightened and maturing theological sensitivity or the Babylonian deification of royalty, in the 7th century BCE and throughout the period of exile, the phrase is reserved for introducing God’s

words, especially to kings, rather than for the edicts of human monarchs. It is not surprising that this formula appears so frequently in the words of the prophets – they are delivering God's word to the people and, quite often, to the aristocracy and royal house.

We are then faced with a further anomaly: the one instance of "*Ko amar*" in *Ketuvim*, outside of *Divrei Ha-yamim*, is in *Ezra* (1:2), "*Ko amar Koresh.*" Why is the messenger formula used for a human's words? Furthermore, *Divrei Ha-yamim*, a Second Temple Era composition, returns to the use as found in *Melakhim* for both Achav and Sancheriv.

Reconsidering Theology: The Post-Exilic Pendulum

Theological sensitivity is a product of *Sitz im Leben*. When the Sadducees denied the notion of resurrection, it became the *cause célèbre* of rabbinic doctrine; when Islam claimed that the Jews had forged the Torah, the historical accuracy and reliability of every letter in the Torah became a creedal issue. In other words, when there are contemporaneous groups that challenge basic principles or practices, the traditional community usually closes ranks around what we might call "religious purity." Conversely, when the threat is no longer there, either because the dissenting group has disappeared or because they have abandoned their oppositional tenet, the traditional community relaxes its stance and stridency is often replaced by complacency.

Indeed, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed just such as shift. When the heterodox movements issued responsa in the 1950s, they were taken seriously and challenged by Orthodox authorities. By the 1990s (if not earlier), this was no longer the case. This was for one simple reason: the chasm separating the non-Orthodox world from the traditional camp became so wide that it was largely felt that rulings issued by such a rabbinic body would have no impact on Orthodox readers. As such, there was no "threat" and no need to respond.

This phenomenon is not a uniquely classical, medieval or modern phenomenon; it existed in the biblical era as well. During the First Commonwealth, the worship of Ba'al was popular in Israel such that from the period of the Shoftim all the way through Yirmeyahu's time, fighting against Ba'al worship is a common cause for leaders and prophets alike. Eliyahu's most famous moment takes place on Mount Carmel when he challenges, defeats and slaughters the Ba'al prophets of Izevel. A hundred years later, Hoshea (2:18) alludes to the challenges of Ba'al worship, as God adjures the Jewish nation to refer to Him as its *Ish* rather than its *Ba'al* (these can be synonyms meaning "husband"). At the end of the First Commonwealth, Yirmeyahu rails against Ba'al worship (e.g. 11:6-13). As a result, proper names which are comprised of the theophoric "Ba'al" are covered with shame (*boshet*). Meriv Ba'al becomes Mefivoshet; Eshba'al becomes Ish Boshet

and Yeruba'al becomes Yerubeshet. After the return from Babylonian exile, Ba'al worship is no longer an active threat, and the names are restored.

I would like to suggest that much the same happens with regard to *"Ko amar*." The divinity of kings, a common belief in the Ancient Near East, is "close enough" to be a threat, so biblical authors stop using "*Ko amar*" to introduce a human's words. Once the notion is no longer prevalent among Jews (even though it was certainly maintained in the Persian court), perhaps because of the loss of sovereignty, it is again safe to use the "*Ko amar*" formula to introduce the words of a human king, e.g. Achav and even Sancheriv.

While one might suggest that *Divrei Ha-yamim* is a retelling of *Melakhim* and maintains its language, this thesis is easily disproven. Sancheriv's message to the people of Yerushalayim, told in *II Melakhim* 18/ *Yeshayahu* 37 and then retold in *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 32, amply demonstrates this. Therefore, I think it more likely that "*Ko amar*" simply ceased to be problematic, allowing for "*Ko amar Sancheriv*."

"For Three Sins, and for Four" – Or is It "For a Fourth"?

The next part of the rhetorical pattern is "*Al shelosha pishei* **X** *ve-al arba'a lo ashivenu*." Although we saw a rough translation above, this phrase can be rendered in several ways, each carrying a unique and distinct meaning. We may understand it as: I have forgiven/ overlooked three sins of this nation, but the fourth one is too grievous to overlook. This would mean that the fourth violation is of a more heinous nature than the others. Alternatively, we may read it like this: I have forgiven/ overlooked three sins of this nation, but the fourth one is too much to bear. In this reading, the fourth sin is not any worse than the first three, but it is the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back. This reading fits the syntax of the phrase a bit easier. The simplest reading of the phrase implies that God is willing to forego three sins, but four is simply too much to overlook. This approach is supported by Rambam's ruling in *Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:5:

> When a person's sins are weighted against one's merits, the first and second times that one sins aren't reckoned, rather only from the third time and onward. Therefore, if one's sins from the third sin on are greater than one's merits, those first two instances are added and one is judged for all of them. But if one's merits are equal to one's sins from the third sin on, then one's sins are erased, each subsequent sin being considered the first. This is because one's third time is considered to be one's first since the first two have already been forgiven; then, one's fourth time is considered the first time since the third was already forgiven, and so on. This only applies to the individual, as it says: "All of these will God do, twice and thrice with a man" (*Iyov* 29:29). For the community, however, their first, second and third sins are held in abeyance, as it states: "For

> three sins of Yisrael, and for the fourth I will not reverse it," and when sins are reckoned for them in this manner, they only count from the fourth and onward.

Rambam's read of the verse is consistent with the Tosefta (*Yoma* 4:13) as explicated in the Bavli (*Yoma* 86b). (Of tangential interest is Rambam's application of the verses to individual and community, as the Bavli does the opposite and reads them in tandem, applying to both individuals and the community; but this is far beyond the scope of this *shiur*.)

There is yet another way to read the phrase, a reading that is hard to support in the first oracles but may be the best way for the final one.

Tanakh utilizes symbolic numbers in a frequent and consistent manner. When a long time span is described, anticipated or decreed, the number forty (days or years) is nearly always invoked. When a very long time is intended, that becomes four hundred, as in the four hundred years that Avraham's seed is subjugated. When a complete cycle of time is called for, the number seven will be used: seven days of the week, seven weeks from harvest festival to harvest festival, seven years of the *Shemitta* cycle and seven *Shemitta* cycles to the *Yovel*; and so on.

When the Torah warns the Israelites about the consequences of their abandoning God and His *mitzvot* (at the covenant made at Sinai), they are warned time and again that they will be punished sevenfold for their sins. We find this phrase repeatedly in *Vayikra* 26. The notion of seven punishments for seven sins is not unique to the Sinaitic *brit*; it also appears quite clearly in God's words to the people in *Shoftim* 10, where He lists idolatrous faiths they've embraced and matches that to the seven nations from whom He has delivered the Israelites.

Many contemporary commentaries on Amos have pointed out that the schema of "for three, and for four" is a common biblical rhetorical tool, known as "n/ n+1." It can be found in various sections of the Bible, including wisdom literature. For example, "There are three things I that are wondrous for me and four things I do not know" (*Mishlei* 30:18). Nonetheless, I believe that the selection of three/ four in these oracles is deliberate as three/ four not only fits the scheme of n/ n+1 but also, perhaps most significantly, adds up to seven. In other words, the prophet is proclaiming that the three sins alone would not arouse God to punish; but the three plus four – seven – is the limit of God's patience.

This rendering of the verse does not work well in the case of the first seven (!) oracles, as only one terrible crime is explicitly stated. However, it may be the most appropriate way to read the culminating oracle against Yisrael. As we will see a few chapters down the line, this oracle lists several "sevens" – seven

crimes, seven kindnesses that God did for the people and seven punishments that God will mete out to them.

In what proves to be a clever rhetorical twist, the same phrase is used in different ways. In indicting the other nations (who are, as pointed out in an earlier *shiur*, just the "set-up" for the prophet), we read it in the following manner: Three things I could have overlooked; but the fourth is (either) too heinous (or) too much. In pointing the finger at his real audience in Shomeron, the phrase now means: "For the three and four (seven) sins, I will not reverse it."

For further study:
Meir Weiss, "The Pattern of Numerical Sequence in Amos 1-2" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1967), pp. 416-423.
Y. Zakovitch, "*Al Shelosha Ve-al Arba'a,"* published by *Makor* (1979).