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

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**Shiur #12: The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles against the Nations (continued)**

In this *shiur*, we will continue our study of Amos's ultimate prophecy in this series of oracles against the nations. In the previous chapter, we took a panoramic view of this oracle and proposed several alternative structural schemata. We concluded by favoring the "triangular model" in which the recitation of God's kindnesses for the people operates in relation to both the crimes of which they are accused and the punishments awaiting them.

We will now study the text itself, phrase by phrase, identifying difficult words, wordplay and other rhetorical tools and intra-textual allusions. This is the prophecy that truly speaks to its audience. As such, we will intensify our focus on the language. For purposes of our study, we will analyze the text in sections, beginning with the indictment (vv. 6-8). At the end of each section, I will share some broader observations about the language and internal structure of that section. This *shiur* will focus solely on the indictment.

**THE TEXT: PART 1 – THE INDICTMENT (vv. 6-8)**

**6** Thus says God: For the three sins of Israel, and for four I will not reverse it: because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes. **7** That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the indigent, and turn aside the way of the humble. And a man and his father go unto the same maid to profane My holy name. **8** And they lay themselves down beside every altar upon clothes taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of them that have been fined.

The section is made up of three verses which include the refrain and seven accusations. The first and last verse contain two accusations and the middle verse, v. 7, contains three. We will revisit this pattern below.

**6a: For the three sins of Israel, and for four I will not reverse it:**  
We have already discussed this refrain in earlier lectures.

**6b<sub>1</sub>: Because they sell the righteous for silver**

Literally, this reads: “for their selling *ba-keseif tzaddik*.”

*Tzaddik* is a clear example of a word with evolved (and evolving) meaning. As Rabbi Yochanan states: “The [Hebrew] language of the Bible is distinct and the [Hebrew] language of the Sages (i.e. Rabbinic Hebrew) is distinct.”<sup>1</sup> As Bendavid comprehensively demonstrates,<sup>2</sup> the Hebrew of the Sages during the classical era is not the same as the Hebrew of the Bible, and numerous words in *Tanakh* are replaced in the literature of *Chazal*. For instance, *etz* (tree) becomes *ilan*; *shemesh* (sun) becomes *chamma*. There are hundreds of examples of these “alternative” words, comprising a nearly distinct subset of language. Per Bendavid’s theory, it would be inaccurate to state that “*etz* became *ilan*” and it is not at all clear which preceded which; but in usage, this is exactly what happened.

Beyond substitutions, words also evolve. The phrase *am ha-aretz*, as it first appears in *Bereishit* 23, is a laudatory term and refers to the landed gentry and members of the town council. The term maintains this positive sense throughout the First Commonwealth. By Mishnaic times, it is used to describe people who are lax in some areas of observance; by the pre-modern era, it becomes synonymous with “ignoramus.”

The word *tzaddik* has experienced a similar metamorphosis. Throughout *Tanakh*, the word *tzaddik*, when referring to a human being, simply means “innocent.” When Avraham beseeches God not to destroy Sedom because of its *tzaddikim* (*Bereishit* 18), he is not asking for righteous people, but for people innocent of the crime of which the town (broadly speaking) is guilty. Avraham points out that it would be a miscarriage of (divine) justice for God to destroy the *tzaddik* along with the *rasha*, equating the *tzaddik* with the *rasha*. As we see when the Torah (*Devarim* 25:1) discusses corporal punishment, the judges “shall exonerate (*ve-hitzdiku*) the *tzaddik* and they shall convict (*ve-hirshiu*) the *rasha*.” There are numerous examples throughout *Tanakh* that substantiate this meaning of the word – again, when used in describing a person.

In the era of *Chazal*, the word takes on a different meaning: not one of absence of guilt, but rather one of affirmative righteousness. The phrase *tzaddik gamur* (complete) is a product of Rabbinic language. The term takes on yet another meaning at the beginning of the modern era with the advent of the Chassidic movement and the phenomenology of the *tzaddik* of the Chassidic court.

In our context, then, the people of Samaria stand accused of selling innocent people for silver. This accusation raises a whole host of questions: Why are they selling them? To whom are they selling them? How are they even able to do this?

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<sup>1</sup> BT *Avoda Zara* 58b, BT *Chullin* 137b. The literal translation of his adage is “Leave the language of the Torah to her and the language of the Sages to them.”

<sup>2</sup> See below, For Further Study.

To properly understand this indictment, we'll first look to the second hemistich. Before doing so, however, one matter requires our attention. Is *kesef* the **vehicle** of sale — in other words, were they sold **for** silver? Alternatively, is *kesef* the **reason** for the sale — were they sold **on account of** silver? This will also be easier to determine after looking at the next passage.

### **6b2: And the needy for a pair of shoes.**

Again, does this mean that the accused “sold” poor people and what they received in return was a pair of shoes? Alternatively, were the destitute sold because they owed a meager sum (“shoes”) and couldn’t repay it? Sadly, both human history in general and *Tanakh* in particular have examples of the latter, e.g. the widow of Elisha’s acolyte in *II Melakhim* 4:1-7. She owes money and her creditor is coming to seize her two sons as slaves.<sup>3</sup> In a somewhat similar vein, Yosef is prepared to enslave Binyamin for the theft of his silver goblet (*Bereishit* 44:17).

However, there is mention of this later on in *Amos* which steers us towards the former understanding of the sale in question.

**4** Hear this, you that would swallow the needy, and destroy the poor of the land, **5** Saying: 'When will the New Moon be gone, that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, that we may set forth corn — making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances of deceit? **6 That we may buy the indigent for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes,** and sell the refuse of the corn? **7** God has sworn by the pride of Ya'akov: Surely I will never forget any of their works. **8** Shall not the land tremble for this, and every one that dwells there mourn? Indeed, it will rise up wholly like the river; and it shall be troubled and sink again, like the river of Egypt.

This is an inverted version of the crime. Instead of selling poor people, the accused buy them, ostensibly as slaves. Since they are buying *ba-kesef*, this indicates that *kesef* is the medium of barter, not the excuse for the sale. The parallel clause therefore means that the poor can be purchased for a meager price – (a pair of) shoes. Reading this back to our passage, the first two crimes in the indictment refer to selling people as slaves; the silver and the shoes are the price. Although *kesef* is often understood as something of value in *Tanakh* (*vide, inter alia, Shemot* 22:6, 16), its being paralleled with “shoes” seems to relegate *kesef* here to a meager amount, the sense being that not only are the accused selling people as slaves, they are doing so for little profit.

On the face of it, this is an odd accusation. Is it aimed at debt-collectors who sell debtors as slaves due to their inability to repay their loans? If so, why mention the

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<sup>3</sup> She is saved by the last, never-ending cruse of oil which she pours into many vessels and sells. Parenthetically, this would seem to be the textual “anchor” for the famous Chanuka story recorded in the scholium of *Megillat Ta'anit* (BT *Shabbat* 21b).

meager price — wouldn't the accusation be all the sharper if the profit were greater? Perhaps, as some have suggested, the accused are judges who are willing to take meager bribes to have innocent people who are destitute taken as slaves. If so, however, the terminology is odd; we would expect the verse to speak of condemning the righteous or some other form of perversion of justice: because they corrupt the case of the righteous and sell them for shoes. The crime would be more clearly stated without sacrificing rhetorical or metrical style.

It seems that Shveka's proposal (see For Further Study) is the most reasonable. He refers us to an Ancient Near Eastern Text: Hittite Law 22a, which reads as follows (using the translation of Hoffner, *op. cit.*):

If a male slave shall run away, and someone brings him back, if he captures him nearby, he shall give him (i.e. the finder) a pair of shoes.

The law, in 22b-c, continues to grant greater bounty if found further from the master; see Shveka's article.

The code of Hammurabi has a similar law:

If anyone finds runaway male or female slaves in the open country and bring them to their masters, the master of the slaves shall pay him two shekels of silver.<sup>4</sup>

The same law appears in the laws of Ur-Nammu, LU 17.

Amos's indictment of the aristocracy of the Samarian kingdom begins with their treatment of runaway slaves. In contravention of the law in *Devarim* 23:16-17, these hard-hearted men would return slaves to their masters for the meager bounty promised.

Do not deliver to his master a slave that has run away to you from his master. He shall live with you, in your midst, where he chooses, in one of your gates that is good for him, you shall not oppress him.

This then explains the parallel of silver with shoes, reflecting both Mesopotamian practices which undoubtedly have parallels throughout the Levant and against which the prophet is inveighing. The slave is described here in two terms: "innocent" (*tzaddik*) and "needy" (*evyon*). The second term is easily understood and needs no elaboration. Why, however, describe the slave as *tzaddik*?

Perhaps this cuts to the biblical meaning of this word, which, as pointed out above, morphs into something very different by the Rabbinic period.

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp> on January 7, 2018.

The root is one related to court proceedings. In one of the best known passages in the Torah, the court is adjured: “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof,*” “Justice, justice you must pursue” (*Devarim* 16:20). This is the mandate of the court, as we mentioned above: vindicating the *tzaddik*, condemning the *rasha*. Given this, the picture that emerges from Amos’s phrasing is that people were wrongfully taken as slaves in adjacent regions and would flee their unjust oppression. In at least some circumstances they would flee to the Samarian kingdom; perhaps they relied on the reputation (recorded a century earlier) of the Israelite leadership as being kind-hearted.<sup>5</sup> In any event, they would be handed over to their masters for a small bounty. The willingness of these scoundrels to hand over poor slaves, pleading innocence — and to do so for such a small profit — is the first nail in their coffin. Although this is a single indictment, Amos divides it into two. Perhaps he does so to reflect the two disparate bounty-deals mentioned above. Alternatively, he wishes to generate a septad of sins to fully realize the “three/four” rhetoric and to complement the seven divine kindnesses and the seven punishments.

It would be difficult to move on to the next passage and subsequent series of crimes without making mention of the famous Midrashic association of this passage with the Yosef narrative within the broader martyrology known as the Ten Martyrs (*Aseret Harugei Malkhut*).

The Northern Kingdom theoretically includes ten of the Israelite tribes, as per Achiya’s symbolic gesture to Yeravam ben Nevat (*I Melakhim* 11:30-31). The original capital of the northern kingdom was Shekhem.<sup>6</sup> The combination of the location, the number of tribes associated with the North and the mention of selling the innocent for silver creates a strong association with the sale of Yosef. Even though Yosef is sold in Dotan, over 20 miles to the north, he is originally sent to Shekhem to find them (*Bereishit* 37:12) and it is there that he meets the anonymous man who directs him to Dotan where Yosef finds his brothers — and finds himself in an empty cistern soon thereafter. Shekhem becomes the association-locale for the sale of Yosef in the Midrashic imagination, commenting on Rehavam’s going to Shekhem for his confirmation and coronation:

It was taught in Rabbi Yossei’s name: Shekhem is a place ready for punishment. It was in Shekhem that Dinah was raped; it was in Shekhem that Yosef was sold by his brothers; and it was in Shekhem that the Davidic kingdom was divided. (BT *Sanhedrin* 102a).

These many associations lead the exegetes (*ba’alei midrash*) to interpret verse 6b — the first indictment — as alluding to the sale of Yosef. This association is the background for the title appended in rabbinic literature to Yosef’s name, *Ha-tzaddik*. This sobriquet is unattested in the canon, yet is ubiquitous in Midrashic

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<sup>5</sup> *I Melakhim* 20:31

<sup>6</sup> It was subsequently moved to Tirtza and then, following Omri’s purchase of a mountain from Shemer, moved there and named Shomeron (*ibid.* 16:24)

literature.<sup>7</sup> In several Midrashic expositions on the sale of Yosef, the brothers use the proceeds to purchase shoes.<sup>8</sup> This is also the background to the universal custom to read our passage as the *haftara* of *Parashat Vayeshev*, the section in *Bereishit* (chapters 37-40) which contains the story of the sale of Yosef.

The development of the Midrashic martyrology is comprehensively presented in Velner's work, cited below, and is beyond the scope of this *shiur*. It is, however, worth noting that in the Midrashic development of the narrative, the Roman governor (who is the catalyst of the plot) invites the "ten sages"<sup>9</sup> into his offices to ostensibly pose a halakhic question: what is the punishment for a Jew who sells another Jew as a slave? When the sages enter, they find piles of shoes, recalling our passage and the punishment they soon receive as retribution for the sale of Yosef "for a pair of shoes."

One final comment about the use of our passage as the text-base for the narrative of the martyrs is in order. Our passage is directed to the Northern Kingdom, with its historic and symbolic ten tribes, which is accused of selling a *tzaddik* for silver (pieces). This echoes the Yosef story, especially if we imagine, as does the Midrash, that all ten brothers (excluding Binyamin) are present and participate in the sale.<sup>10</sup> There is some exquisite symmetry to this image, as it is the same ten brothers who descend to Egypt in *Bereishit* 42 to purchase grain; instead of throwing Yosef into a cistern devoid of nourishment, they throw themselves at his feet for their own nourishment. This is all very well, but there is no indication in the narrative in *Bereishit* 37 how many brothers are present; the text seems to be operating with four, as Reuven speaks "to them" and Yehuda later speaks "to his brothers," although the text would read smoothly even if only three of them are there. Nonetheless, the irony of an accusation leveled against the Israelite kingdom anchored in the sale of Yosef is overt. The Northern Kingdom is, as pointed out above, theoretically made up of ten tribes — all but Yehuda and Binyamin. Still, the only significant tribes to play a role in the leadership, the kingdom and aristocracy are Menasheh and Efrayim! With the exception of the short-lived dynasty of Basha, all of the kings are descendants of Yosef. The name "Efrayim" is used interchangeably with "Yisrael" to represent the Northern Kingdom; both during the era of its rule (*Hoshea* 14:9) as well as over a century after its fall (*Yirmeyahu* 31:20). Perhaps the irony is deliberate: these people would turn on their own family members for profit.

In the next lecture, we will continue with our study of the seven-fold indictment against Yisrael.

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<sup>7</sup> See *inter alia* BT *Yoma* 35b, *Seder Olam* 30.

<sup>8</sup> See *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 37.

<sup>9</sup> The ten sages mentioned in the various martyrologies did not live at the same time and were not executed in one period.

<sup>10</sup> See, however, the curious deathbed "testimony" of Zevulun about his role as would-be savior of Yosef in the *Testaments of the Patriarchs*, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century apocryphal work. This particular testimony is found in chapters 2-4 of the *Testament of Zevulun*.

**For Further Study:**

**Evolution of meaning in Hebrew words:** Abba Bendavid, *Leshon Mikra U-leshon Chakhamim* (Dvir, Tel Aviv: 1967).

**Selling the poor for shoes:** Avi Shveka "For a Pair of Shoes: A New Light on an Obscure Verse in Amos' Prophecy," *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012) pp. 95-114.

**The Ten Martyrs:** Alter Velner, *Aseret Harugei Malkhut Ba-midrash U-vapiyut*, (Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem: 2005).