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 #14: 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 concluded our analysis of the seven crimes of which Yisrael stand accused. We will now move on to the surprising segment of the oracle, which is unmatched in any of the previous seven (set-up) prophecies: the **recitation of kindnesses,** an almost liturgical presentation of God's beneficence towards Yisrael in the conquest of the Land, several centuries earlier.

One prefatory note before presenting the text is in order. Presentations of God's kindnesses appear in three distinct rhetorical styles and contexts in the canon.

Firstly, they appear in purely liturgical form as songs of praise. *Tehillim* 78, 105 and 136 are a few famous examples. We also find this phenomenon in the Torah itself (*Shemot* 15, *Shirat Ha-yam*), in earlier *Nevi'im* (*Shoftim* 5, *Shirat Devora*), in later *Nevi'im* (*Yeshayahu* 12) and elsewhere in *Ketuvim* (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 29 and the early part of *Nechemya* 9, both of which appear in our daily prayers).

Secondly, they appear as "historiosophy," a retelling of a historic narrative aimed at inspiring the audience to praise God and to commit to His covenant or to His worship. This phenomenon is also found in every part of *Tanakh*. In the Torah, Moshe employs this rhetorical tool when introducing the events of the Giving of the Torah (*Devarim* 4). Yehoshua (at the end of his career, ch. 24) as well as several unnamed prophets in *Shoftim* (e.g. ch. 2, 10) and Shemuel (I *Shemuel* 12) recount God's many kindnesses with an aim to commit the people to the covenant, to abandon their assimilationist behavior and to reconsider their demand for a king, respectively. In *Nechemya* 9-10, the detailed recounting of God's kindnesses is aimed to motivate the gathering to sign on to the *amana* (pact), recommitting to punctilious observance of God's Torah.

The third rhetorical type is the one we encounter here: God's grace and generosity are presented in opposition to the people's rebellious behavior. Rather than being devotional or exhortative, this last one is a special form of chastening, as we will see forthwith.

What all three forms have in common is that the events recounted are presented in a manner which is distinct from the narrative record in three ways.

First of all, not all the events are presented; for instance, Yehoshua's historiosophy (ch. 24) omits the famine which brings the Jew to Egypt and any mention of Yosef — certainly a key person in the narrative of the Exodus. Even more remarkable is his complete elision of Pharaoh and the "negotiations" which form a core element of the story.

Secondly, events are presented in a sequence that differs from the narrative record. In *Nechemya* 9, for instance, Avram's name being changed to Avraham is presented before the covenant to give him the land of the Hittites, Hivites etc. In *Bereishit*, however, the covenant (ch. 15) precedes the name change (ch. 17) by more than a decade. Similarly, *Yehoshua* 24 mentions the defeat of Sichon and Og after the crossing of the Jordan, and *Tehillim* 78 and 105 both rearrange the Plagues.

Finally, those events which *are* presented in these retellings are often conflated. When the *malakh* speaks to the people at Bokhim (*Shoftim* 2:1-5), he states:

> I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I swore unto your fathers; and I said: I will never break My covenant with you; and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars; but you have not heeded My voice; what is this that you have done? Wherefore I also said: I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be unto you as snares, and their gods shall be a trap unto you.

Note that the entry into the Land is presented as simultaneous with (or perhaps even preceding) the commands to destroy pagan worship sites and not to make a covenant with them. The command not to make a covenant with the pagans of the Land first appears in *Shemot* 23:32, a full generation before they enter the Land. Similarly, the commands regarding destroying pagan worship sites are first given at Sinai (ibid. v. 24).

There is a single explanation for these three deviations from the narrative sequence and scope. The purpose of a historiosophy is not to teach the events as they happened – i.e. what we refer to as "history". It is, rather, aimed at evoking a particular sort of reaction from those listening and attending to the words: in one case, effusive praise; in another, resolve and commitment. In the third case, the goal is to inspire shame and, perhaps, to be prepared to accept God's punishment for their wrongdoings. In none of these cases is the information incorrect or inaccurate. However, as we are all aware, there are numerous ways in which the same story can be told. In truth, there are few "objectively presented" histories and the tenor of how, for instance, Israel's War of Independence is recounted has shifted in the last seventy years, telling us more about the orientations of the historians than about the facts. As it is, we generally begin by assigning factual and sequential objectivity to the narrative record and "agenda"-driven variations to the praising, exhorting and chastising texts.

We should not be surprised, then, when the chastising historiosophy that Amos presents does not accord exactly with the history of conquest and settlement as we know them.

THE TEXT

> And I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and he was strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from beneath. Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorites. And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not even thus, O you children of Yisrael? says God.
> But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying "Do not prophesy."

As I suggested in *shiur* #11, v. 12 may be a bridge between the historiosophy and the crimes.

Or, as we delineated in an earlier *shiur*, we may read it like this:

1) And I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and he was strong as the oaks
2) Indeed, I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from beneath
3) Also, I brought you up out of the land of Egypt
4) And led you for forty years in the wilderness
5) To possess the land of the Amorites
6) And I raised up your sons to be prophets
7) And of your young men to be Nazirites

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LITURGICAL RECITATION

It seems clear that the recitative_should be understood as having three segments: the first and last segment made up of two hemistichs and the middle one a tri-colon. This structure is self-evident, not only due to the division of the verses and the syntax, but also due to the themes and the content:

a) Destruction of the Amorite nations
b) (1) Exodus →(2) wanderings→(3) conquest
c) Sanctification of the people

Note that, as pointed out above, this historiosophic recitation is not sequentially true to the story: the destruction of the Amorite nations (a) happened within the context of the conquest (b3). The final segment is not at all clear, nor does it seem to fit within the scope of the "kindnesses" being enumerated here. The first five are all great things, miraculous and wondrous acts which clearly speak of God's power and favor towards His people. The final two seem to fall within the realm of personal sanctification and

would be better classified under the rubric of free will. How do we understand God's raising our sons to be prophets and our young men to be Nazirites? What does this mean? How much of those choices are we expected to ascribe to God and how much do we credit these young men (and their parents, teachers, extended family and environment)? We will address this after concluding our analysis of the paean.

From a thematic perspective, the three sections could reasonably be seen as a mini-chiasmus, or perhaps, more accurately, as a complex inclusio. The hemistichs that frame the segment serve as an inverted parallel. On the one hand, God destroyed the Amorites; on the other hand, God sanctified the young men of Israel. The Amorites are described as tall (as cedars) and strong (as oaks). The young men – especially *bachur* – are often depicted this way, as a sapling that grows strong and tall. (see, *inter alia*, *Tehillim* 127 and the definition of *bachur* in *I Shemuel* 10:23-24). Moreover, the specific description of the destruction of the Amorites uses "roots" and "fruit" in a figurative sense. Both of these are commonly used throughout *Tanakh* to depict genealogical relationships, the roots being the ancestors and the fruit being the children.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

> And I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and he was strong as the oaks.

The opening letter, *vav*, is a prefix whose meaning must be clarified. We are accustomed to reading a *vav* as the conjunction "and". There are, however, multiple and variegated uses of the *vav*, especially in biblical Hebrew. Besides the *vav ha-chibur* (conjunctive *vav*), there is also the well-known *vav ha-hipukh*, the conversive *vav* which changes the tense of verbs. For instance, the word *yelekh* means "he will go," whereas *va-yelekh* in *Tanakh* means "he went." There is also the *vav ha-biur* (explicative *vav* or *vav* of clarification). For instance, in *Bereishit* 4:4, "And Hevel also brought from the finest of his flock [*vav*] from their fat," the *vav* before serves to indicate that the "finest of his flock" **means** "from their fat". There is also a popular use of the *vav* which serves not as a conjunction but rather as a disjunct. This is referred to as *vav ha-nigud* (*vav* of apposition). For instance, in *Rut* 1:14, "Orpa kissed her mother-in-law [*vav*] Rut cleaved to her."[1]

How are we to read the *vav* here? Does Amos mean that Israel committed all these terrible crimes **and** God destroyed the Amorites? This hardly makes sense. Since the predicate is already written in the past perfect and would not require a *vav ha-hipukh* to define it as a past-tense verb, the most reasonable explanation is that the *vav* at the beginning of this paean is a *vav ha-nigud*. In other words, God declares that despite Israel's sinfulness, He has shown them great kindnesses.

If this is the case, however, then the rhetoric seems to fall short on the basis of chronological sequencing. The crimes have happened in the current generation and

[1] This is not an exhaustive presentation of the uses of the *vav* prefix, but it suffices for our purposes.

continue as Amos's mission is undertaken, but we would expect the *vav ha-nigud* to introduce an opposite action taken by God **in spite of** their behavior – not to recall something that He did hundreds of years earlier.

To resolve this, another short word about biblical grammar is needed. We are familiar with three tenses: past, present and future. The existence of a present tense in Hebrew is arguable (I would contend that there is not), but in modern and rabbinic Hebrew, we can easily recognize the past and future, e.g. *katav* (he wrote) and *yikhtov* (he will write). However, in biblical Hebrew, the past tense has two distinct forms which are presented in distinct ways. The past imperfect is written as the future tense with the *vav ha-chibur* as a prefix. Hence *katav* becomes *yikhtov*, with a *vav* (and *patach*) preceding it: *va-yikhtov*. The past perfect, however, is written in the manner of our regular past tense. Hence "*amar*," which in modern (and rabbinic) Hebrew means "he said," in biblical Hebrew means "he had said."[2]

With this understanding in mind, we can reassess the first clause: "but I **had already** destroyed." In other words, the *vav ha-nigud* does not speak to a divine **reaction** to the wayward behavior of Yisrael; rather, it reflects the horrid disconnect between the beneficent and magnanimous behavior which God showed to His people and their behavior towards Him, to His law and to the lowly and disenfranchised among them.

This analysis comports well with the suggestion I made a few lessons back — that we view this oracle as "triangular" in form, with the paean to God's kindnesses forming the opening and central theme, while the accusations (on one side) and the punishments (on the other) both relate to the difference between what should have been and what was.

There is a further oddity in the opening clause of the laudation. God declares that He had already destroyed the Amorites "from before them," not from before **you**. In other words, the nation that had been the beneficiaries of God's destruction of the native population is in the third person, not the second. The sense of *hester panim*, of God's turning away from the people and regarding them as "not my people" (to borrow from *Hoshea*) is palpable and this small variation speaks to it. It would be tempting to relax this tension by positing that the entire praise-psalm is presented to Israel in the third person, but the next verse makes that impossible ('I brought **you** up out of Egypt").

There is one more issue we need to address before moving on to an analysis of the rest of the paean. How do we reckon this as an ode at all, considering that it is not being sung or recited by the people, but by God Himself? The answer, I believe, makes the entire oracle that much harsher. God is communicating with His people about the glorious relationship they had in the past, in contrast to the current state of affairs. The message is the following: Be aware that your own (formerly) secure status in the Land was due to My kind acts; this is the song you **ought to be singing**.

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[2] This has the potential of reorienting our understanding of the first two verses in *Bereishit.*

We will continue with our analysis of the psalm-that-should-have-been in the next *shiur*, focusing on the imagery and language and how they relate to the current status and actions of the aristocracy and judiciary in Shomeron.