

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom

**Shiur #21
The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles Against the Nations (continued)**

The oracle against Israel, to which we have devoted our study for the past few *shiurim*, builds up to these final four verses. As with each of the seven "set-up" oracles, the point of the diatribe is the consequence, i.e. the punishment that God will mete out against the targeted nation. Since Israel is the true target of the entire sequence of oracles, there is a multi-tiered rebuke which includes, as we have seen, both a detailed list of seven indictments as well as a presentation of the kindnesses which God had done for the people. In the "bridge-verse," those kindnesses ("And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites") are turned on their heads by the people ("But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying 'Do not prophesy'). We fully expect the hammer to fall this point and are prepared to hear what punishment awaits Shomeron.

It may surprise the audience — which has already had its share of surprises — that the consequence is a bit delayed and we encounter another "bridge-verse." We will analyze the entire section, comment on the words and structure and then turn our attention to this prefatory verse; we will continue our analysis of the essential punishment passages in the following chapters.

13 Behold, I creak ¹ under you, as a cart creaks that is full of sheaves. **14** And flight will fail the swift, and the strong will not exert his strength, neither will the mighty deliver himself; **15** Neither will he stand that handles the bow; and he that is swift of foot will not deliver himself; neither will he that rides the horse deliver himself; **16** And he that is courageous among the mighty will flee away naked in that day, says the Lord.

One prefatory note regarding the "signature" of the oracle is in order here. The first two oracles (Aram and Peleshet) have a signature ("*amar Hashem*"), the next two (Tzor and Edom) do not, but the next two (Ammon and Moav) do. Judea

¹ This is one possible translation – see below for a range of possible meanings

has no signature, while Israel does, with a new verb to end to the entire oracle sequence, "*ne'um Hashem.*"

Now that we've put our oracle into its structural context within the larger series, let's attend to the chastisement-consequences.

Once we move past the introductory transitional verse, we again see seven consequences:

- 1) Flight will fail the swift
- 2) And the strong will not exert his strength
- 3) Neither will the mighty deliver himself
- 4) Neither will he stand that handles the bow
- 5) And he that is swift of foot will not deliver himself
- 6) Neither will he that rides the horse deliver himself
- 7) And he that is courageous among the mighty will flee away naked in that day

Note that the entire sequence of punishments is given in the context of war: the fourth ("he that handles the bow") and sixth ("he that rides the horse") are explicit references to military positions. The other five (fleet², strong³, mighty⁴, fleet [again!] and courageous) are all used consistently in a war-context in *Tanakh* and, by virtue of context, are clearly to be understood in that setting.

Considering the long history of biblical chastisements and warnings, going back to the Sinai Covenant (*Vayikra* 26), we might have expected a different or broader context. Exile, famine, plagues, destitution, loss of sovereignty and much more can be found both in *Vayikra* 26 and *Devarim* 28, as well as the (relatively) minor admonitions of (*inter alia*) *Yehoshua* 23-24, *I Shemuel* 12 and *I Melakhim* 9. Why, then, is this sequence limited to military failure? Parenthetically, if all of these dire threats are realized, all that we have is a vanquished army. True, this is never good news; but within the broader scope of Israelite history, it seems to fall short of the terrifying message we have come to expect.

DECIPHERING THE "LIGHT" PUNISHMENT

There are, *prima facie*, three ways to approach this seeming anomaly.

² Cf. *II Shemuel* 2:18: Asa'el, the first person described as "fleet of foot" in *Tanakh*, is characterized that way in a clearly military context; similarly, Achima'atz (*II Shemuel* 18:23) who famously "overtakes the Kushite" is delivering news from the war to David.

³ The phrase that Moshe uses to encourage Yehoshua throughout *Devarim* and which makes up the *leitmotif* of God's investiture of Yehoshua (ch. 1) is "*Chazak ve-emetz*" ("Be strong and courageous"), both of which are found in the second punishment (which literally reads "the strong will not encourage his power"). *Amitz* appears as the final item on our list too.

⁴ See, for instance, the list of David's mighty ones in *II Shemuel* 23:8. They constitute the upper echelon of David's army.

First of all, the punishment may be far worse than we imagine. If the military has lost all of its ability, its power, its speed and its courage, there is little to hope for but the compassion of its enemies. However, within the context of these oracles, it is the enemies' ruthlessness which plays a prominent role. The Arameans (surely the most likely enemy of Shomeron at this point) slash open the pregnant women of their enemies; Edom refuses to allow natural compassion to stay its sword and so forth. A regression of military might and ability may indeed spell the worst imaginable consequences.

Secondly, perhaps the punishment is, indeed, less "severe" than others, because the transgressions it addresses are less severe as well. We generally assume that when the prophet threatens the people, it is because they have "filled the basket" (to paraphrase the Midrash⁵) and deserve to pay the ultimate price — or, at least, to be presented with stages of increasingly severe punishments with possible points of return along the way. The clearest example of this is the Rebuke of *Vayikra* 26, which consistently allows for the people's realization of the error of their ways and immediate repentance. This assumption is, perhaps, not well-founded and there remains the possibility of milder chastisements for milder crimes. Is it possible that Israel, at this point, has violated certain divine norms and deserves punishment, but only so far as these lighter punishments go? Perhaps exile, famine, et cetera are excessive here and would be gratuitous rather than just punishment.

Finally, we have to look at the literary context. When looking back at the seven nations that precede Israel in this series — ostensibly setting up this oracle — the crimes speak to a broad range of bad behavior. The punishments are, however, fairly consistent:

- 1) **ARAM:** So will I send a fire into the house of Chaza'el, and it shall devour the palaces of Ben Hadad; And I will break the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from Bikat Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beit Eden; and the people of Aram shall go into captivity unto Kir, says the Lord.
- 2) **PELESHET:** So will I send a fire on the wall of Gaza, and it will devour her palaces; And I will cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod, and the one who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; and I will turn My hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines will perish, says the Lord God
- 3) **TZOR:** So will I send a fire on the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her palaces.
- 4) **EDOM:** So will I send a fire upon Teiman, and it shall devour the palaces of Botzra.
- 5) **AMMON:** So will I kindle a fire in the wall of Rabba, and it shall devour her palaces, with shouting in the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the

⁵ See BT *Sota* 9a.

whirlwind; And their king shall go into captivity, he and his princes together, says the Lord.

- 6) **MOAV:** So will I send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the palaces of Keriyot; and Moab will die with tumult, with shouting, and with the sound of the horn; And I will cut off the judge from their midst, and will slay all of their princes with him, says the Lord.
- 7) **YEHUDA:** So will I send a fire upon Yehuda and it shall devour the palaces of Yerushalayim.

All seven nations will have a fire consume their major cities; leadership, in most cases, will be destroyed (in one fashion or another) and, in some cases (e.g. Moav and Ammon), the cities will seemingly be overrun by enemies. Although the context is a military defeat/conquest, none of this action takes place on a battlefield, per se; rather the "camera" is focused on the cities of the targeted kingdom. Our final oracle, on the other hand, takes place entirely on the battlefield and makes no mention of the presumably inevitable impact on the cities of Shomeron, Yizre'el and so forth. As a matter of fact, not one of the Israelite cities is even mentioned in the entire oracle, making this final leg of the sequence stand out all the more. This literary apposition may be interpreted in two ways.

Distinction: Instinctively, the simplest way to read it is as a clear distinction. Whereas the other nations will suffer devastation in their palaces and cities, Yisrael will suffer defeat after defeat on the battlefield, with their army rendered useless. If we were to read the first six oracles (excluding Yehuda) as being of one general spirit and reflecting an overall divine displeasure, then we might be tempted to adduce specific crimes from one nation to the other and see the consistent punishment as fitting the consistent crime. This would then force us to interpret Yisrael's crimes as being of a different sort, such that the punishment they are slated for is different as well. This is a tempting direction to take, but it seems inadequate. The discernible crimes of which Aram, Peleshet, Tzor, Edom, Ammon and Moav are accused are crimes **on the battlefield**, so why should they be "spared" the punishment of "Flight will fail the swift" etc.? Furthermore, as we have seen over the past few lectures, the crimes of which Yisrael is accused are decidedly **removed from the battlefield**, but it is the one nation whose punishment is fully limited to that theater of operations. All of this leaves us with the feeling that taking the route of distinction, while tempting and instinctual, might not resolve our question. Therefore, we may wish to take the opposite approach, seeing the punishment promised to Yisrael as completing the picture of all of the oracles. This would take us on the interpretive road of clarification, utilizing the rabbinic maxim⁶ that "the words of Torah are poor in one place, yet

⁶ The earliest authority credited with this maxim is Rabbi Nechemya (*Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, end of *Parasha* #1) specifically as a method for deciphering unclear non-legal statements (aggada). His application of this notion is exactly on point for us: "They require substantiation to be brought from another place (i.e. text)". Rabbi Yochanan is quoted as deriving this maxim from the verse

rich elsewhere.” In other words, what the text omits in one place may be filled in from a related passage.

Clarification: The earlier, much briefer oracles all end with destruction of the major cities of the targeted kingdoms. Perhaps our longer oracle serves to complete the picture in each of those earlier ones. In other words: how will Damascus eventually see its bar broken and so forth? Because its warriors will cease to be fleet and their archers will no longer be able to control the bow.

According to this reading, the final oracle and the first seven speak to each other, filling in the gaps in each other's message, warning that the cities of Yisrael will suffer the same fate of fire, destruction of its palaces etc. This conflagration will begin with a measured disabling of the army.

“BEHOLD, I CREAK UNDER YOU...”

As mentioned above, there is another "transition verse" before the sevenfold punishment is presented:

Behold, I creak (*mei'ik*) under you, as a cart creaks (*ta'ik*) that is full of sheaves.

Mei'ik/ta'ik, as a verb, is a *hapax legomenon* and makes its only appearance in *Tanakh* in our verse (twice!). It is commonly rendered as "creak" (or "totter"), following BDB. Kohler-Baumgartner, however, give three varied meanings based on suggested etymologies:

- 1) Hinder: Behold I am made to sway beneath you, as a wagon full of straw is hindered.
- 2) Roar: Behold I roar beneath you (perhaps the crash of an earthquake?) as a wagon⁷ roars when overfilled with straw.
- 3) Split open: Behold I make a furrow beneath you as a wagon splits the land when it is overfilled with straw.

The difficulty of interpreting *mei'ik* and *ta'ik* notwithstanding, the image is powerful. God, so to speak, is hindered/ overburdened/ roaring due to the tremendous weight of Israel on His back. This image has roots as early as Kayin's words to God: "Is my sin to great (for You) to bear?" (*Bereishit* 4:13). God describes Himself (*Shemot* 34:7) as "One Who carries sins" — i.e. He Who takes the weight of sin from man's shoulders and assumes it. The image of a forgiving God is not usually one of "cleaning the slate" (one famous exception is "I have blotted out your transgression like a cloud," *Yeshayahu* 44:22), rather of

praising the woman of valor: "She is like a merchant ship, bringing her bread from afar" (*Mishlei* 31:14)

⁷ Perhaps he is suggesting that *agala* (wagon) recalls *egla* (calf)? The words are spelled identically in the biblical text.

acknowledging that the sins exist, the burden is heavy, and that it is God's compassion which lifts that burden from man.

In our case, it is as if the burden is so heavy that God is (as it were) incapable of bearing it. The elegance of this painful image is that it is grain — the plenty with which God has blessed His people — which becomes a metaphor for the sins. It is, to wit, His own blessings which have led to the wayward behaviors of the people; “Yeshurun became fat and rebelled” (*Devarim* 32:15). One of Amos’s contemporaries puts it like this:

For she did not know that it was I that gave her the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and multiplied unto her silver and gold, which they used for Baal (*Hoshea* 2:10).

We have presented this verse as a transitional passage, leading from the praise-hymn to the punishments, because this verse does not list punishments, nor does it fit with the military images used in the seven punishments outlined in the next passage. In addition, the seven-fold scheme which informs the entire oracle (and the set-up sequence as well) necessitates seeing vv. 14-16 separately and viewing our "tottering" verse as independent.

Nonetheless, Professor Shalom Paul⁸ suggests that this verse is, instead of a transition, a topic sentence describing the punishment in general terms; this is then followed by the three verses which detail it. In his words:

The armies of Israel will be stopped and will stand in their places as if paralyzed, like a wagon which is stopped because of the weight of the straw... the image, taken from the world of agriculture, Amos' world, is paradoxical. The wagon is stopped due to the weight of the straw which testifies to great bounty, the same bounty which Amos himself degrades in other prophecies.

As he points out, interpreting this verse as part of the punishment which is then explicated in the following verses is difficult, as it seems to use certain imagery in a fashion contradictory to Amos's general use.

I would argue against Paul that this verse is a preface, a divine cry as it were, expressing the pain that God feels when He decides to mete out punishment to His own people and to still the "armies of God" and paralyze their defenses. The image of the wagon is not the armies themselves stopped in their tracks, rather it is I, *Anokhi*, God Himself who is frozen due to their overwhelming sins. We might almost be tempted to then read the next few verses, detailing the disabling of the Israelite army — not as an active punishment, but rather as an inevitable

⁸ Shalom M. Paul, *Mikra LeYisrael: Amos* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1994), p. 54.

weakening of divine support for the Israelite warriors, as He is "burdened down" and "cannot move" to help them.

Indeed, if we read the next three verses carefully, we can see this image, subtly, throughout the descriptions of the weakened forces. God does not declare that he will slow down the fleet or rob the hero of his courage; rather it is "Flight will fail the swift." Without God's support and help, the warriors' abilities are for naught (cf. *Tehillim* 127:1). God is anticipating the question that will be asked on the day of defeat: "Where is God?" The answer to the people is that He is busy being burdened with their sins — incapable, so to speak, of intervening on their behalf and giving them the necessary strength to stand and fight.

Next *shiur*, we will analyze these seven deficiencies in combat.