

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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**Shiur #08:
The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles against the Nations (continued)**

In this lecture, we will continue our study of Amos's oracles against the nations. In the previous chapter, we surveyed the histories of the coastal "interlopers," the Phoenicians and the Philistines, in order to put their crimes and punishments in context. In this lecture, we will do the same with the oracle against Edom. The rationale for isolating Edom is its rich background vis-à-vis Israel, with which we will begin our survey. In addition, this oracle completes the first cycle of "long-long-short-short" speeches in *Amos*. Next week, we will turn to Ammon and Moav.

INTERLUDE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENESIS

It is appropriate at this point to make a few observations about the importance of studying these histories. Indeed, the reader may ask why passages in *Bereishit*, *Bamidbar*, *Devarim*, *Yehoshua* and *Shoftim* would have significance in enhancing our understanding of the mid-8th century prophecies of *Amos*.

Within current traditional circles, there is broad disagreement about how to read narrative history in *Tanakh*. Are we to understand that the Torah and historical books of *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* are presenting the facts as they occurred, faithfully reproducing every nuance of a conversation between the actors? Or are we to read the narratives more as a historiosophy?

A historiosophy is a retelling of history in a manner that projects a specific message. It isn't untrue in any way, but the manner of presentation is geared more to swaying the audience to a particular attitude and perception of events and actors than it is to "objectively" present the data. For instance, in *Yehoshua* 24, the leader (in what is apparently his farewell speech) conflates the history of the descent to Egypt, the Exodus and the wanderings in the desert into a few verses. Even those verses — which omit key events like the Ten Plagues and Giving of the Torah at Sinai — don't follow the events of *Shemot/ Bamidbar/ Yehoshua* exactly. Much the same can be said for Yiftach's response to the king of Ammon in *Shoftim* 11 and Shemuel's speech to the people in *I Shemuel* 12.

Are we to read other narratives in the same way or are we to cede less and assume tighter construction? This matters when the facts of a story don't add up. For instance, when Hagar is sent out with the "lad" in *Bereishit* 21 (14-19), we assume it to be Yishmael, who would be in his mid-to-late teens; yet the text presents him as a little boy whom the maidservant is then told to pick up and carry. If we assume exact history, then we might suggest (as does Rav Yoel Bin-Nun) that this boy is a son of Yishmael who is, indeed, a young child. If we are prepared to read the narrative as message-oriented, we won't be bothered by such apparent contradictions; we would read the text as intended and see Yishmael. In other words, the text is more about how we are to view the characters and events as opposed to any objective reality about them.

If we adopt the second approach, the significance of studying foundational texts about any nation would be immediately apparent. It is vital to understand how we are to view the respective tribe/ nation in order to put the oracle of Amos into context.

Truth to tell, even if we adopt the objectivist position of biblical history, the inquiry into foundational texts is still needed. Even if we accept the facts "as is," the text is still selective. For instance, we know the name of Sara's maidservant (Hagar) in the abovementioned passage, but not the name of Avraham's servant in *Bereishit* 24. We know what Avraham feeds his guests in *Bereishit* 18, but not what he eats every evening. It stands to reason that the information we are given teaches us something about the character, the location or the event being described. Therefore, whatever information the Torah chooses to give us about Ammon, for instance, is vital for our later understanding of — and attitude towards — Ammon in *Amos*.

Our understanding of Amos's prophecies against any neighboring nation will be deepened and broadened by considering his audience's attitude. When Amos accuses Aram of brutality in war, that accusation stands against the background of what the people in Shomeron already believe about Aram. When Amos accuses Philistia and Phoenicia of selling slaves to Edom, that indictment resonates with its audience because of what they already believe about these nations.

As we scroll down to what the prophet has to say to/ about Edom, the rich, textured and tortured history of relations between Yisrael and Edom informs our perception. In this case, the history goes back to our own foundations, and the tension between the twins must be considered in order to put the oracle into context. To wit, how would the 8th-century audience have heard the words "for the three sins of Edom...he pursued his **brother** with the sword..."? In order to gain this broader and deeper perspective, we will go back, again, to the beginning.

EDOM-EISAV: BEGINNINGS

Although we might posit the foundational text of the Edomite nation as being the prophecy given to Rivka regarding her twins in utero (25:23), the gestational passage is actually a bit earlier in *Bereishit*. Avraham is told by God the following about Sara: “I will bless her and I will give you a son from her; I will bless her and she will become nations, kings of peoples will emanate from her” (17:16). The verse itself carries a double message: the imminent of a single son and motherhood of nations. The second element might have been realized generations later. This is not the case; the single son she bears became the father of nations. Now let us turn to Rivka.

And God said to her: “There are two nations (*goyim*) in your womb, and two peoples (*le’umim*) will separate from your belly; people will strive against people and the older will serve the younger (*ve-rav ya’avod tza’ir*).”

Note that this prophecy is made up of four distinct stages:

- 1) “There are two nations in your womb” — Rivka is apprised not only that she has twins in her belly, but that each of them will found a nation.
- 2) “Two peoples will separate from your belly” — The first clause indicates that the children will ultimately (perhaps in a later generation) become two distinct ethnocultural groups. This second clause implies that the separation will happen immediately at birth: “the first came out ruddy, all like a mantle of hair (*sei’ar*) ...then came his brother, holding onto his heel...” There is, however, nothing in these two lines that implies contention or discord between the brothers. Indeed, the differences predicted in this stage might have been used to create a broader base of leadership of the two nations.
- 3) “People will strive against people” — this third segment doesn’t speak about the boys themselves, rather their progeny. At some point, the descendants of these boys, now nations, will confront each other.
- 4) “The older will serve the younger” — this phrase is equivocal. The traditional reading is countered by the cantillation marks: “*ve-rav, ya’avod tza’ir*,” “the older, the younger will serve.” The deliberate ambiguity of the phrase indicates they will always be in contention and one will always subdue the other. In other words, they will not wrestle to a draw, nor will one be completely vanquished by the other. When one is victorious, the other will be subjugated by him; but either one could be master at any time.

The boys differ at birth, and they grow to embrace antagonistic livelihoods: Eisav is the man of the field (farmer) and Ya’akov is the man of the tents (shepherd). This takes us back to the fratricidal relationship of Kayin and Hevel. Eisav’s ruddiness and his impetuous and seemingly slack-jawed demand “Stuff that red stuff down my throat” contribute to the etiology of his tribal name: Edom (“red”). From that point on, the only story we hear of the two brothers while in their

parents' home is one of deception on the part of Ya'akov and outrage on the part of Eisav.

All that said, it isn't at all clear that Eisav ever truly means Ya'akov harm. and his angry outburst may be more of a reflection of his lack of impulse control than anything else. When Ya'akov returns after many years,¹ Eisav brings four hundred men to greet him, apparently for the sake of protocol, not malicious intent (*Bereishit* 32-33). After Ya'akov and Eisav's warm reunion, which Ya'akov cleverly cuts short with a promise to catch up later, we don't see Eisav himself any more. Eisav's impressive genealogy (*Bereishit* 36) is presented a few chapters later; ominously, the hated Amalek is introduced as his grandson.

We next meet Edom in the desert (*Bamidbar* 20:14-16):

Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: "So says your brother (!) Yisrael: 'You know the afflictions that have found us. Our ancestors descended to Egypt and we settled in Egypt for many years and the Egyptians dealt badly with us and oppressed us and our ancestors. We cried out to God and He heard our voice and sent a messenger and took us out of Egypt; behold we are now at Kadesh, the city on your border.'"

This passage sounds eerily similar to the message sent by Ya'akov when he returns from *his* oppressive years with Lavan (*Bereishit* 32:4):

Ya'akov sent messengers to Eisav his brother: "So says your servant Ya'akov, I sojourned with Lavan and was delayed until now."

By using a very similar formula, the Torah communicates that this dialogue between Yisrael and Edom should be understood in light of the relationship of Ya'akov and Eisav, grounded in the prophecy to Rivka.

Notwithstanding Edom's refusal to allow Yisrael to pass through its land, we are commanded to avoid war with Edom and allow Eisav's generations to inherit Har Sei'ir ("hairy mountain"). This seems to be the thrust of *Devarim* 2:22, following similar commands regarding Moav and Ammon. Later (*ibid* 23:8-9), we are told: "Do not eschew an Edomite, for he is your brother... The children born to them of a third generation may enter the congregation of God." In other words, converts from Edom (like those from Egypt) are accepted, and their grandchildren may marry native-born Jews. The paradigm seems to be that of a "cold brotherhood."

¹¹ At least twenty, but perhaps many more; cf. my *Between the Lines of the Bible, Vol. 1 (Revised)*, Chapter 16.

After Yehoshua's conquest, Edom doesn't appear as an active player in biblical history until David's time.² David's broad conquest of the eastern lands, stretching north to the Euphrates, includes Edom, where he places a garrison (*// Shemuel* 8:14). We hear nothing further until the end of Shelomo's reign when we learn that a particular Hadad from Edom was a "satan" (troublemaker) to Shelomo. He had fled to Egypt when David conquered Edom. Only when he heard that David and his chief-of-staff Yoav had died did he return to Edom (*// Melakhim* 11:14-22).

Edom waits in the wings until it is time to wage war against the rebellious Moav. Moav had been paying tribute to Shomeron, but in *// Melakhim* 3:5, at the death of Achav, the king rebels and refuses to continue paying the tribute. The two Jewish kingdoms form an uncomfortable alliance, along with Edom, to go to war against Moav. This pan-Yitzchak alliance is quite unanticipated, and Edom then disappears once again.

From the broader historical view, all this quiet on the southeastern front is a bit unsettling. If the prophecy to Rivka is enduring, we would expect ongoing tension if not all-out war between United Israel (and, later, Judea and Israel) and Edom.

Edom first takes a powerful, autonomous role in its relations with the Jewish people when it rebels against Yehuda under Yoram (c. 840 BCE); when Amos is standing in Shomeron delivering his diatribe against Edom, it has been independent of Yehuda for less than a century. What diminishes Edom's status further is the next mention in the Biblical history. Amatzya, king of Yehuda, defeats Edom in the Valley of Salt and then turns to Yehoash, king of Yisrael, asking for a meeting. The latter's degrading response is telling: "You smote Edom and your heart became haughty; keep your honor and stay in your home. Why should you provoke evil such that you will fall (in war) and Yehuda right along with you?" (*// Melakhim* 14:10). The implication is that smiting Edom is not an impressive military feat and that Amatzya should not let it go to his head.

Here is where things get interesting. Even though Edom is spared inclusion in the sequence of Yeshayahu's oracles against the nations (ch. 14-22), he is threatened in a separate prophecy in chapter 34. In *Yoel* (whose setting is undetermined and may as late as the 6th century BCE), Edom is promised vengeance (in the Valley of Yehoshafat!) for the blood of Yehuda that it has spilled (4:19).

One thing is clear from several texts: Edom plays a central role in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The psalmist calls on God to remember what "the daughter of Edom" did on the day of the destruction (*Tehillim* 137:7). The fourth chapter of *Eikha* ends with a promise of God's punishment against Edom. If we are searching for heinous acts done by Edom against Yisrael during our period

² "Edom" is mentioned briefly in Yehoshua as a geographical marker, in *Shoftim* (as earlier in *Shemot*) in war poetry and in *I Shemuel* in the brief summary of Shaul's wars (*I Shemuel* 14:47)

— acts that Amos’s audience would recognize — we have not found any yet. Again, the passage from *Yoel* (and *Ovadya*, which targets Edom/ Eisav exclusively) may come later, and any references from Destruction-Era texts tells us nothing about Edom’s behavior during the period prior to the Assyrian conquest. The oracles against Edom in both *Yirmeyahu* (chapter 49) and *Yechezkel* (25:12-14) are of little help to us, as they reflect the Era of the Destruction, by which time Edom had become an active and brutal enemy to Yehuda.

Significantly, a number of these prophecies include a component that is unmatched: the promise that Yisrael/ Yehuda will conquer Edom’s land and dispossess Eisav.

And saviors will ascend Mount Tziyon to judge Mount Eisav, and kingship will belong to God. (*Ovadya* 1:21).

On that day I will raise the fallen *sukka* of David and will seal up its breaches, I will raise up its destroyed buildings and will build it as in days of yore. In order that they may conquer the remnant of Edom and all the nations upon whom My name is called... (*Amos* 9:11-12)

A careful reading of Amos’s oracle against Edom may shed some light on this mystery:

11 *Ko amar Hashem*: For three transgressions of Edom, indeed, for four, I will not reverse it: because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all of his compassion, and his anger perpetually tore at him, and he held onto his wrath forever. **12** So will I send a fire upon Teiman, and it shall devour the palaces of Botzra.

Botzra and Teima/ Teiman are cities in Edom.

Note that the accusation is longer and more detailed than any we have heard until now, even though the punishment follows the “short” scheme.

Surprisingly, unlike the other nations we have heard about, Edom does not stand accused of *doing* anything. They are guilty of an attitude, crushing their own instinctive brotherly compassion. The assumption is that throughout the period — and perhaps stretching back to the beginning of the monarchy or even to the period of conquest and settlement — they have maintained an inherited enmity for their Israelite brothers. The incident of chasing Israelites by the sword pales in comparison to their deliberately squelching their own compassion and consciously keeping the embers of hatred glowing inside.

Instead of our looking for historic precedents to which the prophet is alluding (as we have tried to do in the cases of Aram, Peleshet and Phoenicia), perhaps we

should consider that the prophet is opening our eyes to something the historical record could not document.

Edom, brother of Yisrael (see *Bamidbar* 20:14 above) spends these many centuries stoking its own hatred, which finally explodes years after the prophet from Tekoa was no more, in a gush of enmity and a dance of joy at the destruction of Yerushalayim. This prophecy, aimed not at war crimes and brutality but at profane attitudes and misanthropic feelings, has the potential to impact even more powerfully the audience in Shomeron. Whereas the Israelite nation may not stand accused of threshing the pregnant women of their enemies, the notion that God holds peoples accountable for stoking pernicious feelings has the potential to highlight their own spiritual failings.

It is as if the ancient prophecy about Edom/Yisrael is awaiting resolution, with the reading of “*ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir*” as the older serving the younger being the desired and anticipated final state: “And saviors will ascend Mount Tziyon to judge Mount Eisav.”

For further study:

Although we did not touch on later perceptions of Eisav/ Edom, this article is highly recommended:

Gerson M. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Ed. Altmann (Cambridge: 1967), pp. 19-48.