

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

**By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom**

**Shiur #19**

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

We have successfully made our way to the end of the praise-hymn which forms the core text of Amos's oracle against Israel. The final bicolon in this segment relates not to God's kindnesses on behalf of the nation per se, but rather His raising/ enabling (?) the young men of Israel to achieve spiritual stations of excellence, as Nazirites and prophets. We will have to examine this last verse of the hymn from several perspectives. First of all, why does the prophet focus on these two divine kindnesses to conclude his hymn? Furthermore, how is God in any sense reckoned to be the one who encourages/ enables young men towards their spiritual success? The first five acts of divine grace listed, which involve God's decimating the Amorites and, in a flashback, taking the people up out of Egypt and leading them safely through the wilderness to conquer the Land, fit the typical *Tanakh* mode of praise. Acts which are supernatural, which involve salvation and/ or bounty, are credited to God; and for them, He is given thanks. Where is there a precedent in *Tanakh* for praising God for an individual's spiritual success?

Here, again, is the text of the hymn-section:

**9** 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. **10** 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. **11 And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not even thus, O you Israelites? says God.**

**12** But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying "Do not prophesy."

To understand Amos's referencing these two phenomena we will need to look deeper into the nature of these two stations – *navi* and *nazir*. We will evaluate them first without reference to their role in this oracle, then return to the text.

**The Jewish People: A Blessing for All the Families of the Earth**

Let's take a step back and ask a more panoramic question. What is the assumed goal of the Jewish people's entrance into the Land? After all, it is that entrance, conquest and settlement that necessitates both the Exodus and the successful navigation through the wilderness, mentioned in the previous verse.

The answer, writ large, is found in many places in *Tanakh*. When Avraham begins his journey, he is told (*Bereishit* 12:1-3):

Go for yourself from your land, your family<sup>1</sup> and your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you and make your name famous; and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and will curse the one who curses you; and through you, all families of the earth will be blessed.

This ultimate goal — being a source of blessing for all families of the earth — is repeated to Avraham at his last great stand, at the (successful?) climax of the Binding of Yitzchak (22:18).

Indeed, the subtext of the “moral high road” as a justification for the Jewish people's elevated status and successful conquest of the Land courses through the Covenant Between the Parts (15:13-16) where Avraham is told that his seed may not conquer the Land until the “sin of the Amorite” is “complete” — i.e. until the indigenous population has sinned to such a degree that their ouster is justified in the divine calculus.

The repeated warnings — especially in *Vayikra* — that the Land will not tolerate sinful behavior and will vomit out violators who defile the Land<sup>2</sup> serve as support that the Jewish people's geographic situation and political independence are dependent on their maintaining a moral compass which justifies their position and allows them to inspire other nations, who then are blessed as a result.

This theme continues subtextually into the beginning of *Yehoshua* when the first local that the people encounter, a (simple?) harlot of Yericho, acknowledges God as the one true Power.<sup>3</sup> This theme subsequently “goes into hiding” as the challenges and travails of tribal, then federal, society-building are undertaken; the larger picture takes a necessary backseat. It is only with the advent of the literary prophets, who (on occasion) have the opportunity to take the longer view and transmit that vision, that we are reminded of this goal. The great universalistic calls of Yeshayahu (Chapter 2) and Mikha (Chapter 4) are somewhat echoed in

---

<sup>1</sup> *Moledet* in modern Hebrew is commonly understood as “birthplace.” In biblical Hebrew, however, it is most accurately rendered as “family.”

<sup>2</sup> *Vayikra* 18:24-30; see Ramban's powerful comments at v. 25 ad loc.

<sup>3</sup> *Yehoshua* 2:9-11.

the later chapters of the former's book,<sup>4</sup> when he refers to the Temple as a place that "will be called a house of prayer for all of the nations" (56:6). Even Yoel's bloody apocalypse (Chapter 4) and Ovadya's visions of Edom's day of reckoning — which match the visions at the end of Yirmeyahu — are universal in scope, even if they paint a very different picture of the *eschaton* than those drawn by Yeshayahu and Mikha. Yeshayahu's self-identification as one sent to be a "light of the nations" (42:6<sup>5</sup>) confirms this overriding global goal of bringing the world to a greater understanding of God's moral demands and of the knowledge of God which will "fill the world as the waters cover the seabed" (11:9). As pointed out above, some of the prophets share a different perspective on that same reality, maintaining that the nations of the world will be judged by God for their fealty or lack thereof to His morality (see, inter alia, *Zekharya* 14). However, nearly all of them share the vision that God's plan includes all of humanity and that the Jewish people's role in that is, among other functions, to act as teacher (see *Yeshayahu* 61:6) and model (see *Zekharya* 8:23).

The inspirational modes with which the Jewish people are equipped operate on multiple and variegated levels. The individual, charismatic, saintly, devoted and so on may be a vehicle of inspiration for others — something we see in our own lives. The family and community each have a great contribution to make to the reputation of the Nation of Israel and, by implication, to the Torah of Israel and its Commander, the God of Israel. Both of these modes are frequently put squarely into our awareness — especially in the Diaspora — as neighbors exclaim with no little measure of jealousy about how beautiful the Shabbat table is and how marvelous it is to see children studying with their parents and so on. Much the same happens on a communal level, although the consciousness that this is a double-edged sword is all too acute these days as we see communities, large and small, both vilified and praised for their actions.

Of these three, however, only the first is well-anchored in the text of *Tanakh*. Impressive people such as Avraham, Yitzchak, Yosef, David, Elisha and others make their mark on outsiders (it would be anachronistic to use "non-Jews" for the first three of these) and, in one way or another, impress upon them the greatness of the God to whom they show obeisance. To be sure, there is yet another mode, one we do not encounter often enough yet the one that is most dominant in *Tanakh* — the impressive nation. Keep in mind that our mandate at Sinai is to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*Shemot* 19:6) which implies a national

---

<sup>4</sup> These chapters are conventionally referred to as Trito-Isaiah and represent the prophecies of a seer in Yerushalayim during the era of the Return to Zion; some traditionalists eschew the distinction and assume the entire 66 chapters to be the work of "Isaiah of Jerusalem" of the Assyrian era. There is much literature on the topic; the interested reader is directed to Rachel Margaliyot's *Echad Haya Yeshayahu*.

<sup>5</sup> These chapters are conventionally ascribed to Deutero-Isaiah, assumed to be a prophet operating in Babylonia during and just after Cyrus' victory and subsequent declaration allowing the Jews to return and rebuild their home and temple; see note 4 above. The prophet's identifying himself as a universalist is all the more surprising and inspiring considering the political station occupied by the Jews at the time.

body, complete with land, government, currency and army, et cetera, which is holy and which presumably has the power to inspire other nations to raise their own ethical standards and spiritual sensitivity.

Amos deftly shifts from the national landscape of Exodus and conquest to the ultimate goal for which the Israelites have been redeemed and brought here — to have their youths become excellent spiritual guides and models. The sanctity of the land, the glamorous and challenging historical epic of the people, and the divine law which frames the lives of those people in that land all contribute to an environment which promotes these two pursuits among the youth. Commenting on our verse, ibn Ezra notes that God puts His spirit in the young men, turning them into prophets and inspiring them to teach His laws (which the people have ignored, as we see in v. 11). Rav Elazar of Beaugency and Rav Yosef Kara take a similar approach. However, Radak (and, in his footsteps, Malbim) side-step the issue of prophet-as-rebuker and note that God inspires young men to have the spirit of God on them, showing the people that such special and lofty communion is possible.

Indeed, God Himself raises some of the young men to become prophets and others to become Nazirites.

### **“And I raised up of your sons for prophets”**

We have already discussed the nature of prophecy in our opening lectures; a short recap is needed here. Although we typically think of prophets in their spokesman mode as messengers of God’s word, *Tanakh* is replete with descriptions of prophetic gatherings where the people involved experience a rapturous communion with God with no specific message to be transmitted further. In Maimonides’ formulation, these are exercises intended to train the prophetic disciples (*bnei ha-nevi'im*) to be receptive to the divine spirit and to be ready to act as His agents if such a need arises. Nonetheless, it is clear from the descriptions in *Shemuel* and *Melakhim* (especially *II Melakhim* 2 and 4) that this guild of prophetic acolytes has its own spiritually uplifting experiences which only the “chosen” may join (hence the surprised reaction “Is Shaul among the prophets as well?” in *I Shemuel* 10:11-12, 19:24).

The prophet is not only a vehicle for the word of God, to continue the process of bringing the divine message to humankind (per ibn Ezra et al. above); he is also a spiritual person whose training gives him the experience of “residing in the shadow of God” (echoing Radak et al. above). Unlike Amos himself, who tells us (7:14) that he is neither *navi* nor *ben-navi*, there are guilds of prophets who train to be receptive to God’s word. Their “rapture” exercises are alluded to in *I Shemuel* 19 and their spiritual experiences sketched out both there and earlier in *Shemuel* (ch. 10). Raising such young men who forsake the pursuit of material wealth (see *II Melakhim* 4:1-6, 38-43) for spiritual riches should be the task of the nation itself — but as Amos testifies, it is God who raises them to be *nevi'im*.

There are two salient points in this phrase. First of all, there is a subtle rebuke in the line: the people should be the ones raising the young men to a life of prophecy, but God Himself has to do so. In other words, even though the phrase can be read as part of the continued praise for God, that He establishes a sanctified community that could be a breeding ground for prophets, nonetheless, the community does not sufficiently live up to its mandate, and He has to “do it on His own.” Second, there is an allusion in the phrase used here by Amos to the prophetic guild (*benei ha-nevi'im*), the group Amos is not associated with.

### “And of your young men for Nazirites”

Although *nezirim* (literally, “those who are set apart”) is the term employed here, the medieval commentators are not all convinced that the intent is to refer to those who take a formal vow of *nezirut*, which is defined in the Torah (*Bamidbar* 6) as requiring three elements: a) avoiding defilement by a corpse (*tumat met*); b) eschewing of wine or any grape products; and c) letting one’s hair grow. Rashi, following Targum Yonatan, suggests that the *nezirim* are teachers (*malfin*). Rav Yosef Kara makes the same proposal. Radak seems to endorse reading *nezirim* as per the halakhic definition, but all he mentions explicitly is eschewing wine, atypical behavior for “young men” who might be expected to pursue hedonism and materialism. Instead, they aspire to spiritual greatness and to serve as both role models and teachers to the wayward generation.

We see how this opportunity is squandered in the subsequent verse — but first let of consider the idea of *nezirim* in greater detail. The root gives us both *nazir* and *nezer*, a crown, and both appear in the passage of the Nazirite (*Bamidbar* 6:1-21; BDB suggests that the two are related, as a consecrated person is adorned with a crown). Indeed, the *nazir* is known for his abstention from wine and grape products; in addition, over the course of his *nezirut* (at least 30 days), his hair grows out until it resembles a crown. Some have suggested that the institution of *nezirut* is an opportunity for a commoner to imitate the High Priest, who has similar restrictions regarding defilement to the dead and wears a *nezer* as well (cf. *Vayikra* 21:12, *Bamidbar* 6:7). The Mishna in Tractate *Nazir* 7:1 debates who of the two should bury a corpse if no one else is available.

#### *Nezirim* in *Tanakh*

Outside of our passage, we find virtually no mention of *nezirim* as an existing group — or of a solitary *nazir*. *Eikha* 4:7 uses the term, but most commentators do not take it as a reference to Nazirites (but see ibn Caspi ad loc.). There are some Tannaitic views about Shemuel (Mishna, *Nazir* 9:5) and Avshalom (*Mekhilta*, *Beshalach*, *Shira* 2) and their Nazirite status, but these are subject to dispute. The only individual identified as a *nazir* explicitly by the text is Shimshon (*Shoftim* 13-16).

Shimshon, however, is a curious *nazir* and I would like to reappraise his status as such. Besides being identified as such by an angel before his birth (and, perhaps, before his conception), his divinely mandated mission is to fight the Pelishtim (which he does quite regularly) and to kill them – an act which, unless done from a distance, would entail *tumat met*. This is why the halakhic category of *nezirut Shimshon* is limited and carries no liability of a special offering if one encounters *tumat met* (Mishna, *Nazir* 1:2). According to Rabbi Yehuda (Tosefta, *Nazir* 1:5), Shimshon was under no prohibition of *tumat met*.

There is yet a further anomaly in the story of Shimshon. First his mother, then his father, are forbidden from drinking wine and “eating impure foods” (*Shoftim* 13:7, 14). When traveling to Timna (to meet his Pelishti bride), Shimshon and his parents go different ways and they are not together when going through the vineyards of Timna (when Shimshon encounters a lion and kills it with his bare hands). Although we assume that it was Shimshon who avoided the vineyard (per the maxim of *Shabbat* 13a), the simplest reading of the text implies that it is he who goes into the vineyard and his parents who avoid it.

Conventional wisdom holds that somehow his parents’ drinking wine would affect his abstention from wine – but this is odd, as even if we were to posit such a thing when *in utero*, that would only make sense vis-à-vis his mother. In addition, why are his parents not bound from eating grape products, and why are they explicitly told to avoid “impure foods”? If Shimshon is a Nazirite who has a “permit” to have contact with the dead, why doesn’t the wine-prohibition play a greater role in his capture? Why does he tell Delila (after three lies) that if she cuts his hair, he’ll lose his strength (ibid. 16:17)? Why not mention the wine? In addition, Shimshon hosts a wine-banquet at his own wedding in Timna (ibid. 14:10)!

One final question in this curious episode. Shimshon’s parents are bound to avoid wine and impure foods – until when? We do not hear of a *terminus ad quem* after which they may enjoy alcohol again.

I would like to propose that *nazir* in the Shimshon story is a borrowed term, just as numerous commentators read it in our passage in *Amos*. Shimshon’s mother is promised that her son will have awesome strength and that (for reasons unknown to us) maintaining his hair uncut guarantees that he will keep that strength. Since he will never cut his hair, he both looks like a *nazir* and also wears a “crown of hair” — a *nezer*. This is the only ritually unique feature he carries, and it is the only source of his undoing when he divulges his secret to Delila.

If this is the case, why is there a ban on wine for his parents? Shimshon is destined to have superhuman strength. Any power which man is given has the potential to lead to ruin, unless one learns how to control it and rein it in. How would this superman learn how to restrain his power and strength and to be led

by his mind, not his emotions? I'd like to propose that his parents were commanded to live ascetic lives so that they would serve as immediate role models for him from birth; models who avoid that which is permitted to others (wine) and that which is prohibited (impure foods). This is why it is they circumnavigate the vineyard and aren't privy to Shimshon's slaying of the lion. This model of restraint has the potential to guide Shimshon to use his awe-inspiring powers to save the Jewish people. His relative success is a matter for a *shiur on Shoftim*.

### **Back to Amos**

As we have seen, the two spiritual stations mentioned by Amos – *nevi'im* and *nezirim* – reflect exemplary discipline as well as lofty and laudable ambitions. Yet they stand at two different points on the spectrum of service of God. The *navi* is one who has sensitized himself to be a worthy recipient of God's words. The *nazir* has trained himself to live a life of sanctity by virtue of his restraint; one inspires others to **listen** to God, while the other impresses upon others the potential to become personally sanctified. These two stations, these two models, serve as the nexus for the "holy nation" that is intended to teach the world about God and model a holy society and a society of holy individuals. This was, of course, the aim. In the next shiur we will see how Amos describes the people's reaction to having *nevi'im* and *nezirim* among them.

#### **For Further Study:**

Z. Weisman, "*Ha-nezirut Ba-mikra, Shorasheha Ve-tipuseha*," *Tarbiz* 36 (1967), pp. 207-220.