

וישב

Amos, chapter 2, verse 6 to chapter 3, verse 8

Introduction

Connection of haftarah and sidra:

The sidra relates how young Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and in the first verse of the haftarah Amos castigates Israel for selling a *tzaddik* (righteous person) for silver. In the Talmud, Joseph is called *tzaddik*,¹ and therefore the Rabbis assumed that Amos must have had a person like Joseph in mind when he used the term.

The setting:

Though Amos was a native of Tekoa, a little place probably near Jerusalem (capital of Judah), he moved to Israel and preached in Samaria (its capital) and Bethel, where a shrine existed that featured immoral practices under the guise of religion. He was deeply shocked at what he saw: moral laxity, legal and social corruption, and religious rites that had little to do with the God of Israel. Conspicuous wealth and social injustice lived side by side.

For more on Amos and his time, see our *General Introduction*.

The message:

1. The sins of Israel. (2:6-8)
2. What God has done for Israel, and how its people have forgotten it. (2:6-8)
3. The looming punishment. (13-15)
4. A dramatic, poetic appeal to the people. (3:1-8)

HAFTARAH FOR VAYEISHEV

Amos, chapter 2, verse 6 to chapter 3, verse 8

2:6. Thus says the Eternal One:

For Israel's three transgressions,
and for four,

I will not revoke [judgment]:
because they sell the innocent for silver,
the needy for a pair of sandals;

7. they who trample the heads of the poor
into the earth's dust,
and make crooked the road of the meek.

Father and son go to the same girl:
thus [they] profane My holy name.

2:6 כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה

עַל-שְׁלוֹשָׁה פְּשָׁעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

וְעַל-אַרְבָּעָה לֹא אָשִׁיבֵנּוּ

עַל-מִכְרָם בְּכֶסֶף צְדִיק

וְאֶבְיוֹן בְּעֵבֹר וְעֵלִים:

7 הַשֹּׂאֲפִים עַל-עַפְר־אֲרִיץ בְּרֹאשׁ דָּלִים

וְדַרְךְ עֲגוּמִים יִטּוּ

וְאִישׁ וְאִבּוֹ יֵלְכוּ אֶל-הַנְּעוּרָה

לְמַעַן חַלֵּל אֶת-שֵׁם קֹדְשִׁי:

Commentary

2:6. *For three ... and for four.* A stylistic device (denoting “one too many”²) with which Amos begins his denunciation of sins that various nations have committed. He uses this formula eight times in succession, beginning in chapter 1 with his castigation of Damascus, and then in turn of Gaza, Tyre, Edom, and Ammon, and in chapter 2 of Moab and Judah. After having thus established the supremacy of God’s moral law in all these nations, gentiles and Children of the Covenant, the Prophet focuses on his main subject, the sins of Israel.³

I will not revoke [judgment]. An alternative rendering is, “I will not take him back.”

The innocent. צְדִיק (*tzaddik*) here describes persons who innocently trust people and lose their very liberty in the process.

A pair of sandals. The poetic image can be translated into prose to convey: “For Israel’s three transgressions—and now a fourth!— I will not take him back. Because they sell the innocent (needy) for (only) the price of sandals.” “They” are the corrupt judges who do not care about the guilt or innocence of poor people.⁴

7. *Trample.* Reading it שָׂפִים (*shafim*) instead of שׂוֹאֲפִים (*sho’afim*, yearn for). So the Septuagint, Vulgate and Ibn Ezra, JPS. The rest of the Hebrew is also not clear.

Go to the same girl. While technically not incest, these sexual acts are highly reminiscent of behavior prohibited in Leviticus 18:15-17. The Hebrew נְעוּרָה (*na’arah*) stresses the youth of the woman.⁵

8. Near every altar they lie
on clothing taken in pledge;
[with the proceeds]
of those who have been fined
they drink wine
in the house of their God.

9. Yet it was I
who destroyed the Amorites before them,
who were tall as cedars,
and sturdy as oaks!
I destroyed their fruit on top,
and cut off their roots beneath.

10. And it was I who brought you up out of
the land of Egypt,
and led you in the wilderness forty years,
to take possession of the land of the
Amorites!

11. I raised up prophets from among your
children,
and Nazirites from among your young.
Is this not so, people of Israel?
—says the Eternal One.

8 וְעַל־בְּגָדִים חֲבָלִים יִפְּוּ

אֶצֶל כָּל־מִזְבֵּחַ

וַיֵּין עֲנוּשִׁים יִשְׁתּוּ בֵּית אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

9 וְאֲנֹכִי הִשְׁמַדְתִּי אֶת־הָאֱמֹרִי מִפְּנֵיהֶם

אֲשֶׁר כְּגֹבַה אֲרָזִים וְגִבּוֹ

וְחֶסֶן הוּא כְּאַלְוָנִים

וְאֲשַׁמֵּד פְּרִיָו מִפֶּעַל

וְשָׂרְשָׁיו מִתַּחַת:

10 וְאֲנֹכִי הֵעֵלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

וְאוֹלַךְ אֶתְכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה

לְרַשֵּׁת אֶת־אֶרֶץ הָאֱמֹרִי:

11 וְאֲקִים מִבְּנֵיכֶם לְנָבִיאִים

וּמִבְּחֹרֵיכֶם לְנָזִירִים

הֲאֵף אֵינְךָ וְאַתְּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

נְאֻם־יְהוָה:

Commentary

8. *Clothing taken in pledge*. In contravention of the law: "If you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets."⁶ Amos castigates the hypocrites who exploit the poor and lie down in religious places on garments that they have acquired through unethical means.

9. *The Amorites*. One of the peoples whom Israel displaced when they conquered the land.

Tall as cedars. Recalling the report that the spies brought back when they scouted the land for Moses: "All the people we saw were of great size."⁷

11. *Nazirites*. Persons under special vows to observe certain restrictions in their personal lives.⁸

12. But you made the Nazirites drink wine,
and prohibited the prophets from proph-
esying.

13. Now I will make you totter
as a wagon totters under a full load of
newly-cut grain.

14. Flight shall fail the swift,
the strong shall find no strength,
warriors shall not escape with their lives.

15. The archer shall not stand firm,
the swift runner shall not escape,
nor shall the horseman escape with his life.

16. On that day, says the Eternal One,
even the bravest of soldiers
shall flee away naked.

3:1. People of Israel,
hear this word the Eternal has spoken
about you,
about the whole crowd that I brought up
out of the land of Egypt:

Commentary

12. *But you made the Nazirites drink wine.* Thus causing them to violate one of the restrictions (to abstain from alcohol, from cutting their hair, and from touching a corpse).

Prohibited the prophets from prophesying. Amos himself was "encouraged" to cease his preaching.⁹

13. *Totters.* Reading מפיק (*mefik*) instead of מעיק (*me'ik*, hinder, slow down).

3:1. *About the whole crowd.* Usually, משפחה (*mishpachah*) means family, and appears in that meaning in the next verse. But here, Amos uses it disparagingly and applies it to Judah as well as to Israel. Micah and Jeremiah also employ it in this sense.¹⁰

12 ותשקו את־הנזירים גין
ועל־הנביאים צויתם לאמר לא הנבאו:

13 הנה אנכי מעיק פחתיכם

כאשר תעיק העגלה המלאה לה עמיר:

14 ואבד מנוס מקל

וחזק לא־יאמץ כחו

וגבור לא־ימלט נפשו:

15 ותפש הקשת לא יעמד

וקל ברגליו לא ימלט

ורכב הסוס לא ימלט נפשו:

16 ואמץ לבו בגבורים

ערום ינוס ביום־ההוא

נאם־יהוה:

3:1 שמעו את־הדבר הזה אשר דבר יהוה

עליכם בני ישראל

על כל־המשפחה אשר העליתי מארץ

מצרים לאמר:

2. You alone have I known
of all the families of the earth—
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities.
3. Do two walk together
without having arranged it?
4. Does a lion in the forest roar
when it has no prey?
Does a young lion growl in its den
without having caught something?
5. Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground
that has no bait?
Does a trap spring up from the ground
when there is nothing to capture?
6. When the shofar is sounded in the town
do not the people tremble?
When evil falls on a city
did not the Eternal make it happen?
7. The Eternal God does nothing
without revealing its purpose
to God's servants, the prophets.

Commentary

2. *You alone have I known.* In your unique relationship with God.
Therefore I will punish you. For violating your special trust. Belonging to God's people does not guarantee privileged treatment; on the contrary, it entails added obligation.
3. *Do two walk together.* The first of three examples of cause and effect, which are explained in dramatic fashion in verses 7 and 8.
4. *Does a lion ... roar.* The roar of the lion is a metaphor for God's voice ringing in the ears of a prophet (as verse 8 has it).¹¹

2 רק אתכם ידעתי
מכל משפחות האדמה
על-כן אפקד עליכם
את כל-עונותיכם:
3 הילכו שנים יחדו
בלתי אסדו-עדו:
4 הישאג אריה ביער
ושרר אין לו
הישון כפיר קולו ממענותו
בלתי אסלקד:
5 התפל צפור על-פח הארץ
ומוקש אין לה
הישלה פח מן-האדמה
ולכוד לא ילכוד:
6 אסיתקע שופר בעיר
ועם לא יחרדו
אסתהיה רעה בעיר
ויהנה לא עשה:
7 כי לא יעשה אדני יהנה דבר
כי אסגלה סודו
אל-עבדיו הנביאים:

8. The lion has roared,
 who will not fear?
 The Eternal God has spoken,
 who can but prophesy?

8 ארִיָה שָׁאָה
 מִי לֹא יִירָא
 אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר
 מִי לֹא יִנְבֵּא:

Commentary

8. *Who can but prophesy?* God's warning of inevitable doom is so overwhelming that it leaves the Prophet no choice but to confront the people with it. Will they listen, or will they pretend that all is in order?

Essay

The prophet of social justice

No one among the prophets was as appalled at what he saw as was Amos. Time and again the Prophet denounced the immorality that surrounded him.

When he appeared in the north there was pride, plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. The rich had their summer and winter mansions adorned with costly ivory, gorgeous couches with damask pillows, on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts. They planted pleasant vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils; their women, compared by Amos to the fat cows of Bashan, were addicted to wine.

At the same time there was no justice in the land, the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery, and the judges were corrupt. In the midst of this atmosphere arose Amos, a shepherd, to exclaim: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and those who feel secure in the mountains of Samaria."¹²

It has been said that to Amos, social justice was religion. That is both right and wrong. Right, because all pretense to religious observance is a sham without just living. Wrong, because social ethics cannot take the place of religion; it is an essential aspect but not the whole of it.

For it is God who stands behind the whole edifice of existence. It is God who commands us to love our neighbor, to distinguish right from wrong, and to act accordingly. In the view of Amos and all of the Tanach, God wants Israel not only to *remember* the Covenant, but above all to *live* by it. This means to order one's existence in such a way that we constantly remember God's presence (with ritual and prayer the mainstays of remembrance) and at the same time order our relationships with others—personally or as members of society—in accordance with ethical principles. Religion without ethics is not religion. The two are obverse and reverse of the same coin that bears God's signature.

Adherents of traditional Judaism often picture Reform Jews as people who have forgotten God and the divine law. In return, Reform Jews have frequently created an image of Orthodoxy as form without moral content. Both judgments are only partial truths. Indeed, there are Jews who deem themselves observant but are unethical; and there those who believe they are leading ethical lives, while forgetting about God and Covenant. The truth lies with neither of these extremes.

Amos reminds us of this. He decries injustice because God abhors it. To be sure, the shepherd from Tekoa is the prophet of social justice, but he is also the voice of the Living God who cares for Jerusalem and Samaria. Amos urges us to requite God's love for the House of Jacob by caring for the unfortunate and at the same time by remembering the opening line of the *Shema*: "You shall love your Eternal God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might."¹³

Gleanings

Words to Remember

They sell the innocent for silver,
the needy for a pair of sandals. (2:6)

The lion has roared,
who will not fear?
The Eternal God has spoken,
who can but prophesy? (3:8)

The outsider

Amos was a peasant, and the amenities of life among the well-to-do and leisured classes were no doubt shocking to him, as they have always been to those who were not brought up with them. And coming from a region and particularly from a background where there was, as yet, no great wealth and no fixed line of demarcation between rich and poor, he found the inequalities in Israel especially noticeable. The biting irony and scorn of his comments must have enraged his hearers, who felt they were living pretty much like the rest of the world, as no doubt they were. Why, they wondered, should they be singled out for vituperation just because some out-of-date fanatic from the backwoods had a quaint outmoded conception of God which he wished to substitute for their own.

Brooke Peters Church¹⁴

The essential point

The great message, with all its variety and differences in imagery and details, is that God will not finally abandon his people, even if he is responsible for judging and destroying them, even if that action is necessary and there is no way to escape it. Without repentance there is no possibility of forgiveness.

F.I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman¹⁵

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