

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

By Rav Yitzchak Etshalom

Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah
for all who require healing, comfort and peace –
those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.
May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

In honor of Oma Ina Sondheim, our matriarch,
from her children, grandchildren and great - grandchildren,
who all love her and are davening for her refuah shelaymah
so that she can continue to share her wisdom, insight and wit with all of us.

Shiur #01: Introduction to the Prophets

In this introduction, I will present an overview of *nevua* (prophecy) throughout the biblical period. As such, it will be overly broad, with a goal to refining our understanding of the role of the prophets whose works we will study together.

Prophecy is as old as the creation of Man. God speaks with Adam and, as such, Adam might be considered a *navi*. From another perspective, prophecy only begins with Moshe; yet it may be argued that the onset of the prophetic experience in Israel happens when Shemuel anoints Shaul. The popular approach posits the prophets of the mid-8th century BCE – Hoshea, Amos, Mikha and Yeshayahu – as the first era of *nevua*. Indeed, each of these claims is accurate and depends, to a large extent, on our definition of prophecy.

I will examine eight possible definitions of prophecy, each of which is reasonable and anchored in traditional sources. This will provide an overview of the range of *nevua* within biblical history.

A: Communication with the Divine

In pure Maimonidean terms, prophecy demands a preternaturally sensitive personality with intelligence and spiritual sensitivity to match. To perceive and receive God's word, the individual must start out with a sterling intellect and superior morals and then be trained in the ways of prophecy (see *Guide* II, 32-

46). This would mean that those men and women with whom God speaks at any point would be considered “prophets”; Adam, Chava and Noach are all prophets. This approach forces Maimonides to explain God’s word coming to some less-than-stellar individuals, such as Lavan, Avimelekh, Bilam and, perhaps most strikingly, the serpent in Eden! (Bilam’s donkey doesn’t rate according to Maimonides, as that entire scene may just be Bilam’s vision.) Nonetheless, the notion that a person could reach a sufficiently sublime level to receive divine communication may qualify as prophecy.

B: Representative of the Divine Message

The only *navi* identified as such in *Bereishit* is Avraham. When Sara is taken by Avimelekh (*Bereishit* 20), God appears to Avimelekh in a dream (!) and orders him to “return the woman of that man (i.e. married woman) because he (Avraham) is a navi and he will pray for you and you will be revived.” As the commentators point out (following *Bava Kama* 92a), Avraham’s being a *navi* isn’t the reason provided for Avimelekh to return his wife; rather, being a *navi*, Avraham’s prayers will be most effective in healing Avimelekh (e.g. Saadia Gaon, Rashbam, *Bereishit* 20:7). Alternatively, since he is a *navi*, he knows that Avimelekh is innocent of sexual advances (Rashi, Bekhor Shor, *ibid*). In other words, a *navi* is someone who not only (perhaps not necessarily) receives divine communication. He is chiefly a representative of God, someone whose entreaties to God are received on high as well as someone who has intimate knowledge of events outside of the purview of his physical senses.

C: The Messenger

Although God speaks with numerous individuals before Moshe, none of them is entrusted with an explicit oratory mission. The words are dictated to them as commands, warnings, chastisements, punishments, promises, exhortations and covenants – but at no point are these words to be transmitted further. All of these communications are intended for the recipient alone, or as a means of protecting God’s “favored” one (e.g. Avimelekh to protect Sara, Lavan to protect Ya’akov). Indeed, it seems that at least in several cases, the *navi* keeps God’s words to himself or herself (as in the case of Rivka and the prophecy about her children).

Moshe is the first prophet to undergo an initiation (*Shemot* 3:1-4:17) and his first encounter with the Infinite is all about a mission. It is his job not only to face off against Pharaoh and to lead God’s people out of Egypt – but also to deliver a specific and explicit divine message to both addressees. He is to tell the elders of Israel that God has “remembered” them and will take them out. He is to tell the king of Egypt that the God of the Hebrews has sent him with a clear message about His people and His plans for them. Moshe’s agency is the first time that the formulaic “*Ko amar*” (the messenger formula; to wit, “Thus says”) is used in reference to God. If we define a prophet as a messenger of God’s word, Moshe

is certainly the first; to use the rabbinical phrase, he is *av la-nevi'im* (father of the prophets, *Midrash Tehillim* 90).

D: The Lawgiver

Beyond the sea change in the divine word that Moshe's agency signals, he serves another unique prophetic function. Alone among humans, Moshe is a lawgiver. Not only does he transmit God's word about history and destiny, he receives God's eternal law and enforces its integration into the national ethos. Viewed through the lens of the rest of the canon, Moshe is the only lawgiver (*mechokek*), in spite of various reforms instituted by Yechezkel and Ezra (and, quite possibly, Shemuel and others). Indeed, the rabbinical reading of the summary verse at the end of *Vayikra*, "These are the statute," is "that No prophet may innovate any new law henceforth" (*Megilla* 3a). Moshe is the beginning as well as the end of legislation.

In any case, Moshe's position in history as "prophet" is assuredly unique and its uniqueness assured. God defines the impossibility of comparison in His famous chastisement of Aharon and Miriam in *Bamidbar* 12.

One critical footnote to our too-brief treatment of Mosaic prophecy: Moshe himself is not called "*navi*" until he is eulogized in the final passage in *Devarim*. The one instance of *navi* in *Shemot* refers to Aharon as Moshe's *navi* (!). There, "*navi*" clearly means spokesperson and implies nothing about spiritual character or communication with the Divine. Absent from *Vayikra*, the word appears five times in *Bamidbar*. Four of these appear in reference to the two *nevi'im* in the camp – Eldad and Meidad – and in Moshe's fervent wish that all of the people would be *nevi'im* (*Bamidbar* 11:25-29). The final mention is in God's words to Aharon and Miriam about **other** prophets **aside from** Moshe (*ibid.* 12:6). In both passages, Moshe is the assumed model for *nevua*, but never referenced explicitly as a *navi*. In *Devarim*, all references but one are to prophets **other** than Moshe: false prophets or prophets in the mold of Moshe, but never Moshe himself. The one time that Moshe earns the sobriquet *navi* is in his eulogy – when we are told that "no *navi* ever arose in Israel like Moshe whom God knew face to face" (34:11).

Let us consider one final footnote. Yehoshua, whose prophetic status is ensured by dint of Moshe's "laying of hands" on him (*Bamidbar* 27:23) enjoys a spectacular career. Yet from the vantage point of prophecy, he seems to be a "throwback" to the pre-Mosaic era. He is never given explicit messages to transmit to the people and the nature of the Divine communication to him all falls under the rubric of supporting and guiding his military leadership.

Although there are several "divine messengers" mentioned in the period between Yehoshua and Shemuel, two of them (*Shoftim* 6:11ff, 13:3ff) are clearly and explicitly angelic beings. Both of them disappear in the flame of an offering and in

both cases, the individuals to whom they have appeared fear for their lives as a result of seeing the Divine.

The third (*Shoftim* 2:1) is hard to identify, though he is called *malakh Hashem*. In spite of the Midrashic tradition that identifies him with Pinchas (which would make him the second person in history sent to the people with a specific message), the rhetorical style militates in favor of yet another angelic being. Unlike Moshe, this *malakh* speaks as God (as do the two aforementioned divine agents) and doesn't quote his dispatcher: "I have brought you up out of Egypt and brought you into the Land which I swore to your fathers. I said: 'I will never break my covenant with you and you shall make no covenant with the dwellers of the Land; you shall break down their altars' but you did not listen to My voice. What have you done? Therefore, I said that I will not drive them out from before you, but they shall be snares to you and their gods will be a trap to you."

E: The Court Prophet

It might be argued that Shemuel ranks as the second most empowered prophet after Moshe; his being listed with Moshe in *Yirmeyahu* 15:1 (and, poetically, in *Tehillim* 99:6 with Moshe and Aharon) supports this argument. Although it may be a bit premature to call him a "court prophet," Shemuel is the first whose mission involves anointment of kings and whose destiny is to be the vehicle of change from prophetic/ dynamic leadership to monarchic/ dynastic government. Although Shemuel never serves formally in anyone's court, he acts as Shaul's assumed superior, chastising him for violating God's word and twice announcing Shaul's demotion – first from the father of a dynasty (*I Shemuel* 13:14) and then, famously, stripping him of the monarchy (*ibid.* 15:23). He also serves, in one famous scene, as a sort of prophet for David when the latter flees to Ramah to seek Shemuel's protection from Shaul (*ibid.* 19:18ff).

David, however, is the first to have court prophets, and these prove to be the last true prophets who serve in a court. Gad the Seer joins David early on in his flight from Shaul, and Natan remains with him and in the royal court after David's death. Their job seems to be to keep the king "in check" and ensure that he is acting according to God's directive and not allowing the excesses and powers of the office to sway him from obedience to God.

A definition is in order: by "court prophet," I mean someone who is employed by the court, whose job is to be an advisor to the king and, to borrow the biblical parlance, "eats at the king's table." For purposes of our categorization scheme, we will only include those court prophets who were, from the perspective of the text, proper and "true" prophets.

The only possible candidate for "court prophet" subsequent to Natan might be Shemaya, who is sent by God to restrain Rehavam from attacking the northern tribes after the tax rebellion at the core of their secession (*Melakhim* 12:22ff).

After that point, the court prophets all appear to be royal lackeys who simply declare, in the name of prophecy, what the king wants to hear. A clear example of this is the dichotomy between the court prophets and Mikhayhu ben Yimla in *I Melakhim* 20. In other words, the court prophets are anything but *nevi'im*; they serve not the divine word, but royal abuses and corruption.

F: The Charismatic

With the loss of proper court prophets, a new type of *navi* appears – the charismatic prophet. The most famous of these are Eliyahu and his disciple Elisha, who operate outside of the purview of the court and essentially as opponents to the royal house. The enmity between Achav and his wife Izevel to Eliyahu couldn't be clearer and Achav's son Yehoram's hatred for Elisha and his desire to have the prophet killed plays out explicitly in *II Melakhim* 6. Along with various anonymous prophets (such as the "man of God" who addresses Yeravam ben Nevat at the altar in Beit El, *I Melakhim* 13:2-3), these charismatic prophets seem to part of a larger band of the "sons of prophets" who practice prophetic trances and live ascetic lives. Their chief impact on the nation and the leadership is in their miraculous deeds – such as bringing and ending famines, providing unexpected military victories and reviving (nearly?) dead children. This phenomenon seems to be an exclusively northern one as we find no charismatic prophets in Judea. It is interesting to note that this regional distinction continues into the rabbinic period when the famous charismatics such as Choni the Circler and R. Chanina b. Dosa all hail from the Galilee.

Taking a panoramic view for a moment, we are struck by a huge omission. Whereas we think of *nevi'im* as having an impressive and impactful literary output, with words that inspire, frighten, console and exhort, we've seen little of that so far in our survey. With the exception of Moshe – and he will always be the exception – the prophetic leaders we've assayed so far have little to say, but much to do. The few powerful messages that Shemuel delivers to Shaul in the aftermath of his Amalek debacle (*I Shemuel* 15:22-23) can hardly be called a significant literary output. That these leaders had much to say is likely and that their messages were of divine origin and spirit is also a reasonable proposal; yet we have little of that literature in our canon, so far as we know.

As such, when we study the books we commonly refer to as *Nevi'im Rishonim* (Early Prophets, *Yehoshua* to *Melakhim*), there is little prophetic rhetoric that we encounter. David, who is not generally considered a prophet (within the oeuvre), delivers more prophetic content in his "famous last words" (*II Shemuel* 23) than anyone else in his time. The reality is that when we think of prophets as great orators, we are hard-pressed to point to anyone found in these books who fits that bill.

Let us make one last comment about this period. We note that prophets appear on the national and regional scene at turning points. As the monarchy is

established, Shemuel makes his entrance onto the stage of Jewish history. As the kingdom splits, several “minor” prophets appear, and at decisive points of war, prophetic warnings and/ or messages of encouragement are heard. Famine is heralded and resolved by the charismatics and the state-sponsored idolatry of Izevel’s house provokes prophets to speak up and, by their actions, protest the court’s sinfulness in God’s Name.

G: The Independent (Non-Court) Prophet

The middle of the 8th century BCE brings earth-shattering changes to the region. The Assyrian empire, which has made inroads west but has been rebuffed in the previous century (by a coalition of Israel, Judea, Aram, Ammon and others!), is rearing its ravenous head toward the kingdom of Israel. By the latter third of the century, the threat is palpable and, as if to underscore the dire times ahead, a devastating earthquake strikes the region. It is just ahead of this period that “literary” prophets first appeared in the streets, in the palaces and in the courts of Israel. For the first time, we meet orators whose main form of leadership and persuasion is rhetorical. Whether they intend their words to be committed to writing or not is debatable (and is still debated). Although we have numerous biographical and autobiographical passages about these prophets, their main impact is through their words. And oh, what amazing words they speak. The drama of hearing Yeshayahu thunder about the flirtatious women of Yerushalayim, the soothing voice of Hoshea promising that the people’s repentance will be joyfully accepted, Amos’ challenge to the “cows of the Bashan” who encourage their husbands to extort more from the poor and Mikha’s beautiful description of Ya’akov’s travails all speak to true rhetorical artistry.

These “anti-establishment” prophets come in two large waves – one prior to the demise of the northern kingdom of Israel, the other prior to the fall of the southern kingdom of Judea. And it is no wonder. Their job – a hopeless and thankless one – is to warn the people and to save them from their impending doom. But, alas, the prophet is heeded only when it is too late – or hundreds of years later by his admirers who, with the safety of time and distance, can safely recognize the truth of his words at no cost. During these 170 years or so, the focus of the divine mission to the people shifts from prophetic leaders, to charismatics, and then to powerful orators. In each case, it is the *navi*’s job to remind the leadership, the upper class, the priestly class and sometimes the people, of God’s word and their mission.

The prophets whose works we will study, Hoshea and Amos, belong to this era and type. Both prophesied during the mid-late 8th century BCE and stood independently of the court and delivered their prophecies against the elite of the Samarian (and, in a few cases, Judean) society.

H: The People’s Prophet

There is one final period of prophecy: the period of consolation and rebuilding. This period is broadly called *Shivat Tziyon* or the period of national renaissance. In the prophecies of the second half of *Yeshayahu*, *Zekharya*, *Haggai* and later *Malakhi*, we find words of encouragement, some of chastisement but mostly those of consolation for a battered and exiled people who have been given a chance to return, to restore and to rebuild. Although these prophets used the same rhetorical flourishes as their predecessors, the message and tone are decidedly different, as they are addressing the nation at the nearly opposite point of its trajectory. The prophet says what needs to be heard at each moment, and that always means saying the least obvious thing. In times of plenty, this means a warning about the corruption of power. In times of trouble, this means the hope and promise of God's eternal covenant.

In this series, we will focus on two of the "literary prophets" from the first wave of that period. We are in for a delightful, challenging and uplifting meeting with two monumental figures who speak harsh words to a soft people and whose words, sadly but predictably, were treasured far more when they mattered far less. Nonetheless, as our tradition teaches, any prophecy that was included in the canon has eternal import: "A prophecy needed for the generations was committed to writing" (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 4:11). We will study them with an eye to the eternal messages of these timely yet timeless prophetic texts.

For further study:

1. For a general introduction and overview of prophecy, see: *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, Chapter 7; Guide II: 32ff.
2. On the complicated role of a court prophet, see: Wetter, Anne-Mareike: "The Prophet and the King: Is There Such a Thing as Free Prophetic Speech?" In: *Prophecy and Prophets in Stories. Papers Read at the Fifth Meeting of the Edinburgh Prophecy Network, Utrecht, October 2013*. Edited by Bob Becking, Hans M. Barstad. Leiden: Brill, 2015.