

## Prophets & Prophecy

### 1. What is a prophet?

<p>בְּרוּךְ Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who chose good prophets and was pleased with their words, spoken in truth. Blessed are You, LORD, who chose the Torah, His servant Moses, His people Israel, and the prophets of truth and righteousness.</p>	<p>בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בְּנְבִיאִים טוֹבִים, וְרָצָה בְּדְבָרֵיהֶם הַנְּאֻמִּים בְּאֵמֶת. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, הַבּוֹחֵר בַּתּוֹרָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ וּבְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ וּבְנְבִיאֵי הָאֵמֶת וְצִדְקָה.</p>
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בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כ

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים בְּחַלְמֵם גַּם אֲנֹכִי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי בְּתֵם לְבַבְךָ עָשִׂיתָ זֹאת וְאָחֲשָׁךְ גַּם אֲנֹכִי אוֹתְךָ מִחַטּוֹ לִי עַל כֵּן לֹא נִתְתִּיךָ לְנִגְעַת אֱלֹהֵי: (ז) וַעֲתָה הֲשִׁב אִשְׁתְּ הָאִישׁ כִּי נְבִיא הוּא וְיִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעַדְךָ וְחַיָּה וְאִם אֵינְךָ מְשִׁיב דָּע כִּי מוֹת תָּמוּת אֶתָּה וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְךָ:

And God said to him in the dream, “I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against Me. That was why I did not let you touch her. Therefore, restore the man’s wife—since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you—to save your life. If you fail to restore her, know that you shall die, you and all that are yours.”

שמות פרשת שמות פרק ד

(טו) וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשָׁמַתָּ אֶת הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם פִּיךָ וְעִם פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר תִּעְשׂוּן: (טז) וְדַבֵּר הוּא לְךָ אֶל הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי לְךָ לִפְהָ וְאֶתָּה תְהִיָּה לוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים:

You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him.

שמות פרשת וזאת פרק ז

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק אֶל מֹשֶׁה רְאֵה נִתְתִּיךָ לְפָרְעֹה וְאַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ יְהִי נְבִיאְךָ:

The LORD replied to Moses, “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet.

רש"י יהיה נביאך – כתרגומו: מתרגמןך. וכן כל לשון נבואה – אדם המכריז ומשמיע לעם דברי תוכחות. והיא מגיזרת: נב שפתים (ישעיהו נ"ז:ט), ינוב חכמה (משלי י'ל"א), ויכל מהתנבאות (שמואל א י'ל"ג) דשמואל. בלעז קורין לו פריקייר.

This must be understood as the Targum takes it: thy interpreter. Similarly, wherever this term of נבואה is mentioned it refers to a man who publicly proclaims and utters to the people words of reproof.

<p>You must be wholehearted with the LORD your God. Those nations that you are about to dispossess do indeed resort to soothsayers and augurs; to you, however, the LORD your God has not assigned the like. The LORD your God will raise up for you a</p>	<p>דברים פרשת שופטים פרק יח (יג) תָּמִים תְהִיָּה עִם יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ: ס (יד) כִּי הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה יוֹרֵשׁ אוֹתָם אֶל מַעֲנָנִים וְאֶל קְסָמִים יִשְׁמְעוּ וְאַתָּה לֹא כֹן נִתֵן לְךָ יְקֹוֹק</p>
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prophet from among your own people, like myself; him you shall heed.	אֱלֹהֶיךָ: (טו) נְבִיא מִקִּרְבְּךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ כַּמִּנִּי יָקִים לְךָ יְקִוֵּק אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵלָיו תִּשְׁמָעוּן:
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## 2. Qualities of a Prophet

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף צב עמוד א

דאמר מר: אין השכינה שורה אלא על חכם גבור ועשיר ובעל קומה

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדרים דף לח עמוד א

אמר ר' יוחנן: אין הקב"ה משרה שכינתו אלא על גבור ועשיר וחכם ועניו, וכולן ממשה.

הלכות יסודי התורה ז: Maimonides

מִיִּסוּדֵי הַדֵּת לֵיָדַע שֶׁהָאֵל מְנַבֵּא אֶת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם. וְאִין הַנְּבוּאָה חֲלָה אֶלָּא עַל חָכָם גָּדוֹל בְּחֻכְמָה, גְּבוּר בְּמַדּוּתָיו, וְלֹא יֵהָא יִצְרוּ מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלָיו בְּדַבֵּר בְּעוֹלָם אֶלָּא הוּא מִתְגַּבֵּר בְּדַעְתּוֹ עַל יִצְרוֹ תָמִיד. וְהוּא בְּעַל דְּעָה רְחֵבָה נְכוֹנָה עַד מְאֹד.

It is a fundamental part of religion to acknowledge that God bestows prophecy upon the sons of men. But prophecy does not descend save upon a wise man, eminent in wisdom, of sterling character, never subdued by worldly passion, but conquering it by an ever-present willpower, broadminded and settled to the highest degree.

R. Nissim of Gerona (1320-1380)

It is well known that the Blessed One, desiring to create this world for His honor, and its ultimate purpose being that mankind serve Him, it follows that there reach man, from Him, an effluence higher than intellect, the prophetic effluence (שפע נבואי), to perfect the soul so that it may glow in the Light of Life (אור החיים). Intellect alone does not suffice for this...

What demands explanation, however, is why a prophet must also be strong and wealthy. Some interpret "strong" in this connection as asserting one's intellect over one's lusts [איזהו גבור ועשיר, השמח ובעל קומה, and "wealthy," as possessing the quality of contentment [בחלקן], likening R. Yonathan's categories to those mentioned by Ben Zoma (Avoth 4:1). They are obviously mistaken, however, for once "humble" is included it is no longer necessary to mention "strong" and "wealthy" [in the aforementioned sense], for our sages of blessed memory have said (Avodah Zarah 20b): "Humility is greater than all of the other traits." They explain that it is impossible to attain humility without having previously attained purity, holiness, fear of sin, and the other qualities mentioned there. This being so, it is obvious that the humble man rules his evil inclination and that he has achieved contentment; for if his inclination rules him and he is constantly anxious over what he has not acquired, it is impossible for him to have achieved the other qualities.

Was Moses humble mentally or humble physically? It states: "You shall do to him as	ספרי במדבר פרשת בהעלותך פסקא קא
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<p>you did to see Sichon King of the Amorites.” He fell Sichon and slew him and he fell upon Og and slew him. Others say, Was he was very humble in his wisdom or humble in his wealth?</p>	<p>(קא) והאיש משה עניו מאד, עניו בדעתו אתה אומר עניו בדעתו או עניו בגופו ת"ל ועשית לו כאשר עשית לסיחון מלך האמורי (במדבר כא לד) ירד על סיחון והרגו ירד על עוג והרגו ד"א עניו מאד עניו בדעתו אתה אומר עניו בדעתו או עניו בממונו</p>
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### 3. How does one become a prophet?

במדבר יא:כט וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה הַמִּקְנָא אֶתָּה לִי וְגַמִּי יִתֶּן כָּל־עַם ה' נְבִיאִים כִּי־יִתֶּן ה' אֶת־דְּרוֹחוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם:

But Moses said to him, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD put His spirit upon them!”

KUZARI 1:87-91

87. The Rabbi: The Sabbatical law is derived from this circumstance, as well as from the creation of the world in six days, also from another matter to be discussed later on. Although the people believed in the message of Moses, they retained, even after the performance of the miracles, some doubt as to whether God really spake to mortals, and whether the Law was not of human origin, and only later on supported by divine inspiration. They could not associate speech with a divine being, since it is something tangible. God, however, desired to remove this doubt, and commanded them to prepare themselves morally, as well as physically, enjoining them to keep aloof from their wives, and to be ready to hear the words of God. The people prepared and became fitted to receive the divine afflatus, and even to hear publicly the words of God. This came to pass three days later, being introduced by overwhelming phenomena, lightning, thunder, earthquake and fire, which surrounded Mount Sinai.

Maimonides Guide for the Perplexed 2:32

1. Among those who believe in Prophecy, and even among our coreligionists, there are some ignorant people who think as follows: God selects any person He pleases, inspires him with the spirit of Prophecy, and entrusts him with a mission. It makes no difference whether that person be wise or stupid, old or young; provided he be, to some extent, morally good...
2. The philosophers hold that prophecy is a certain faculty of man in a state of perfection, which can only be obtained by study. Although the faculty is common to the whole race, yet it is not fully developed in each individual, either on account of the individual's defective constitution, or on account of some other external cause. This is the case with every faculty common to a class. It is only brought to a state of perfection in some individuals, and not in all; but it is impossible that it should not be perfect in some individual of the class; and if the perfection is of such a nature that it can only be produced by an agent, such an agent must exist.

Accordingly, it is impossible that an ignorant person should be a prophet; or that a person being no prophet in the evening, should, unexpectedly on the following morning, find himself a prophet, as if prophecy were a thing that could be found unintentionally. But if a person, perfect in his intellectual and moral faculties, and also perfect, as far as possible, in his imaginative faculty, prepares himself in the manner which will be described, he must become a prophet; for prophecy is a natural faculty of man. It is impossible that a man who has the capacity for prophecy should prepare himself for it without attaining it, just as it is impossible that a person with a healthy constitution should be fed well, and yet not properly assimilate his food; and the like.

3. The third view is that which is taught in Scripture, and which forms one of the principles of our religion. It coincides with the opinion of the philosophers in all points except one. For we believe that, even if one has the capacity for prophecy, and has duly prepared himself, it may yet happen that he does not actually prophesy. It is in that case the will of God [that withholds from him the use of the faculty]. According to my opinion, this fact is as exceptional as any other miracle, and acts in the same way. For the laws of Nature demand that everyone should be a prophet, who has a proper physical constitution, and has been duly prepared as regards education and training. If such a person is not a prophet, he is in the same position as a person who, like Jeroboam (1 Kings xiii.), is deprived of the use of his hand, or of his eyes, as was the case with the army of Syria, in the history of Elisha (2 Kings vi. 18). As for the principle which I laid down, that preparation and perfection of moral and rational faculties are the *sine qua non*, our Sages say exactly the same: "The spirit of prophecy only rests upon persons who are wise, strong, and rich."

<p>The great sage Maimonides wrote that this is the case with every prophet. He cannot [prophecy] without a natural disposition (<i>hakhana tiv`it</i>) in his essential being, with which he can aspire to prophecy through training (<i>hitlamdut</i>). Moreover, every wisdom and natural trait in which a person excels, he must have some predisposition towards it, which improves along with training.</p>	<p><b>רד"ק ירמיהו א:</b>          והחכם הגדול ר' משה בר מימון ז"ל כתב כי זה ענין כל נביא; אי אפשר לו מבלתי הכנה טבעית בעיקר יצירתו שיהיה נכון לנבואה עם ההתלמדות.          ולא זה בלבד אלא כל חכמה וכל טבע שיש באדם שהוא גובר בו, יש לו קצת הכנה בו בעיקר היצירה יגבר בה עם ההתלמדות.</p>
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#### 4. What does the prophet (not) do?

<p>If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent,</p>	<p><b>דברים פרשת ראה פרק יג</b>          (ב) כִּי יָקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נָבִיא או חֹלֵם          חֲלוֹם וְנָתַן אֵלֶיךָ אוֹת או מוֹפֵת:</p>
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<p>saying, “Let us follow and worship another god” — whom you have not experienced—even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For the LORD your God is testing you to see whether you really love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul.</p>	<p>(ג) וּבֵּא הָאוֹת וְהַמוֹפֵת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים לְאָמֹר גִּלְכָּה אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֹתֶם וְנִעְבְּדֶם:</p> <p>(ד) לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֶל דִּבְרֵי הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא אוֹ אֶל חוֹלֵם הַחֲלוֹם הַהוּא כִּי מִנְסָה יִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶתְכֶם לְדַעַת הַיִּשְׁכֶּם אֲהַבִּים אֶת יִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּכֹל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁכֶם:</p>
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SE`ADYAH GAON: EMUNOT V`DE`OT

CHAPTER III

Now that I have expressed myself in this summary fashion about the two general divisions of the precepts of the Torah, namely the rational and the revealed, it behooves me to explain why there should have been need for divine messengers and prophets. For I have heard that there are people who say that men have no need for such messengers because their reason is enough of a guide for them to distinguish between good and evil. I therefore went back to the touchstone of truth and I noted that, if the matter were really as they said it was, the Creator would have known it best and He would not have sent any messengers to mankind, since He does nothing that has no purpose. Then I pondered the matter deeply and I found that there was considerable need for the dispatch of messengers to God's creatures, not merely in order that they might be informed by them about the revealed laws, but also on account of the rational precepts. For these latter, too, are carried out practically only when there are messengers to instruct men concerning them.

Thus, for example, <119> reason calls for gratitude to God for His kindness, but does not define how this gratitude is to be expressed or at what time or in what form it is to be shown. There was, therefore, need for messengers who defined it and designated it as prayer and assigned to it certain set times and gave to it a particular formulation and [prescribed] a specific posture and direction.<sup>8</sup>

<p>R. Abdimi from Haifa said: Since the day when the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to the wise. Is then a wise man not also a prophet?— What he meant was this: Although it has been taken from the</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא בתרא דף  יב עמוד א  אמר רבי אבדימי דמן חיפה: מיום  שחרב בית המקדש, ניטלה נבואה</p>
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prophets, it has not been taken from the wise. Amemar said: A wise man is even superior to a prophet, as it says, And a prophet has a heart of wisdom. Who is compared with whom? Is not the smaller compared with the greater?

R. Johanan said: Since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from prophets and given to fools and children.

מִן הַנְּבִיאִים וְנִיתְנָה לַחֲכָמִים. אֲטוּ  
חָכֵם לֹא־וְנִבִיא הוּא? הֲכִי קֹאמֵר:  
אֲע"פ שְׁנִיטְלָה מִן הַנְּבִיאִים, מִן  
הַחֲכָמִים לֹא נִיטְלָה. אֲמַר אֲמִימֵר:  
וְחָכֵם עַד־יָף מִנְּבִיא, שְׁנֹאמֵר: אֲוֹנִבִיא  
לִבֵּב חֲכָמָה, מִי נִתְלָה בְּמִי? הֲוִי  
אֹמֵר: קֶטָן נִתְלָה בְּגֹדוֹל.

דף יב עמוד ב  
א"ר יוחנן: מיום שחרב בית המקדש,  
ניטלה נבואה מן הנביאים וניתנה  
לשוטים ולתינוקות.

## Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Prophets Chapter One: "What Manner of Man is the Prophet?"

### ONE OCTAVE TOO HIGH

We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. To us life is often serene, in the prophet's eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man's capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man.

Who could bear living in a state of disgust day and night? The conscience builds its confines, is subject to fatigue, longs for comfort, lulling, soothing. Yet those who are hurt, and He Who inhabits eternity, neither slumber nor sleep.

The prophet is sleepless and grave. The frankincense of charity fails to sweeten cruelties. Pomp, the scent of piety, mixed with ruthlessness, is sickening to him who is sleepless and grave.

Perhaps the prophet knew more about the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness, about the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference, than men whose knowledge depends solely on intelligence and observation.

**AUSTERITY AND COMPASSION**

The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind. Ezekiel sets forth what all other prophets imply: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23.) Indeed, every prediction of disaster is in itself an exhortation to repentance. The prophet is sent not only to upbraid, but also to "strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees" (Isa. 35:3). Almost every prophet brings consolation, promise, and the hope of reconciliation along with censure and castigation. He begins with a *message of doom*; he concludes with a *message of hope*.<sup>5</sup>

The prominent theme is exhortation, not mere prediction. While it is true that foretelling is an important ingredient and may serve as a sign of the prophet's authority (Deut. 18:22; Isa. 41:22; 43:9), his essential task is to declare the word of God to the here and now; to disclose the future in order to illumine what is involved in the present.<sup>6</sup>

the inner man...  
 It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders, predicting peace and prosperity, offering cheerful words, adding strength to self-reliance, while the prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction. People need exhortations to courage, endurance, confidence, fighting spirit, but Jeremiah proclaims: You are about to die if you do not have a change of heart and cease being callous to the word of God. He sends shudders over the whole city, at a time when the will to fight is most important.

By the standards of ancient religions, the great prophets were rather unimpressive. The paraphernalia of nimbus and evidence, such as miracles, were not at their disposal.<sup>9</sup>

For our Rabbis have taught: When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel; nevertheless they made use of the **Bat Kol**. On one occasion [some Rabbis] were sitting in the upper chamber of Gurya's house in Jericho; a Bat Kol was granted to them from heaven which announced, 'There is in your midst one man who is deserving that the Shechinah should alight upon him, but his generation is unworthy of it'. They all looked at Hillel the elder...

תלמוד בבלי סוטה דף מח עמוד ב  
 דת"ר: משמתו חגי זכריה ומלאכי -  
 נסתלקה רוח הקודש מישראל,  
 ואע"פ כן היו משתמשים **בבת קול**,  
 שפעם אחת היו מסובין בעליית בית  
 גוריא ביריחו, נתנה עליהן בת קול  
 מן השמים ואמרה: יש בכם אדם  
 אחד שראוי שתשרה שכינה עליו,  
 אלא שאין דורו ראוי לכך, נתנו  
 עיניהם בהלל הזקן...

"And this is the blessing": Because **Moses** had first spoken to Israel **hard words** — (*Ibid.* 32:24-25) (They will be) "hairy with hunger and embattled by demons... On the outside (of the city) the sword (of legions) shall devour (them), and in the chambers (of their hearts, when they flee), fright" (will pound,

ספרי דברים פרשת וזאת הברכה  
 פסקא שמב  
 "וזאת הברכה אשר ברך משה."  
 לפי שאמר **משה לישראל דברים**  
**קשים תחילה** (דברים לב כד - כה)

eventually killing them), (*Ibid.* 9:8) "And in Chorev you angered the L-rd," (*Ibid.* 7) "You have been rebellious..." — he reverted to words of consolation. "And this is the blessing wherewith Moses blessed, etc." And from him all of the prophets learned: They first spoke hard words to Israel, and then they reverted to words of consolation.

"מזי רעב ולחומי רשף," "מחוך תשכל חרב" (דברים ט ז – ח), "ובחורב הקצפתם את ה'", "ממרים הייתם," "חזר ואמר להם דברי ניחומים: "וזאת הברכה אשר ברך משה."

וממנו למדו כל הנביאים, שהיו אומרים לישראל דברים קשים תחילה, וחוזרים ואומרים להם דברי ניחומים.