



MAKOM

A VIRTUAL SHAVUOT INITIATIVE



THE CHALLENGES OF PROPHECY

DOES THE PROPHET FEEL "AT HOME" IN HIS/HER MISSION | DR. TOVA GANZEL

God sends the prophet to deliver a message. To what extent does the prophet feel "at home" in delivering that message? To what extent does the prophet feel that he/she is simply fulfilling God's command? Join us in exploring three prophets and their missions.

Often we portray the prophets as passive individuals, mere tools for the transmission of prophetic messages between God and His people. In this session, we will ask: To what extent did prophets feel "at home" as transmitters? To what extent did they reconcile themselves to being sent to confront the people around them?





We will examine different instances in which the prophetic literature reveals the prophet's inner world, the feelings and experiences prophets had when facing—and, at times, confronting—God. How did they cope when forced to perform unendurable actions, such as eating the very minimum for many months (Ezekiel) or walking in public without clothes for three years (Isaiah)? How did they respond when forced to prophesy, when a divine hand took the prophets by the hair of their heads (בציציות ראשם; Ezek. 8:3) and forced them into their prophetic missions?

The sources below relate to three case studies: Moses, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In each case, I suggest that readers give thought to or discuss the following:

- **To what extent is the prophet's individual personality expressed?**
- **To what extent does the prophet identify with the prophetic messages he conveys to the people in God's name?**
- **What feelings does the prophet express through his experience and through his discourse with God?**
- **In sum, where and when does each prophet feel at home?**
- **Note: the answers are not uniform; different verses will illuminate distinct trends**

MOSES



וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵּךְ רֵד כִּי שָׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלִית מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: סָרוּ מִהֵרָא מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מִסֶּכֶה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לּוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לּוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלּוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עִם־קִשְׁה־עֵרְף הוּא: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּחָה לִי וַיִּחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאָכַלְתִּם אוֹתָם לְגוֹי גָדוֹל: וַיַּחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־פָּנָיו ה' אֱלֹהָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה יָחַרָה אַפְּךָ בְּעַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גָּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה: לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם לָהָרַג אֹתָם בְּהָרִים וּלְכַלְתָּם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפְּךָ וְהִנַּחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה לְעַמֶּךָ: זָכַר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ וַתְּדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֲרָבָה אֶת־זַרְעֲכֶם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֲתָן לְזַרְעֲכֶם וְנָחְלוּ לְעַלְמִם: וַיִּנָּחֵם ה' עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ:

(שמות לב, 7-14).

The LORD spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD further said to Moses, "I see that this



is a stiffnecked people. Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." But Moses implored the LORD his God, saying, "Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever." And the LORD renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

And here is the sages' perspective:



"ועתה הניחה לי ייחר אפי בהם ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול וגו'". אמר רבי אבהו: אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומרו. מלמד שתפסו משה להקדוש ברוך הוא, כאדם שהוא תופס את חבירו בבגדו, ואמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, אין אני מניחך עד שתמחול ותסלח להם."

(ברכות ל"ב, ע"א)

In an additional aspect of the sin of the Golden Calf, God told Moses: "Now leave Me be, that My wrath will be enraged against them and I will consume them; and I will make of you a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). Explaining this verse, Rabbi Abbahu said: Were the verse not written in this manner, it would be impossible to utter it, in deference to God. The phrase: Leave Me be, teaches that Moses grabbed the Holy One, Blessed be He, as a person who grabs his friend by his garment would, and he said before Him: Master of the Universe, I will not leave You be until You forgive and pardon them.



ויהי העם כמתאננים רע באזני ה' וישמע יהוה ויחר אפו ותבער בהם אש יהוה ותאכל בקצה המחנה: ויצעק העם אל־משה ויתפלל משה אל ה' ותשקע האש: (במדבר יא, 1-2).

The people took to complaining bitterly before the LORD. The LORD heard and was incensed: a fire of the LORD broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down.



על מרים: וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ:
(במדבר יב, 13)

So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "O God, pray heal her!"



על אהרון: וּבְאַהֲרֹן הִתְאַנַּף ה' מְאֹד לְהַשְׁמִידוֹ וְאֶתְפַּלֵּל גַּם־בְּעַד אַהֲרֹן בְּעַת הַהוּא: (דברים ט, 20)

Moreover, the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him; so I also interceded for Aaron at that time.

For more on this subject, see Numbers 14; Deuteronomy 9:25–29.

JEREMIAH



אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ ה' זְכַרְנִי וּפְקֻדְנִי וְהִנָּקֶם לִי מֵרֹדְפֵי אֶל־לְאָרְךָ אֲפֹךְ תִּקְחֵנִי דַע שְׂאֵתִי עָלֶיךָ חֲרָפָה: נִמְצְאוּ דְבָרַיךָ וְאֶכְלֵם וַיְהִי
דְבָרֶיךָ [דְּבָרְךָ] לִי לְשִׁשׂוֹן וְלִשְׁמַחַת לִבִּי כִּי־נִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עָלַי ה' אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת: לֹא־יִשְׁבְּתִי בְּסוּד־מְשֻׁחָקִים וְאֶעֱלֶז מִפְּנֵי יָדְךָ
בְּדָד יִשְׁבְּתִי כִּי־זַעַם מִלֹּאֲתָנִי: לָמָּה הָיָה כְּאֲבִי נֹצֵחַ וּמְכַתִּי אֲנוּשָׁה מֵאַנְהָה הֲרַפָּא הִיוּ תַהֲיֶיהָ לִי כִּמוֹ אֶכְזָב מִיָּם לֹא נֶאֱמַנָּה:
(ירמיהו טו, 15-17)

O LORD, you know—Remember me and take thought of me, Avenge me on those who persecute me; Do not yield to Your patience, Do not let me perish! Consider how I have borne insult On Your account. When Your words were offered, I devoured them; Your word brought me the delight and joy Of knowing that Your name is attached to me, O LORD, God of Hosts. I have not sat in the company of revelers And made merry! I have sat lonely because of Your hand upon me, For You have filled me with gloom. Why must my pain be endless, My wound incurable, Resistant to healing? You have been to me like a spring that fails, Like waters that cannot be relied on.



וַיִּשְׁמַע פֶּשְׁחֹר בֶּן־אִמֶּר הַכֹּהֵן וְהוּא־פְּקִיד נָגִיד בְּבֵית ה' אֶת־יְרֵמְיָהוּ נֹבֵא אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה: וַיִּכָּה פֶּשְׁחֹר אֶת יְרֵמְיָהוּ הַנְּבִיא וַיִּתֵּן אֹתוֹ עַל־הַמֶּהֱפֶכֶת אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעַר בִּנְיָמִן הָעֶלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית ה': וַיְהִי מִמָּחָרָת וַיֵּצֵא פֶּשְׁחֹר אֶת־יְרֵמְיָהוּ מִן־הַמֶּהֱפֶכֶת וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְרֵמְיָהוּ לֹא פֶּשְׁחֹר קָרָא יְהוָה שְׁמִי כִּי אִם־מַגּוֹר מִסָּבִיב: כִּי כֹה אָמַר ה' הֲנִי נֹתֵן לְמַגּוֹר לְךָ וְלְכָל־אֲהַבָיִךָ וְנִפְלוּ בְּחָרֵב אֲיִבִיָּהֶם וְעֵינֶיךָ רְאוּת וְאֶת־כָּל־יְהוּדָה אֶתְּךָ בְּיַד מֶלֶךְ־בָּבֶל וְהִגְלַם בְּבִלְהָ וְהִכָּם בְּחָרֵב: וְנִתְּתִי אֶת־כָּל־חֵסֶן הָעִיר הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־כָּל־יְגִיעָהּ וְאֶת־כָּל־יְקָרָהּ וְאֶת־כָּל־יְהוּדָה אֶתְּךָ בְּיַד אֲיִבֵיהֶם וּבְזָזִים וּלְקַחוּם וְהִבְיָאוּם בְּבִלְהָ: וְאֵתָּה פֶּשְׁחֹר וְכָל יֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ תִּלְכוּ בְּשָׁבִי וּבְבָל תְּבוֹא וְשָׁם תָּמוּת וְשָׁם תִּקְבְּר אֶתָּה וְכָל־אֲהַבָיִךָ אֲשֶׁר־נִבְּאתָ לָהֶם בְּשָׁקֶר:

(ירמיהו כ, 1-6).

Pashhur son of Immer, the priest who was chief officer of the House of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesy these things. Pashhur thereupon had Jeremiah flogged and put in the cell at the Upper Benjamin Gate in the House of the LORD. The next day, Pashhur released Jeremiah from the cell. But Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD has named you not Pashhur, but Magor-missabib. For thus said the LORD: I am going to deliver you and all your friends over to terror: they will fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. I will deliver all Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon; he will exile them to Babylon or put them to the sword. And I will deliver all the wealth, all the riches, and all the prized possessions of this city, and I will also deliver all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hands of their enemies: they shall seize them as plunder and carry them off to Babylon. As for you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house, you shall go into captivity. You shall come to Babylon; there you shall die and there you shall be buried, and so shall all your friends to whom you prophesied falsely."



פתייתי ה' ואפת, חזקתני ותוכל; הייתי לשחוק כל-היום, כלה לעג לי: כי-מדי אדבר אצעק, חמס ושד אקרא: כי-היה דבר-ה' לי לחרפה ולקלס, כל-היום: ואמרתי לא-אזכרנו, ולא-אדבר עוד בשמו, והיה בלבי כאש בערת, עצר בעצמתי; ונלאיתי כלכל, ולא אוכל: כי שמעתי דבת רבים, מגור מסביב, הגידו ונגידנו, כל אנוש שלמי שמרי צלעי; אולי יפתה וינכלה לו, ונקחה נקמתנו ממנו: וה' אותי כגבור עריץ, על-כן רדפי יכשלו ולא יכלו; בשו מאד כי-לא השכילו, כלמת עולם לא תשכח: וה' צבאות בחר צדיק, ראה כליות ולב; אראה נקמתך מהם, כי אליך גליתי את-ריבי: שירו, לה'--הללו, את-ה': כי הציל את-נפש אביו, מיד מרעים: ארוך היום, אשר ילדתי בו: יום אשר-ילדתני אמי, אל-יהי ברוך: ארוך האיש, אשר בשור את-אבי לאמה ילד-לה; בן זכר--שמח, שמחה: והיה האיש ההוא, כערים אשר-הפך ה' ולא נחם; ושמע זעקה בבקה, ותרועה בעת צהרים: אשר לא-מותתני, מרחם; ותהי-לי אמי קברי, ורחמה הרת עולם: למה זה מרחם יצאתי, לראות עמל ויגון; ויכלו בבשת, ימי.

(ירמיהו כ, 7-16).

You enticed me, O LORD, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and You prevailed. I have become a constant laughingstock, Everyone jeers at me. For every time I speak, I must cry out, Must shout, "Lawlessness and rapine!" For the word of the LORD causes me Constant disgrace and contempt. I thought, "I will not mention Him, No more will I speak in His name"— But [His word] was like a raging fire in my heart, Shut up in my bones; I could not hold it in, I was helpless. I heard the whispers of the crowd— Terror all around: "Inform! Let us inform against him!" All my [supposed] friends Are waiting for me to stumble: "Perhaps he can be entrapped, And we can prevail against him And take our vengeance on him." But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; Therefore my persecutors shall stumble; They shall not prevail and shall not succeed. They shall be utterly shamed With a humiliation for all time, Which shall not be forgotten. O LORD of Hosts, You who test the righteous, Who examine the heart and the mind, Let me see Your retribution upon them, For I lay my case before You. Sing unto the LORD, Praise the LORD, For He has rescued the needy From the hands of evildoers! Accursed be the day That I was born! Let not the day be blessed When my mother bore me! Accursed be the man Who brought my father the news And said, "A boy Is born to you," And gave him such joy! Let that man become like the cities Which the LORD overthrew without relenting! Let him hear shrieks in the morning And battle shouts at noontide— Because he did not kill me before birth So that my mother might be my grave, And her womb big [with me] for all time. Why did I ever issue from the womb, To see misery and woe, To spend all my days in shame!



כַּמְרָאָה הַקֶּשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר יְהִיָּה בְּעֵנָן בַּיּוֹם הַגֶּשֶׁם כֵּן מְרָאָה הַנֶּגֶה סְבִיב הוּא מְרָאָה דְמוּת כְּבוֹד-ה' וְאֶרְאָה
וְאֶפֶל עַל-פְּנֵי וְאֶשְׁמַע קוֹל מְדַבֵּר: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בֶּן-אָדָם עֲמֵד עַל-רִגְלֶיךָ וְאֲדַבֵּר אִתְּךָ: וַתְּבֹא בִי רוּחַ כְּאֲשֶׁר
דִּבֶּר אֵלַי וַתַּעֲמֵדְנִי עַל-רִגְלִי וְאֶשְׁמַע אֶת מְדַבֵּר אֵלַי: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בֶּן-אָדָם שׁוֹלַח אֲנִי אֹתְךָ אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶל-גּוֹיִם הַמּוֹרְדִים אֲשֶׁר מְרֹדוּ-בִי הִמָּה וְאֲבוֹתָם פָּשְׁעוּ בִי עַד-עַצָּם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: וְהַבְּנִים קָשִׁי כְּנִים וְחֲזָקִי-
לֵב אֲנִי שׁוֹלַח אֹתְךָ אֲלֵיהֶם וְאֶמְרָת אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה': וְהִמָּה אִם-יִשְׁמְעוּ וְאִם-יִחְדְּלוּ כִּי בֵּית מְרִי
הִמָּה וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי נְבִיא הָיָה בְּתוֹכָם: וְאַתָּה בֶּן-אָדָם אֶל-תִּירָא מֵהֶם וּמִדְּבָרֵיהֶם אֶל-תִּירָא כִּי סָרְבִים וְסִלּוֹנִים
אֹתְךָ וְאֶל-עַקְרָבִים אֶתָּה יוֹשֵׁב מִדְּבָרֵיהֶם אֶל-תִּירָא וּמִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶל-תַּחַת כִּי בֵּית מְרִי הִמָּה.

(יחזקאל 28 - 6ב)

Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the LORD. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face. And I heard the voice of someone speaking. And He said to me, "O mortal, stand up on your feet that I may speak to you." As He spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet; and I heard what was being spoken to me. He said to me, "O mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, that nation of rebels, who have rebelled against Me.—They as well as their fathers have defied Me to this very day; for the sons are brazen of face and stubborn of heart. I send you to them, and you shall say to them: 'Thus said the Lord GOD'— whether they listen or not, for they are a rebellious breed—that they may know that there was a prophet among them. "And you, mortal, do not fear them and do not fear their words, though thistles and thorns press against you, and you sit upon scorpions. Do not be afraid of their words and do not be dismayed by them, though they are a rebellious breed;

וְרוּחַ נִשְׂאָתָנִי וַתִּקְחֵנִי וְאֶלַף מֵרַבְחַמַּת רוּחִי יָד ה' עָלַי חֲזָקָה:

(יחזקאל ג, 14)

A spirit seized me and carried me away. I went in bitterness, in the fury of my spirit, while the hand of the LORD was strong upon me.



וַיְהִי כִּהֲנַבְאִי וּפְלַטְיָהוּ בֶן־בְּנֵיָה מֵת וְאָפֵל עַל־פְּנֵי וְאֶזְעַק קוֹל־גָּדוֹל וְאָמַר אָהָה אֲדָנָי ה' כָּלָה אֶתְּהָ עֲשֵׂה אֶת
שְׂאֵרֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל:
(**יחזקאל** י"א, 13)

Now, as I prophesied, Pelatiah son of Benaiah dropped dead. I threw myself upon my face and cried out aloud, "Ah, Lord GOD! You are wiping out the remnant of Israel!"

The texts above draw a surprising picture, one that does not necessarily present the prophets as passive and lacking their own voices. Their strong personalities and their faith in God and His words are evident in the text—but their position, placed between God and the people, necessarily means that their world is a lonely one. The prophet's home, then, is as mediator. Moff's puts it succinctly: "Israeli prophecy is the conversational bridge that facilitates the intimate encounter between the divine personality and the human personality."

We close with the Midrash's words about Moses, which describe the place of all of the prophets:



בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה אָמַר רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם עַד עַכְשָׁיו בִּקְשָׁתִי חַיִּים, וְעַכְשָׁיו הָרִי נִפְשִׁי נִתּוֹנָה לְךָ, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁהַשְּׁלִיִּם
נִפְשׁוּ לְמִיתָה, פִּתַּח הַקֶּב"ה וְאָמַר מִי יִקּוּם לִי עִם מְרַעִים (תְּהִלִּים צד טז), וְמִי יַעֲמוּד לָהֶם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשַׁעַת
כַּעֲסִי, וְמִי יַעֲמוּד בְּמַלְחַמְתּוֹ שֶׁל בְּנִי, וְמִי יַעֲוֹד וַיִּבְקֶשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם רַחֲמִים, בְּשַׁעַת שְׁחוּטָאִין לִפְנֵי
(**תנחומא** בּוֹבֵר, וְאַתְחַנֵּן ו')

Then when he had resigned his soul to death, the Holy One opened by saying (in Ps. 94:16): WHO WILL STAND FOR ME AGAINST EVILDOERS? Who will stand for Israel in the time of my wrath? Who will stand in the battle of my children? And who will stand and seek mercy for them, when they sin before me?

For those interested in learning more on this topic, I recommend a supplemental study of Elijah (1 Kings 18–19) as well as the books of Jonah and Habbakkuk.