

Our Prophets Speak To Us

by

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I

Our Prophets must be read in a spirit of sanctity, for they meet us as Divinely inspired leaders, commissioned by God to assist us in comprehending the enigma of life.

Our Prophets are alive in our midst; they must never be relegated to the relics of the past. As eternally alive and direct, the Divine Word of the Torah addresses us, "which I command you this day;" as alive and timelessly pertinent are the words of our Prophets, inseparable from the Words of the Torah, never to be evaluated as "historically and culturally significant" documents, voices from a past long gone. Their message is timeless, eternal (Megilla 14a).

Our Prophets "serve man's earth," "a man that serves the earth am I" (Zechariah 13,5): their loftiest task is the liberation of the earth from the cursed chains in which it is imprisoned by a mankind estranged from God. "As man and for man He has summoned me" (into His service) (ibid.) towards the re-education of such men for their erstwhile, pure, Divine destiny.

Initially, the Prophets address our people. They are our teachers: "God gave me a language for disciples, to address the fatigued at the right time" (Isaiah 50,4). Prophets expect us to look up to them as disciples. They shake us out of our lethargy, to reflect, to perceive . . . From the millennia their words reach us in majestic timeliness.

Life, secular, estranged from God, overwhelms us with its demands. Let us find refuge with our Prophets so that they may stand at our side when we threaten to succumb; when clarity and self-judgment threaten to fade. Let our Prophets become for us *the* source of spiritual fortitude and strength.

Our Prophets lay open the lies and deceit with which ignorance, indifference and weakness attempt to deprive us of our most precious possession of life by falsifying it beyond recognition. Let us read their

books from beginning to end: their incomparably heroic energy is wholly dedicated to this great task. For they were fighters who lived and suffered and fought for their people, for mankind, unto their last breath.

When nature and history threaten to engulf us in nocturnal darkness; when they no longer speak to us as divine creations; when we no longer perceive in them the traces of eternal Divine Providence, then—onwards to the Prophets, that they may clear our gaze from the cobwebs of illusion; that they may remove the veil which beclouds our free outlook and our pure judgment; that we, through them, may rectify our "errors" על שגינות (Habakkuk 3,1), fight our way through life's enigma to the brilliant light, and intone with Jeremiah (16,19) our life's "song of victory."

For Prophets lead us, pave the way for us, "Behold, I send My messenger, and he shall clear the way before Me," (Malachi 3,1) leading to our salvation; they remove the stones and rubble which obstruct our ascent to the proximity of God: "Lead upwards, upwards, pave the way, remove the stumbling block from the path of My people" (Isaiah 57,14).

Our Prophets heal the treacherous and unholy breach which separates "children from fathers, fathers from children" (Malachi 3,24). Thus their eternal admonition זכרו תורה משה עבדו (v. 23). This means: Return to Torah.

A seemingly inexhaustible theme. A few basic thoughts will illuminate it further.

II

Prophets stand before us with the Torah in their hands—this must not be forgotten or ignored at even a single line of prophetic literature.

The lofty ideals which Torah aims at and to which it obligates us—we learn from the Prophets. For they present to us the Torah as concrete evidence of Divine love (Malachi 1,2). Our twice-daily proclamation in prayer—Torah, the life-giving source and confluence of Divine love—this recognition, this consciousness we gain through our Prophets.

They are at our side, as they gaze upon those who are unnerved and poisoned, senselessly drunk in their greed for wealth and enjoyment, as they adorn themselves with their fading wreath, proudly boasting of achievements which only contribute to their own fearful degradation. Prophets stand at our side as they gaze upon those whose table no longer has space for the pure and holy, who have but shrill scorn for Torah, whose spirit is foreign to them, and who consider total emancipation from the Law the prerequisite for life's happiness (Isaiah 28).

Our Prophets are well aware that there is a stage of estrangement when every word is in vain and when only harsh experience and bitter disappointment bring belated and painful awakening (Isaiah 50,11). Our Prophets hurry to our side to protect us from such shipwreck of life.

They spell out the curse which inevitably afflicts a life without Torah (Zechariah 5). Tremble, before you forfeit forever the most precious possession of your life in frivolous superficiality. Remember always what you possess in your Torah. By helping us to attain the genuine, pure knowledge and recognition of Torah, our Prophets prove to be its most forceful interpreters.

III

Torah never tires of compressing its entire contents into pregnant formulations: "this Commandment" (Deut. 30,11); God places us at our post which we must fill with our lives in accordance with God's Will; "nothing, but to fear", (Deut. 10,12): only through the most minute fulfillment of the precepts of the Divine Will shall we be able to attain that true fear of God which does not permit the presence of God to fade from our consciousness even during one moment of our lives; "Complete shall you be with God" (Deut. 18,13): undivided devotion to the Will of God and thereby the most intimate union with God; "the way of God" (Gen. 18,19): strict adherence to the divinely charted path which alone enables man to practice **צדקה ומשפט**, love and righteousness—the all-exhaustive contents of man's mission on earth. All this calls for the total fulfillment of the Divine Law.

In the same way, our Prophets view Torah in all its unabridged entirety (Makoth 42a) by interpreting in many places צדקה and משפט as the sum-total of Torah (Isaiah 56,1-2), Torah being our great guide towards "good" (Micah 6,8), towards "total dedication", אמונה (Habakkuk 2,4), towards the "search for God" (Amos 5,4).

Let us read our Prophets if we wish to be saved from shameful compromise and from misinterpreting our own relationship with God and His sacred Will.

Let us read our Prophets if we wish to comprehend ourselves as *Jews*, with all the obligations which this noble title entails for us. Let us learn with the Prophets and through the Prophets what it means to be bearers of Torah, knowing that this our Torah counts on us to ease the burden of its "fate" (Zechariah 9-14) placed upon it by its timeless course through the storms of time. Yet this Torah depends on our "hunger" and "thirst," that we may not rest until the full realization comes upon us that true happiness and satisfaction—even in the midst of abundance—derives solely from the possession of this truly "good" (Isaiah 55; Jeremiah 31). Are we of those who are "impoverished and needy," who "search vainly for water and do not find it" (Isaiah 41,17)? For us the Divine well runs full, and daily there still falls the bread of life for our satisfaction.

Let us obtain clarity from our Prophets regarding that which fully characterizes the *Jewish national concept*: צמח, a people rooted with all fibers of its being in God and His Word. Every page of prophetic literature recalls the Divine "to Me as a nation; I, your God," the proclamation which founded Israel's nationhood. Unless we dedicate our whole lives towards the perpetuation of this eternal destiny, we have no claim on membership in this nation. Let us never forget: "You are bearers of the Divine design" (Isaiah 52,11).

IV

Our Prophets never tire of defining and outlining the role of ארץ ישראל, so that we may be able to distinguish it from the other lands in the world.

None have recognized so clearly—as they have—the *טומאה* effects on the whole Jewish national body which threatens from this soil, this ideal site of Israel's pure, God-willed existence. The Prophets suffered from these effects which transformed their lives into a martyrdom without compare. In the firm confidence in Divine assistance and in the future of Israel, and with heroic strength, they tore their people from a soil which spelled certain death, in order to train and prepare it for the true *ארץ ישראל* of the future. This is the central theme of the Book of Ezekiel.

In the eyes of the Prophets, *ארץ ישראל* is inviolably bound to *ציון* and *ירושלים*. They view *ארץ ישראל* as the site of a national life which centers around *ציון* as the most sacred monument of the majestic Law which shapes Divinely inspired living. At the feet of *ציון* they see *ירושלים* as the beacon, the exemplary national center dedicated to the worshipful devotion of an entire national existence to the precepts of the Divine Will. On the fortresses of this *ירושלים* they stand, its faithful guardians, tirelessly laboring to admonish and educate their people towards its task as a "holy nation," "redeemed through God," ultimately to shake off the Galuth dust of millennia (Isaiah 62).

Let us read our Prophets if we are to perceive the meaning of *Galuth*, experience *גאולה* and fulfill the conditions which lead to *גאולה* as the certain goal of Divine promise. For *גאולה* is no mere belief—it is a necessity for Israel and for mankind, as true as a God lives Who shapes history and human progress towards His God-willed goals (Zechariah 9). Israel's *Galuth* is nothing but a renewed "march through the desert" (Ezekiel 20,35), the only possible path upon which a purified Israel will ultimately return to its homeland.

Prophets teach us to understand Israel's historic position always in the context of the great *world historic* events and developments. Thus they are, also in this realm, merely interpreters of the guidelines to history and mankind's growth as laid down in the early pages of the Divine Book. Together with our Prophets we must read these pages if we wish to appreciate their profound significance: the aims of Creation for mankind, as revealed therein; their connection with a paradisiac life of proximity to God; the contrasting tragic estrangement from God; vile inhumanity; the illusion of humans fighting against God, *shouetted* against the brilliantly emerging eminence of an

Abraham—such phases we must learn to pursue further in the mosaic of world-historic events.

Invariably, the Prophets guide our gaze from the blinding illusion of man's existence to the tragic "temporariness" to which the achievements of God-denying aspirations are condemned (Isaiah 66,24; Habakkuk 2,13). They point to the "debris" which covers the history of mankind (Malachi 1); to the scarred victims incessantly demanded by the "flames of the coiling sword;" and to the "nocturnal night" (Zechariah 1) in which human deceit turns to utter despair. In the face of the shattering testimony of human folly, the Prophets raise God's eternal demands and proclaim God's eternal readiness to restore to an erring mankind renewed paradisiac joyfulness in order to end forever the misery of its suicidal existence.

Thus our Prophets reveal history before our eyes, that we may behold Him in the ceaseless labor of completing the work of Creation. The concept of "war against ירושלים" runs like a red thread through history (Zechariah 12). The victorious recognition of the way of life as demanded by ירושלים means גאולה for mankind, Sabbath-peace for the world (Isaiah 2).

Such Weltanschauung derived from our Prophets-literature brings with it the most profound appreciation of the nature of the *Jewish mission*. In its national life, Israel must realize the precepts of the Divine Will in selfless devotion, must erect the throne of rulership for the Will of God and await then confidently the time when, as bearer of the "light" and as herald of the "peace" (Isaiah 42), cherubim-like, it will chart the course towards the eternal homeland for a mankind thirsty for redemption.

Need it be added that only from such Weltanschauung flows the true *Jewish consciousness*, as outlined by Isaiah (40 ff.) and Zechariah (9) in brilliant strokes? To be permeated by such consciousness means to reject categorically un-Jewish weakness and compromise; shame in the face of even a faint trace of defeatism (Isaiah 54); it means to experience invincible strength in the possession of the incomparable weapon which rests forever in our hands (Zechariah 4). With unshakable courage, and with the Divine song of victory on our lips (Isaiah 12; Jeremiah 16,19), we will live even through the darkest of Galuth nights.

V

All this we glean from the words of our Prophets—it is *Torah* which we read with them. This thought cannot be stressed enough. There is not a single word, not a single thought, not a single concept that our Prophets have not derived from our Torah. Any attempt to read the Prophet in a different way collapses in its own miserable, frivolously falsifying untruthfulness.

He who reads Prophets as they should be read receives eternally sacred messages from their mouths: This is how we, the Prophets, experienced Torah—this is what Torah means to us; what does it mean to you?

The Books of our Prophets are the immortal sources from which flow Jewish consciousness and Jewish strength in an inexhaustible stream.