

THE JOB OF A PROPHET

When I was in rabbinical school my first year in Israel, I was lucky enough to secure a very part-time gig playing music at a pub called “Prophets.” I played covers of James Taylor, Jimmy Buffet, Simon and Garfunkel, and others at this bar that catered to young Americans living in Jerusalem at the time. Sadly, the bar closed during the first Persian Gulf War, never to be reopened, and I may be the only person who still owns one of their sweatshirts, with the tagline “it’s disgusting.” That tagline came from a review from the *Jerusalem Post*, by the way. In order to drum up business, one of the bartenders would occasionally go out into the streets of Jerusalem dressed as a prophet with a signboard and a bell, shouting “the end is near, come have a beer.”

It was ridiculous, yes, but it resonated, because it’s how most people view the role of the prophet—as one who predicts the future which involves visions of the world coming to an end. Despite this commonly held impression, that is not the job of the Biblical prophet. The Biblical prophet’s task can be summed up in the following sentence. The prophet’s job is to disturb the comfortable and to comfort the disturbed. I’m going to say it again. The prophet’s sacred task is to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. It is often in fulfilling the first of these tasks, comforting the disturbed, that the prophet appears to be predicting the future. In general, he or she is saying that if you/we/our society does not change our behavior, then the future will be one of impending doom and cataclysm. But he is not trying to predict the future; what he/she is trying to do is advocate for change in a society that has become comfortable and complacent with a status quo which is immoral, idolatrous, and filled with injustice.

Today we read from two very different prophets in the Jewish tradition. We just finished the Haftarah from the classical prophet, Isaiah, and later this afternoon we will read from the man who can best be described as the anti-prophet, Jonah. It is important to understand that like most prophets, Isaiah doesn’t really want the job. Because a prophet often has to relay a message that people don’t want to hear, it is not for the faint of heart nor even a good job for “a nice Jewish boy.” So Isaiah, like most prophets, resists at first. In one of the greatest mystical, spiritual passages in the entire Tanach, Isaiah is called by angels declaring “kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, holy, holy, holy is Adonai Tzevaot, the Lord of hosts,” from which we derive the Kedusha prayer which we recite every day. And Isaiah’s response to the glorious moment? “Are you sure you have the right guy? I am a man of impure lips living among a people of unclean lips.” But after a little back

and forth with these seraphim angels, he says “hin’ni shelachani, here I am, send me.” This is important to note when we will compare his response to Jonah’s in just a few minutes.

Before delving into the Haftarah, I should also point out that most scholars believe the Biblical Book of Isaiah was not the work of a single prophet named Isaiah, but the work of either two or even three separate prophets. The language used is similar throughout, but the places and people to whom they speak are separated by hundreds of years and are set in different places. Chapters 1-39 come from Isaiah of Jerusalem, and deal with the time he spent prophesying and chastising the comfortable there from 742 to 687 BCE. This first Isaiah believed that the nation of Assyria was an instrument of God and that the only way by changing their ways would Jerusalem be saved from destruction. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians, but Isaiah’s Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah survived for another century and a half. The "Second Isaiah" was active in Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE and focuses on comforting and consoling the people after their great loss. He promises hope for better days in the future. Times were very dark during the exile, so he speaks in metaphors of light, saying that eventually a new light will shine, the people will be returned to the land, and their faith in God will be restored.

It is from the second Isaiah that we read this morning, Chapters 57-58. The Haftarah itself can be divided into four distinct mini sections. In the first section, Isaiah sets the stage by telling the people what they, and by extension, we, need to do for restoration, healing, and redemption. “Solu solu pinu derech,” clear a spiritual highway for God. Remove the stumbling blocks, the emotional and spiritual impediments that have put distance between ourselves and our God.

The second section shows God’s role as comforter. If we are able to create this new highway, God will let go of anger, revive our spirits, create the breath of life, comfort the mourners, heal us, and grant “shalom larachok v’lakarov, peace to far and near.”

In the third and most famous section, Isaiah returns to chastiser and disturber of the comfortable, reminding us of the transgressions that led to the exile in the first place. Resonating fully with the themes of the High Holidays, God tells Isaiah to shout out the people’s transgressions like a shofar. You can fast all you want, God says, but the fast is meaningless when while you are starving your bodies you are oppressing your laborers and fighting needlessly with one another.

Is this the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?
 Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?
 No, this is the fast I desire.
 To unlock fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free.
 It is to share your bread with the hungry,
 And to take the wretched poor into your home.
 When you see the naked, to clothe him,
 And not to ignore your own kin.

It's not that God doesn't like rituals, sacrifices, and fasting; it's just that these rites cannot be empty and devoid of meaning. They have to be accompanied by an understanding that there are hungry people in the community.

In the fourth mini-section, Isaiah returns once again to comforting the disturbed, and he does so using stunningly beautiful, lyrical imagery. If we fulfill these commandments and treat one another justly, light will burst through like the dawn, the foundations will be restored, our thirst quenched, our bones strengthened, our lives like a spring whose waters do not fail. Just as Isaiah responded "hineni," here I am, to God when called upon to prophesy, God will answer "Hineni" when the people call out to God.

So Isaiah and this Haftarah provide a clear, paradigmatic example of what it means to be a prophet—speak the word of God to the people, whether that involves haranguing or healing, disturbing the comfortable or comforting the disturbed. That's what we get on Yom Kippur morning for the Haftarah.

In the afternoon Haftarah reading, we get the antithesis of the classical prophet in the person of Jonah, a story with which most of you are undoubtedly more familiar. What you might not be as familiar with and knowing what you now know about classical prophets like Isaiah, is that the book is, in many ways, a satire. Like all prophets, Jonah doesn't want the job when he is told to go to Nineveh and tell the people there to repent of their evil ways. But instead of accepting his inevitable fate, what does he do? He runs in the complete opposite direction, taking the first boat he can find to Tarshish. It takes a storm, a lottery, the wisdom of the other sailors, and a giant fish to make Jonah finally realize he cannot run away from his sacred task. And after the Ninevites do exactly what he asks, repent of their evil ways, he is still not happy. The story ends with him lying there by a gourd plant utterly exhausted and overwhelmed. The "peshat" or plain meaning of the story is that no matter how hard we try, we can't run from God (or, by extension, our own responsibilities). This message is emphasized by using a little bit of humor, satire, and the unspoken comparison with the other

prophets, who, unlike Jonah, do exactly what God asks them to do on the first try.

Except that is not at all how the rabbinic sages of the Talmud and Midrash view Jonah. They see the same things we do, including the fool that Jonah appears to be, but they view his attempt to run away from God not as an act of cowardice, but as an act of heroism. What I'm about to say will undoubtedly be strange and objectionable to many, but hear me out, because I think there are valuable lessons to be learned here. Besides Jonah running away from his task, what else distinguishes Jonah from all the other prophets of the Hebrew Bible? All the other prophets are called to preach their messages to the Jewish community. Jonah is asked to prophesy to the non-Jews, the nation of Nineveh. And the sages believe that Jonah is not afraid the Ninevites will say no when he asks them to repent; he is afraid they will say yes. So the sages believe that Jonah fled from this task so the Jewish people wouldn't look bad in comparison. Here are the words from a Midrash called the Mechilta of Rabbi Eliezer.

For Scripture says: 'And Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord' (Jonah 1:2). [Did he think he] could (really) flee from the presence of the Lord? Does not Scripture already say 'Where can I go from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there,' (and then it gives several more prooftexts for this point). Rather, he (Jonah) thought: I will take myself outside the Land (of Israel)—a place where the Shekinah does not reveal itself. For the Gentiles are nearer to repentance (and) so as to not convict Israel (by their example)."

That's a slightly confusing way of saying that non-Jews are better at repentance than Jews are. In this incredibly ethnocentric view, the rabbis see Jews are stubborn, obstinate, k'shinu oref, a word you hear a lot in the Yom Kippur liturgy which means "stiff-necked." Repentance comes quite easily, on the other hand to gentiles, according to this same admittedly ethnocentric idea of the rabbinic sages. Gentiles seek and grant repentance at the drop of a hat. Whether there is any truth to this stereotype is not really the point. The point is that the sages view Jonah as a hero because he cared so much about his own people that he was willing to risk his reputation and his life for them. By running away he was trying to save the Jewish people in God's eyes because he knew the Ninevites, unlike the Israelites, would do exactly as he asked and repent. And the Israelites would look awful in comparison. And that, according to the sages, is why he is not happy at the end of the story. He is worried about his fellow Jews and how they will appear in God's eyes. It's another way of looking at the story.

So we have the epitome of a prophet in the morning and the anti-prophet in the afternoon. But what do we do from here? What is the

takeaway? Our job is to be a nation of prophets. Like Isaiah, we must disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. When there are things that are unjust or immoral in our society, we must speak out—whether through donations, letters, protests, or the ballot box. And we must be equally passionate about comforting the disturbed. This includes not only the universal needy, the poor, the hungry, etc., but also our friends and family members who often need us the most. And like Jonah, we must own our responsibilities, realizing we can not outrun them or God. And like the rabbinic reinterpretation of Jonah, we must care deeply for our own people. This means we might find ourselves in arguments about Israel, we must donate to Jewish causes, because no one else will. And we must take seriously the Talmudic injunction “kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh, all Israel is responsible for one another.”

Those are our sacred tasks: to disturb the comfortable, to comfort the disturbed, to own up to our responsibilities, and to love the Jewish people. And if we accomplish those things, then the next time the prophet goes into the streets of Jerusalem he will not be shouting “the end is near, come have a beer,” but will shout, as Isaiah did, “kumi uri, ki va orech, arise, shine, for your light has come upon you.”