
PROPHETS AND PROPHECY I

What is Prophecy, its Importance, and Who Qualifies to be a Prophet?

When modern Jews open the Torah or Tanach they are immediately confronted by a vastly different world than the one they are used to. The phenomenon of God speaking to man – prophecy – is foreign to us today. Nevertheless, the belief that God has communicated His Will to mankind is at the very foundation of Judaism.

This class will explore the concept, history, and nature of prophecy. We will learn, among other things, that the primary goal of prophecy is to achieve a heightened closeness with God and the secondary goal is the communication of messages to the Jewish people. In the second class we will explore examples of prophecy and why there is no open prophecy today.

This class will address the following questions:

- ∞ What is prophecy? What does it feel like? Are there different levels?
- ∞ What is the purpose of prophecy?
- ∞ Who qualifies to be a prophet? What are the prerequisites?
- ∞ How do we establish the credibility of a prophecy?

Class Outline:

Section I. The Importance of Prophecy

Section II. What is Prophecy?

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Part B. The Prophetic State: What a Prophet Sees or Hears

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SECTION I. INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPHECY

Rambam (Maimonides) counts prophecy as one of the Thirteen Fundamentals of Jewish Faith; this is an indispensable foundation of Judaism.

1. **Rambam, Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 10:1 – Prophecy is an attachment of the human intellect to God’s “mind.”**

The Sixth Foundation [of Jewish belief] is prophecy. That is, that a person must know that there are individuals who have very lofty qualities and great perfection; whose souls are prepared until their minds receive perfect intellect. After this, their human intellect can then become attached to the Active Intellect [i.e. the “mind,” so to speak, of God] and have bestowed upon them an exalted state. These are the prophets and this is prophecy.

והיסוד הששי הנבואה. והוא, לדעת שזה המין האנושי יש שימצאו בו אישים בעלי כשרונות מפותחים מאד ושלמות גדולה, ותתכונן נפשם עד שמקבלת צורת השכל, ויתחבר אותו השכל האנושי בשכל הפועל, ויאצל עליהם ממנו אצילות שפע, ואלה הם הנביאים, וזה הנבואה וזה ענינה.

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, Fundamentals and Faith, pp. 69-70 – Judaism rests on the foundation of the reality of prophecy.**

Rambam’s choice of the term “prophecy” rather than “inspiration” is significant: Prophecy is defined as the reality of man receiving a direct and clear message from God ... Those contemporary thinkers who believe that the Torah was not given through direct communication with the Almighty, that the words of Torah are not His exact words but merely Divinely inspired words of men, do humanity a great disservice. Since a person is easily inspired by a message he wants to hear, a law built upon inspiration obviously will not command the respect and authority necessary to bind man; it will become malleable in his hands. Such a Torah would cease to be the source of life from Above, and would instead become a mere product and target for human manipulation.

Prophecy is crucial to the structure of Judaism: there can be no such thing as a commandment from God if He has no way of communicating His Will directly to us.

However, the logical necessity of prophecy within Judaism does not make it any more believable to one who has never experienced it. Does the lack of prophecy today mean that it never existed, or does it rather indicate that the nature of the world and our relationship to its Creator has changed?

3. **Jeremy Kagan, The Jewish Self, pp. 25-6 – Bridging the gap to the world of prophecy.**

The Torah is the supreme prophetic vision, yet it is completely foreign to us. Not only are we baffled by most of its commandments and prohibitions, we don’t even recognize the world it portrays. It is filled with descriptions of miracles and the appearance of God in the world – but we have never seen a sea split or a flaming representative of the Creator descend from the heavens. The Torah is fixated on the need to separate us from idol worship – but we feel no overwhelming desire to bow as we pass a rock or tree. For that matter, worship itself is incomprehensible ... Yet the archeological record makes clear that all ancient societies were worshipping societies ...

Prophecy is a complement to miracle and worship – all involve an awareness of a direct relationship with the Creator. We lack this awareness. The consistency of worship in the ancient world and the

existence of prophecy in the past indicate to us that the nature of awareness has a history; there was clearly a time when we were aware of ourselves and the world in a very different way than we experience them today.

The idea that somehow people in the past were more advanced than we are today itself seems strange. After all, we are certainly more technologically advanced than our ancestors were. Does that not indicate that we are smarter?

Our control over the physical world has certainly advanced over the years, but our awareness of the spiritual world has declined in proportion to our technological progress.

4. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Shabbat 112b – Decrease in spiritual levels over time.**

Rabbi Zeira said in the name of Rabba bar Zimuna, “If the earlier generations were as angels, then we are like people; if they were like people, then we are like donkeys...”

אמר רבי זירא אמר רבא בר זימנא: אם ראשונים בני מלאכים - אנו בני אנשים, ואם ראשונים בני אנשים - אנו כחמורים...

5. **Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda, Chovot HaLevavot (Duties of the Heart), Sha'ar Prishut, Ch. 7 – Inverse relationship between technology and spirituality.**

The more the world is developed, the more the intellect is destroyed.

וכל אשר נוספה הארץ יישוב, נוסף השכל חורבן...

Our exploration of prophecy must be coupled with humility. The people of the ancient world may not have been as technologically advanced as we are, but they possessed a sensitivity to the spiritual world that we lack today. (See also Part II of this series, Section III. Why There is No Prophecy Today.)

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I

- ☞ Prophecy is the linchpin of the binding authority of the Torah. If it never happened, then how can we justify Divine commandments?
- ☞ Prophecy does not exist today and this may lead to some skepticism as to whether it ever did.
- ☞ The fact that every ancient culture was a worshipping society certainly implies that they had real experiences of encounters with the spiritual world.
- ☞ Even though our generation is much more technologically advanced than the people who lived in ancient times, they enjoyed a higher level of spiritual awareness than we do today, thus enabling them to attain prophecy.

SECTION II. WHAT IS PROPHECY?

In this section we will describe the phenomenon of prophecy: what it is, how it felt, and why it was used. We will also distinguish between the prophecy of Moshe (Moses), i.e. the Torah, and the vision of other prophets in Jewish history.

PART A. THE NATURE OF PROPHECY

1. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 3:3:4 – Prophecy is a state of being bound to God.**

Prophecy is a degree of inspiration where an individual reaches a level where he literally binds himself to God in such a way that he can actually feel this attachment. He then clearly realizes that the One to Whom he is bound is God. This is sensed with complete clarity, with an awareness that leaves no room for doubt whatsoever. The individual is as sure of it as he would be if it were a physical object observed with his physical senses.

The main concept of true prophecy is therefore that a living person achieves such an attachment and bond with God... Besides this, however, it is also often accompanied by certain information and enlightenment. Through prophecy one can gain knowledge of many lofty truths among God's hidden mysteries.

ואמנם למעלה מכל זה יש מעלה אחרת, והיא הנבואה. וענינה, שיגיע האדם ויתקשר בבורא ית"ש ויתדבק בו דביקות ממש, באופן שירגיש ההתדבקות וישג מה שהוא מתדבק בו, דהיינו כבודו ית', על הדרך שנבאר לפנינו, ויהיה הדבר ברור אצלו ומורגש ממנו בלי ספק כלל, כדרך שלא יסתפק בדבר גשמי שירגישו בחושיו.

והנה עיקר הנבואה הוא השיג הדביקות והקשר הזה, עודו בחיים ... ואולם יתלווה לזה ידיעות והשכלות, כי אמנם ישיג על ידי זה ענינים אמיתיים ונכבדים מאד מסתרי סודותיו ית', וישגם בברור בדרך ההשכלה הנשפעת שזכרנו, וביותר כח מבעל רוח הקדש.

2. **Ramchal, Da'as Tevunos (The Understanding Heart) 177 – Prophecy is knowledge of God attained through a (partial) revelation of His Glory.**

Prophecy is the knowledge and attainment of God, for God gives some of His Glory to the prophet ... The one who attains prophecy understands it on his level ... for the prophets do not have the ability to see God's Glory as it really is, but when the Glory is revealed to them it creates images of prophecy in their heart.

הנבואה היא ידיעה והשגה שהקב"ה נותן לנביא מכבודו יתברך ... וישגהו תופס במדה שתפס... כי לא ניתן רשות לנביאים לראות הכבוד העליון כמו שהוא, אבל הכבוד המתגלה עליהם יחדש בלבבם דמיונות נבואיים.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 89a – Every prophecy is unique to the prophet.**

As Rabbi Yitzchak said: the same message goes to many prophets, but no two prophets prophesy with the same style [of speaking].

דאמר רבי יצחק סיגנון אחד עולה לכמה נביאים, ואין שני נביאים מתנבאין בסיגנון אחד.

PART B. THE PROPHETIC STATE: WHAT A PROPHET SEES OR HEARS

1. Rabbi Yeshaya Hurwitz, Shelah, Introduction to Asarah Ma'amarot – An out-of-body experience.

Someone who perfects his character and form according to the path I have written will reach the heights of prophecy. His physical form will be removed and he will wear a spiritual form which he has fixed and perfected, and then will have prophecy.

ומי שהשלים דמותו על הדרך שכתבתי, הנה זה יעלה למעלת הנבואה, ויפשיט הצורה החומרית וילבש הצורה הרוחנית אשר תיקן והשלים ואז יתנבא.

2. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah (Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah) 7:2-3 – Prophecy is a message received in parable form while in a sleeping state.

There are many different levels of prophecy: just as in wisdom some Sages are wiser than others, so too in prophecy some prophets are greater than others.

And all of them only see the vision of prophecy in a dream – a vision of the night, or if sleep comes upon them in the day, as it says, “I will be known to him in a vision, in a dream I will speak to him” (Bamidbar/Numbers 12:6).

The things that are made known to a prophet in a vision of prophecy are made known through parables, and immediately the explanation of the prophetic vision will be engraved on his heart, and he will know what it means ...

הנביאים, מעלות מעלות הן: כמו שיש בחכמה חכם גדול מחברו, כך בנבואה נביא גדול מנביא.

וכלן אין רואין מראה הנבואה אלא בחלום בחזיון לילה, או ביום אחר שתיפול עליהן תרדמה: כמו שנאמר “במראה אליו אתוודע, בחלום אדבר בו” (במדבר יב:ו)...

הדברים שמודיעין לנביא במראה הנבואה--דרך משל מודיעין לו, ומיד ייחקק בליבו פתרון המשל במראה הנבואה, וידע מזה הוא...

3. Midrash HaGadol Bereishit (Genesis) 22:3 – A prophecy leaves no room for ambiguity: example of the Akeidah.

“Avraham arose early in the morning.” This teaches us the power of prophecy. Even though prophecy happens at night in a dream, or during the day after he has fallen asleep, everything that the prophet sees is completely clear and he has no doubt nor uncertainty about it. The words of prophecy and the words of logic are equal in the mind of the prophet. Because the matter was clearly true and there was no doubt about it at all, Avraham arose to sacrifice his only son and did not ask any questions; he did not question whether this prophecy was true or was only a false dream.

וישכם אברהם בבקר, מגיד הכתוב כוחה שלנבואה, שאף על פי שהיא בחלום הלילה או ביום לאחר תרדמה, כל שרואה הנביא הוא דבר על בירורו, ואין בו ספק ולא הרהור, אלא דברי הנבואה ודברי החכמה שווין הן אצל הנביאים, ולפי שהדבר אמת ואין בו דופי ולא ספק, קם אברהם לשחוט את בנו יחידו ולא הרהר, ולא חשב שמא דבר נבואה זו אמת או הבלי חלומות.

PART C. THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY

As our first source below illustrates, prophecy was widespread throughout Jewish history. Apart from the books of the prophets in Tanach, there were hundreds of thousands of people who attained the level of a prophet. This begs the question, what was the purpose of prophecy if not merely to convey a message to humanity? The primary goal of prophecy was to achieve a heightened closeness with God. A secondary goal was the communication of messages to the Jewish people.

1. Talmud Bavli, Megillah 14a – There were many prophets, but only those with a message for future generations were included in Tanach.

There were many (prophets) as it was taught: Numerous prophets were established within the Jewish Nation – double the amount [of people] as left Egypt [i.e. 1.2 million] ... Those prophecies that were relevant for future generations were recorded [in Scripture]; otherwise they were not recorded.

טובא הוו כדתניא הרבה נביאים עמדו להם לישראל
כפלים כיוצאי מצרים ... נבואה שהוצרכה לדורות
נכתבה ושלא הוצרכה לא נכתבה.

2. Rashi, ibid. 14a – The prophets guided the people to do *teshuvah* and taught them Jewish laws.

The prophets were needed for future generations to guide them to improve their behavior and to teach Jewish laws. And these forty-eight prophets who were necessary for future generations [were written down].

נבואה שהוצרכה לדורות - ללמוד תשובה או הוראה
וכל הנך ארבעים ושמונה הוצרכו.

As the next source shows, a prophetic experience does not always contain a message for someone else, but may simply be to bring the prophet closer to God.

3. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 7:7 – A prophecy may be for the prophet's personal elevation or to direct a city or nation.

It is possible that a prophecy is for the prophet alone – to expand his heart and deepen his understanding so that he will know great things that he would otherwise not have known.

And it is possible that the prophecy is sent for one of the nations of the world, or the inhabitants of a certain city or kingdom – to inform them what they should do or to prevent them from continuing in their evil ways ...

הנביא, אפשר שתהיה נבואתו לעצמו בלבד, להרחיב
ליבו ולהוסיף דעתו, עד שיידע מה שלא היה יודע,
מאותן הדברים הגדולים.

ואפשר שישולח לעם מעמי הארץ, או לאנשי עיר או
ממלכה, לבונן אותם ולהודיעם מה יעשו, או למנוע
אותם ממעשים הרעים שבידיהם. ...

4. Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon, Emunot ve-Deot, Introduction, Ch. 6 – Prophecy is a shortcut to spiritual knowledge that would otherwise take great intellectual effort and time to arrive at.

We must certainly discuss this topic, which cannot be ignored. The question is this: If all the principles of religion can be attained through

ובהכרח צריך לספח לענין זה דבר שאין לעבור מעליו,
והוא שנשאל ונאמר: אם כל עניני הדת יושגו בחקירה
ובעיון הנכון, וכפי שהודיענו ה', מה היא נקודת החכמה

investigation and proper analysis, as God makes them known to us, what then is the point of the wisdom that is given to us through prophecy, verified through wonders and open miracles rather than rational arguments?

The correct answer, with the help of God, must be the following: a wise man knows that the things that are learned through intellectual investigation take a very long time. And if we would be lacking all [prophetic] knowledge of religion, it would take long time before we could figure it out [without prophecy]. It is possible that many people would arrive at such knowledge because of their intellectual limitations. Others would not manage due to lack of resolve, or they might become plagued with doubts which lead to confusion that would stop them progressing.

Therefore, God freed us from all these troubles and sent us this information through His messengers [the prophets] by way of pronouncement, and showing us with our own eyes signs and wonders about which there can be no doubt or refutation.

שנתננו לנו בדרך הנבואה, ועשה על כך מופתי האותות הגלויים לא המופתים השכליים?

ונשיב בסיוע ה' יתעלה התשובה השלמה ונאמר, מפני שידוע לפני החכם שהלימודים הנלמדים על ידי העיון לא יגיעו לשלמותם אלא בזמן ממושך, ושהוא אם יפנה אותנו אליהם בידיעת הדת, היינו נשארים זמן רב ללא דת, עד אשר תשלם לנו המלאכה ויסתיים העסק בה. ואפשר שרבים ממנו לא תשלם להם המלאכה מחמת חסרונם, ויש שלא יסתיים לו העסק בה מחמת קוצר רוחו, או שישתלטו עליו הספקות ויביאוהו במבוכה ויעצרוהו.

ולפיכך שיחרר אותנו יתהדר ויתרומם מיד מכל הטרדות האלה, ושגר אלינו את שליחו, ומסרם לנו בדרך הודעה, והראנו בעינינו עליהם אותות ומופתים מה שלא ישלוט בהם ספק, ולא תמצא שום דרך לדחייתם.

5. **Ibid. Ma'amar 3 – Even the rational laws in the Torah contain a depth that would otherwise not be accessible without prophecy.**

It is worthwhile to clarify what the necessity is for messengers and prophets. For I have heard some say that mankind has no use for prophets, that the mind of man is sufficient to figure out good from bad ... So I looked into the matter and found that there is indeed a great need for prophets, not only to teach the mitzvot known through revelation, but even rational mitzvot, for their practice cannot be complete unless the prophets show us how to perform them. Thus, for instance, reason demands gratitude toward God for the blessings received from Him, but does not specify the form, time, and posture appropriate for the expression of such gratitude. So we are in need of prophets. They gave it a form which is called "prayer"; they fixed its times, its special formulae, its special modes and the special direction which one is to face when praying.

ראוי שאבאר מה היה הצורך לשלוחים ולנביאים. כי שמעתי כי יש אנשים שאומרים כי אין לבני אדם צורך לנביאים, וששכליהם מספיקים להם להישירם במה שיש בהם מן הטוב ומן הרע... ואחר כך הסתכלתי בענין, ומצאתי צורך הברואים אל השלוחים צורך גדול, לא מפני המצות השמעיות בלבד, להודיע אותם, אך מפני המצות השכליות, כי המעשה בהם לא ישלם כי אם בשלוחים, שיעמידו בני אדם עליהם. ומוזה שהשכל דן בהודאה לאל על טובתו, ולא שם גבול להודאה ההיא, לא ממאמר מזמן ותכונה, והצטרכו לשלוחים. ושמו לו גבול, וקראוהו תפלה. ושמו לו עתים ומאמרים מיוחדים ותכונה מיוחדת ומגמה מיוחדת.

6. **Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer, The ArtScroll Tanach Series, Tehillim (Psalms) 147:20 – Prophecy illuminates our understanding of life, otherwise unknowable.**

*He declared His word unto Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances unto Israel;
He did not do so for any other nation, for His judgments, they know them not – Praise God!*

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch of Telshe explains that here “judgments” refer to the Torah’s precepts that readily appeal to human reason, such as the Ten Commandments, which are universally accepted by both Jew and gentile. However, it may seem as if the Revelation at Sinai was a wasted opportunity. Why did God present the readily acceptable judgments at that moment...?

God wished to demonstrate that even the seemingly logical judgments are truly beyond the understanding of the nations: *they know them not* ... The Jewish understanding encompasses spheres of action that are totally unknown to the gentiles. [For example, the prohibition *Thou shall not kill* also includes embarrassing someone in public (Bava Metzia 58b), rape (Devarim/Deuteronomy 2:26), and causing someone to lose his livelihood (Yevamot 78b).] God reserved this depth and breadth for His beloved, treasured people – Israel.

PART D. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MOSHE AND OTHER PROPHETS

We have been talking about prophecy in general. It is important to distinguish between the level of prophecy of Moshe in comparison to others. While the prophecy of others was either to elevate the prophet himself or to convey a message to other people, the prophecy of Moshe was different: his was direct from God, qualitatively purer, received in a conscious state, and could occur whenever he desired. Ultimately, it had the status of “Torah.”

1. **Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 49b – Moshe’s vision was “clearer.”**

All the prophets looked through a lens that was not clear, but Moshe Rabbeinu [our teacher] looked through a clear lens.

כדתניא כל הנביאים נסתכלו באספקלריא שאינה מאירה, משה רבינו נסתכל באספקלריא המאירה.

2. **Rambam, Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 10:1 – The Seventh of the Thirteen Fundamentals of Faith maintains that Moshe’s prophecy was qualitatively different from all other prophets – it was perfectly pure.**

The Seventh Foundation [of Jewish belief] is the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu, may he rest in peace. This means to believe that he is the father of all the prophets, both those that preceded him and those who arose after him; all of them were below his level. He was the chosen one from all of mankind, for he attained a greater knowledge of God, more than any other person ever attained or will ever attain.

For Moshe rose up from the level of a human to the level of the angels and gained the exalted status of an angel. There did not remain any screen [between himself and God] that he did not tear and penetrate; nothing physical held him

והיסוד השביעי נבואת משה רבינו. והוא, שנאמין שהוא אביהן של כל הנביאים שקדמו לפניו והבאים אחריו, הכל הם למטה ממנו במעלה, והוא בחיר ה' מכל המין האנושי, אשר השיג ממנו יתעלה יותר ממה שהשיג וישיג כל אדם שנמצא ושימצא.

ושהוא עליו השלום הגיע לתכלית הרוממות מעל האנושיות עד שהשיג המעלה המלאכית ונעשה במעלת המלאכים, לא נשאר לפניו שום מסך שלא קרעו ולא עצר בעדו שום מעצור גופני, ולא נשאר בו שום דבר מן החסרון לא מעט ולא הרבה, והושבתו בו

back. He was devoid of any flaw, big or small. His power of imagination, his senses and perceptions were all nullified; the power of desire was separated from him, leaving him with pure intellect and soul. It is for this reason that it is said regarding him that he could speak to God, Blessed be He, without the mediation of angels.

הכוחות הדמיוניים והחושים בכל השגותיו, ונתבטל כוחו המתעורר, ונשאר שכל בלבד, ועל ענין זה אמרו עליו שהוא מדבר עם ה' בלי אמצעות המלאכים.

As the next source describes, Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy was different from that of other prophets in the following four ways:

1. God spoke to him directly.
2. Moshe remained in a conscious state throughout the prophecy.
3. Moshe was physically unaffected by the prophecy.
4. Moshe could receive prophecy at will.

3. **Ibid. – Four differences between the prophecy of Moshe and all other prophets.**

First, every other prophet received the word of God through an intermediary, whereas Moshe did not have an intermediary, as it says, "*Mouth to mouth I speak to him.*" (Bamidbar 12:8)

Second, all other prophets only receive their prophecy either when they are sleeping, as we find in numerous places: "*In a dream at night*" (Bereishit 20:3) and "*In a vision at night*" (Iyov/ Job 33:15), and many other examples; or by day when a trance has fallen over them, which removes all their senses and leaves their mind open as in a dream. This is called a vision ...

Moshe received his prophecy by day as he stood before the *kruvim* (cherubim), as is testified to by God, Blessed be He, "*And I will commune with you there*" (Shemot/Exodus 25:22) ...

Third, when a prophet receives prophecy, even though it was only a vision and by means of an angel, he would nevertheless be weakened by it and his body would shudder. He would be stricken with a very great fear thinking that his spirit would leave his body ... But for Moshe this was not so: rather, the word came to him and he did not experience trembling and shivering in any way, as it says, "*And God spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend*" (Shemot 33:11) ... This was due to his total attachment to [God]...

ההבדל הראשון שכל נביא איזה שיהיה אין ה' מדבר אתו כי אם על ידי אמצעי, ומושה בלי אמצעי כמו שאמר פה אל פה אדבר בו.

וההבדל השני שכל נביא לא יבואהו החזון אלא בזמן השינה כמו שאמר בכמה מקומות בחלום הלילה, ויחלם, בחלום חזיון לילה וכו' והרבה מן הענין הזה, או ביום אחר תרדמה הנופלת על הנביא ומצב שבו שובתים כל חושיו ומתרוקנת מחשבתו כעין שינה, ומצב זה נקרא מחזה ומראה...

ומושה בא לו הדבור ביום והוא עומד בין שני הכרובים כמו שהבטיחו ה' ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי אתך וכו'...

וההבדל השלישי שהנביא כאשר בא לו החזון ואף על פי שהוא במראה ועל ידי מלאך יחלשו כחותיו ומתחלחל גופו וירד עליו מורא עצום מאד כאלו הולך למות... ומושה אינו כן אלא יבואהו הדבר ולא תארע לו חלחלה כלל והוא אמרו יתעלה ודבר ה' אל משה פנים אל פנים כאשר ידבר איש אל רעהו... וזה מחמת חוזק התחברו...

Fourth, all the [other] prophets were unable to receive prophecy when they willed it, but only when God, Blessed be He, wished it. The prophet could wait days or years and prophecy would not come ... However Moshe, [could prophesy] at any time he wished. As he said, “*Wait and I will hear what God has commanded you*” (Bamidbar 9:8); and as it says, “*Speak to Aharon your brother, he shall not come at all times in the holy place,*” about which our Sages of blessed memory said, “Aharon could not enter, but this did not apply to Moshe.”

וזהבדל הרביעי שכל הנביאים לא יבואם החזון ברצונם אלא ברצון ה', ויש שישאר הנביא כמה שנים ולא יבואהו חזון, ויש שמבקשין מן הנביא להודיעם דבר בנבואה וישאר עד שתבוא לו הנבואה אחר ימים או אחר חדשים או לא תבוא לו כלל... אבל משה רבינו כל זמן שירצה אמר עמדו ואשמעה. מה יצוה ה' לכם, ואמר דבר אל אהרן אחיך ואל יבוא בכל עת, ואמרו אהרן בבל יבוא ואין משה בכל יבוא.

4. Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, *Fundamentals and Faith*, pp. 81-2 – Only Moshe's prophecy constitutes Torah.

[T]he prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu – which was validated through a unique moment in history, the revelation to the entire Nation of Israel – that prophecy is Torah. “Torah” represents the absolute truths of the Almighty directly communicated to man ... In contrast, the prophecy of all other prophets is not Torah. Indeed, their prophecy is validated only through the criteria established by Torah ... In certain cases, prophecy was granted in order to deliver a message to a community or the Nation ... These messages served as a source of insight or inspiration regarding the teachings of the Torah ... However, these communications *never* innovated any Torah commandment.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

- ☞ Prophecy is an act of supreme communion with God, a state in which one is attached to the Creator. Such a connection is valuable in its own right, but can also be useful for gleaning insights into the workings of the spiritual world.
- ☞ While the medium of prophecy – the state of being close to God – is certainly the principal goal, prophecy was sometimes used by God to convey messages to people other than the prophet himself. As a system of Divine communication it served as a clearer and more efficient way to transmit knowledge of God than any alternative.
- ☞ While there are different degrees of a prophet's clarity, the prophecy of Moshe was qualitatively higher than that of all other prophets. His prophecy was direct from God, qualitatively purer, received in a conscious state, and could occur whenever he desired. Ultimately, it had the status of “Torah.”

SECTION III. WHO CAN BE A PROPHET?

In this section we will outline the prerequisites for being a prophet and the process of personal development a person would undergo to achieve prophecy. We will also examine how to test if a prophet is in fact genuine.

PART A. JEWISH AND IN ISRAEL

Prophecy has been restricted to Jews since the time of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), except for Bilaam (Balaam), whose prophecy was ultimately for the benefit of the Jewish people (Bamidbar chap. 22-24). Prophecy occurs in the Land of Israel, except in cases where a prophet initially received prophecy in Israel and subsequently has prophecy outside of Israel.

1. Sifri, Devarim 18:15 – Only in the Land of Israel and only Jews.

“A prophet from your midst, of your brethren, shall God establish for you – to him shall you listen.” (Devarim 18:15)

“A prophet from your midst” – to the exclusion of someone outside the Land of Israel.

“Of your brethren” – to the exclusion of other nations.

נביא מקרבך מאחריך כְּמוֹנֵי יָקִים לְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵלָיו
תִּשְׁמָעוּן: (דברים יח:טו)

נביא מקרבך, ולא מחוצה לארץ.

מאחריך, ולא מאחרים.

2. Ramban (Nachmanides), *ibid.* – Prophecy is only in the Land of Israel.

The reason it says: “From your midst” is that prophecy only takes place in the land of Israel.

טעם מקרבך לרמז שאין נבואה אלא בארץ ישראל.

3. Midrash Sifri Zuta 35:33 – Prophecy requires that the Jews are living in the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Nahorai said, “For I am the Lord ...” Perhaps you might think that the Divine Presence dwells even outside the Land, therefore it says, “... In the Land.” Perhaps it dwells in the Land when the Jews are in exile? Therefore it says, “In the midst of the Children of Israel,” i.e. at a time when they are in the Land and not when they are outside of it.

ר' נהוראי אמר כי אני ה' שוכן בגלות ת"ל בארץ או בארץ ואתם בגלות ת"ל בתוך בני ישראל בשעה שבני אדם בארץ ולא בשעה שהן בחוצה לארץ.

4. Talmud Bavli, Moed Katan 25a – Even though Yechezkel (Ezekiel) prophesied outside the Land of Israel, he was able to do so because he had already prophesied in the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Abba said, “Our Master was worthy that the Divine Presence should abide with him, but [the fact that he was in] Babylon prevented it.”

Thereupon Rabbi Nahman, son of Rabbi Chisda – some say it was Rabbi Chanan, son of Rabbi Chisda – referred to [the text]: “The word of the Lord came expressly unto Yechezkel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar” [Yechezkal 1:3]. His father [R' Chisda] tapped him with his sandal, saying to him, “Have I not told you not to worry everybody

פתח עליה רבי אבא: ראוי היה רבינו שתשרה עליו שכניה, אלא שבבל גרמה ליה.

מתיב רב נחמן בר חסדא, ואמרי לה רב חנן בר חסדא: “היה ה' דבר ה' אֵל יְחִזְקָאל בֶּן בּוּזִי הַכֹּהֵן בְּאֶרֶץ כַּשְׂדִּים!” (יחזקאל א') טפח ליה אבא בסנדליה. אמר ליה: לאו אמינא לך לא תיטרוד עלמא? מאי היה - שדיה כבר.

[with this point]? What is meant by the double expression 'Hayoh [hayah]'? That the Divine Presence had come to him before he came to Babylon."

5. **Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah 1:12 – The requirement for a prophet to be Jewish went into effect after the building of the Mishkan.**

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "Before the Mishkan was built, prophecy was common amongst the non-Jewish nations. Once the Mishkan was built prophecy left them" ... They asked him, "But Bilaam was a non-Jewish prophet (and lived after the Mishkan was built)!" He replied, "His prophecy was for the benefit of Israel, as he [Bilaam] said (Bamidbar 23:10), 'Who can count the dust of Yaakov?'" ...

אמר רבי יצחק, עד שלא הוקם המשכן היתה נבואה מצויה באומות העולם, משהוקם המשכן נסתלקה מביניהם... אמרו לו הרי בלעם מתנבא, אמר להם לטובתן של ישראל נתנבא, מי מנה עפר יעקב...

6. **Shemot 33:16; Talmud Bavli, Berachot 7a – The restriction of prophecy to Jews was due to Moshe's prayer.**

Unless You accompany us, how can it be known that I and Your people are pleasing to You? [But if You do,] I and Your people will be distinguished from every nation on the face of the earth (Shemot 33:16).

Berachot 7a:

[Moshe] asked that the Divine Presence should not rest upon the nations of the world, and it was granted to him. For it is said, "I and Your people will be distinguished" ... (Shemot 33:16).

ובמה יודע אפוא כי מצאתי חן בעיניך אני ועמך הלא בלכתך עמנו ונפלינו אני ועמך מכל העם אשר על פני האדמה (שמות לג:טז).

ברכות ז.

בקש שלא תשרה שכונה על עובדי כוכבים ונתן לו, שנאמר: (שמות לג:טז) ונפלינו אני ועמך...

The Chasam Sofer explains that Moshe sought this exclusive arrangement specifically after the sin of the Golden Calf. Moshe was afraid that without this pledge it would be possible for a non-Jew to replicate the spiritual accomplishments of Avraham (Abraham) and found a new Chosen People. However, from that point on, any non-Jew seeking prophecy would have to convert to Judaism first.

PART B. CHARACTER REFINEMENT

Only someone who has developed an exceptional character qualifies to receive prophecy.

1. **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 7:1 – Developing wisdom, self-restraint, and knowledge.**

Prophecy only comes to one who is very wise; one who has control over his character traits; and whose [Evil] Inclination does not control him at all, rather he intentionally overcomes it at all times; and one who is extremely knowledgeable.

... ואין הנבואה חלה אלא על חכם גדול בחכמה, גיבור במידותיו, ולא יהיה יצרו מתגבר עליו בדבר בעולם אלא הוא מתגבר בדעתו על יצרו תמיד, והוא בעל דעה רחבה נכונה עד מאוד

2. Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), Sukkah 22b – One must be in a state of joy to receive prophecy.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, “Why is it [the Temple in Jerusalem] called ‘The House of Drawing’? Because from there is drawn Divine Inspiration” ... Rabbi Yonah said, “[The prophet] Yonah ben Amitai [Jonah] went to Jerusalem for the festival, and he went to the joyous Water Drawing Ceremony [at Sukkot], and Divine Inspiration rested upon him. This teaches us that Divine Inspiration only rests on someone whose heart is happy.”

א"ר יהושע בן לוי למה נקרא שמה בית השואבה שמשם שואבים רוח הקודש... אמר רבי יונה, יונה בן אמית מעולי רגלים היה ונכנס לשמחת בית השואבה ושרת עליו רוח הקודש, ללמדך שאין רוח הקדש שורה אלא על לב שמח.

3. Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 20b – The eleven-step process to prophecy.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said, “Torah brings one to vigilance, vigilance brings one to enthusiasm, enthusiasm leads to [spiritual] cleanliness, cleanliness leads to abstinence, abstinence leads to purity, purity leads to righteousness, righteousness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of transgression, fear of transgression leads to holiness, holiness leads to Divine inspiration...” (prophecy), and Divine Inspiration leads to the resurrection of the dead.”

א"ר פנחס בן יאיר תורה מביאה לידי זהירות זהירות מביאה לידי זריזות זריזות מביאה לידי נקיות נקיות מביאה לידי פרישות, פרישות מביאה לידי טהרה, טהרה מביאה לידי חסידות, חסידות מביאה לידי ענוה, ענוה מביאה לידי יראת חטא, יראת חטא מביאה לידי קדושה, קדושה מביאה לידי רוח הקודש, רוח הקודש מביאה לידי תחיית המתים.

Character development is not just for those individuals striving to achieve prophecy. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto wrote an incisive guide, *The Path of the Just* (Mesillat Yesharim), for every Jew to develop his personality based on Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair's teaching. This book has been studied daily worldwide by thousands ever since its publication in the 18th century.

4. Rambam, Introduction to Shemoneh Perakim – Learning and fulfilling the ethical teachings of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) leads to prophecy.

Our Sages of blessed memory have stated that “whoever wishes to become righteousness should fulfill the words of Pirkei Avot” (Bava Kama 30a). There is no greater virtue than righteousness, other than prophecy. And righteousness actually brings one to prophecy, as our Sages of blessed memory said, “Righteousness leads to ... Divine Inspiration” (Avodah Zarah 20b). Hence fulfilling the dictates of Pirkei Avot leads to prophecy.

וכבר אמרו רבנן זכרונם לברכה (בבא קמא ל.), “האי מאן דבעי למיהוי חסידא לקיים מילי דאבות”, ואין אצלנו מעלה גדולה מחסידות אלא הנבואה, והיא המביאה אליה כמו שאמרו רבנן זכרונם לברכה (עבודה זרה כ.), “חסידות מביאה לידי רוח הקדש”. הנה התבאר מדבריהם שבקיום מאמרי זאת המסכתא מביא לידי נבואה.

5. Rabbeinu Peretz, Ma'arechet Elokut, Ch. 10 – Righteousness is a prerequisite for prophecy.

According to the way I explained the essence of man, the intelligent person will understand that when man is righteous, he is fitting to prophesy and live the eternal existence, for he has become like God.

וממה שביארתי בדמות האדם יכול להתבונן המשכיל כי בהיות האדם צדיק גמור כי ראוי לו שיתנבא ויחיה לעולם כי מצא מין את מינו וניעור.

6. **Jeremy Kagan, The Jewish Self, pp.46-50 – Character refinement leads to prophecy because it enables one to resemble the Creator.**

Why is the character development outlined in Pirkei Avot identified [by Rambam] as the way to become a prophet? What is the nature of our direct connection with the Creator that human character should mediate the process?

Human character can mediate this connection because it is structured around the very act of creation which connects Spirit to physical reality. Just as a full act of creation is only initiated by a desire to give selflessly, so the foundation of refined human character is a desire to give and relate to others ... When we refine our character, we attune ourselves to Spirit's analogous connection to creation. Because of this, the Sages tell us that we must, within the confines of our own situation, imitate the Creator.

PART C. MITZVAH FULFILLMENT

As explained in the Morasha class on the mitzvot, each commandment we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God. Hence, fulfilling mitzvot also has the power to create the closeness to God that can lead to prophecy.

1. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 1:6 – Keeping mitzvot properly is a prerequisite for the Divine Presence to rest on a person.**

When a person fulfills the mitzvot in perfection, with every detail and nuance essential to the act, adding to that a purity and holiness of thought ... the Glory of God will rest upon him always.

וכאשר קיים כל המצות בשלימות בכל פרטיהם
ודקדוקיהם בעיקר המעשה ונוסף עליהם הצטרף
עוצם טהרת וקדושת המחשבה..... וכבוד ה' חופף עליו
תמיד.

PART D. ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY FOR PREDICTIONS

Most people consider the role of a prophet is to predict the future. As we have seen, the primary goal of a prophet is to develop closeness to God. Nevertheless, a prophet's ability to foresee the future is critical to verify his credibility as a messenger of God.

1. **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 10:1-3 – A prophet is repeatedly tested for the accuracy of his predictions.**

When a person comes who is fitting for prophecy in the employment of God and does not intend to add or subtract [from the Torah], but rather to serve God in the Torah's commandments – we do not demand that he split the sea or revive the dead, etc., and only then believe him ... Rather, we say to him, "If you are a prophet, tell us things that will happen in the future." He does so and then we wait to see if his predictions come true. If what he said does not occur, even if only one small detail is missing, it is known that he is a false prophet. But if all his words do come true, then we consider him trustworthy.

כשיבוא אדם הראוי לנבואה במלאכות ה', ולא יבוא
להוסיף ולא לגרוע, אלא לעבוד את ה' מצוות התורה-
אין אומרים לו קרע לנו את הים או החיה מת וכיוצא
באלו, ואחר כך נאמין בו. אלא אומרים לו, אם נביא
אתה, אמור לנו דברים העתידים להיות; והוא אומר,
ואנו מחכים לו לראות היבואו דבריו אם לא יבואו,
ואפילו נפל דבר אחד קטן--בידוע שהוא נביא שקר.
ואם באו דבריו כולם, יהיה בעינינו נאמן.

We test him many times and if all his words are reliable he is considered a true prophet.

Do astrologers and magicians not also tell the future? What is the difference between them and a prophet? The difference is that with astrologers, magicians, and those like them, some of their words come true and some do not ... but a prophet – all his words come true, as it is said, “And nothing from the word of God shall fall to the earth [i.e. no word will go unfulfilled]” (Melachim/Kings II, 10:10).

ובודקין אותו פעמים הרבה. אם נמצאו דבריו כולם נאמנים, הרי זה נביא אמת.

והלא המעוננים והקוסמים אומרים מה עתיד להיות, ומה הפרש בין הנביא ובינם--אלא שהמעוננים והקוסמים וכיוצא בהן, מקצת דבריהן מתקיימין ומקצתן אין מתקיימין.... אבל הנביא--כל דבריו קיימין, שנאמר “כי לא יפול מדבר ה' ארצה” (מלכים ב' י').

2. **Ibid. 7:7 – Performing miracles confirm the validity of someone previously considered worthy to be a prophet.**

When a prophet is sent [to prophesy to the people], he is given a sign and a wonder to prove to the people that God has truly sent him. Not that everyone who performs signs and wonders is believed to be a prophet. Rather, someone who was already considered worthy to be a prophet due to his wisdom and good deeds, who has risen above all his contemporaries, and has walked in the ways of prophecy, holiness, and asceticism, and only then performs a wonder and says that God sent him – at that point it is a mitzvah to listen to him, as it is said, “And to him you shall listen” (Devarim 18:15).

וכשמשלחין אותו, נותנים לו אות ומופת כדי שיידעו העם שהאל שילחו באמת. ולא כל העושה אות ומופת, מאמינים אותו שהוא נביא: אלא אדם שהיינו יודעים בו מתחילתו שהוא ראוי לנבואה בחכמתו ובמעשיו, שנתעלה בהן על כל בני גילו, והיה מהלך בדרכי הנבואה ובקדושתה ופרישותה, ואחר כך בא ועשה אות ומופת ואמר שהאל שילחו--מצוה לשמוע ממנו, שנאמר “אליו, תשמעון” (דברים יח:טו)

3. **Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 89b – Once a prophet's credentials have been established, he no longer needs to prove himself.**

[The Mishnah noted that] one who ignores the words of a prophet [is punished].
[The Gemara asks:] How should one know [that the prophet is true, that he] should be punished on his account? He gives a sign [and it comes true]. But in the story of Michah (Micah) he does not give a sign and yet [those who ignored him] were punished! The case of [a prophet] who is already established as such is different.

המוותר על דברי נביא מנא ידע דאיענש דיהב ליה אות והא מיכה דלא יהיב ליה אות ואיענש היכא דמוחק שאני.

The Rambam writes that a prophecy of harmful events does not need to be fulfilled, but a prophecy of a prosperous future must be fulfilled.

4. Rambam, Introduction to the Mishnah – An unfulfilled prophecy of harm does not indicate a false prophet; an unfulfilled prophecy of goodness reveals a false prophet.

There is a very important matter that requires clarification. If a prophet's prophecy predicts harmful events, deserved by the people's behavior, and he prophesies, for example, that there will be famine or war ... and then these events do not happen, and the people are pardoned and time passes peacefully – this does not indicate that the prophet is false and deserves the death penalty, since God relented on the evil, for it is possible that the people repented or that God suspended the decree in His mercy or pushed off their punishment to a different time ... or God forgave them on account of previous good deeds ...

However, if [the prophet] promised that fortuitous events will take place at a specific time: for example, he says that the upcoming year will be peaceful and then a war ensued, or he said that the year will have rain and blessing and there was famine and no rain, and similar things, he is a false prophet. For if God promised good things for the people through a prophet, He will certainly fulfill His promise in order to show the truth of their prophecy to mankind ...

ונשאר כאן ענין גדול צריך לבארו. והוא, שהנביא אם נתנבא ברעות לבני אדם שנתחייבו בכך, כגון שיתנבא על רעב או חרב...ולא נתקיים שום דבר מזה אלא נמחל להם ועבר מצבם בשלום, לא יתברר בזה כזבו של הנביא ויהיה נביא שקר ויתחייב מיתה, כי ה' יתעלה ויתרומם נחם על הרעה, ואפשר שישבו ופירשו מחטאותם, או שהאריך להם ה' בחכמתו ודחה פרעונם לזמן אחר...או שמחל להם בגלל טובה שעשו מלפני כן...

אבל אם הבטיח שטובות תבואנה בזמן מסויים כגון שיאמר ששלום יהיה בשנה זו והיתה מלחמה, או שיאמר שהשנה תהיה גשומה וברוכה והיה רעב ובצורת וכדומה לכך, הרי זה נביא... לפי שה' אם הבטיח טובה לעם על ידי נביא הוא מקיימה בהחלט כדי שתתאמת נבואתם אצל בני אדם...

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

- ☞ While prophecy was once attainable by all mankind, since the times of Moshe it has been in the domain of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.
- ☞ Beyond the basic conditions of being Jewish and living in the Land of Israel, the process of becoming a prophet entailed rigorously refining one's character and perfecting one's mitzvah observance.
- ☞ These requirements reflect the very core of what prophecy is: in order to get close to God one must emulate His attributes.
- ☞ A prophet had to prove his abilities by repeatedly successfully predicting events in the future. Only then would his message from God be taken seriously. A prophecy of predicting harmful events does not need to be fulfilled, but a prophecy for a prosperous future must be fulfilled.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS PROPHECY? WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE? ARE THERE DIFFERENT LEVELS?

Prophecy is an attachment of the human intellect to God's "mind."

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY?

Prophecy is crucial to the structure of Judaism: there can be no such thing as a commandment from God if He has no way of communicating His Will directly to us.

WHO QUALIFIES TO BE A PROPHET? WHAT ARE THE PREREQUISITES?

Beyond the basic conditions of being Jewish and living in the Land of Israel, the 11-step process of becoming a prophet entailed rigorously refining one's character, perfecting one's mitzvah observance, and being in a state of joy.

HOW DO WE ESTABLISH THE CREDIBILITY OF A PROPHECY?

A prophet had to prove his abilities by repeatedly successfully predicting events in the future.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

SECTION II

Ramchal, *Derech Hashem*, section 3, Ch. 3 and 5
 Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Handbook of Jewish Thought* Vol. I, Ch. 6
 Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, *Fundamentals of Faith*, pp. 67-86
 Rabbi J. David Bleich, *With Perfect Faith*, pp. 273-344

SECTION III

Ramchal, *Derech Hashem*, section 3, Ch. 4
 Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Handbook of Jewish Thought* Vol. I, 6-8

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