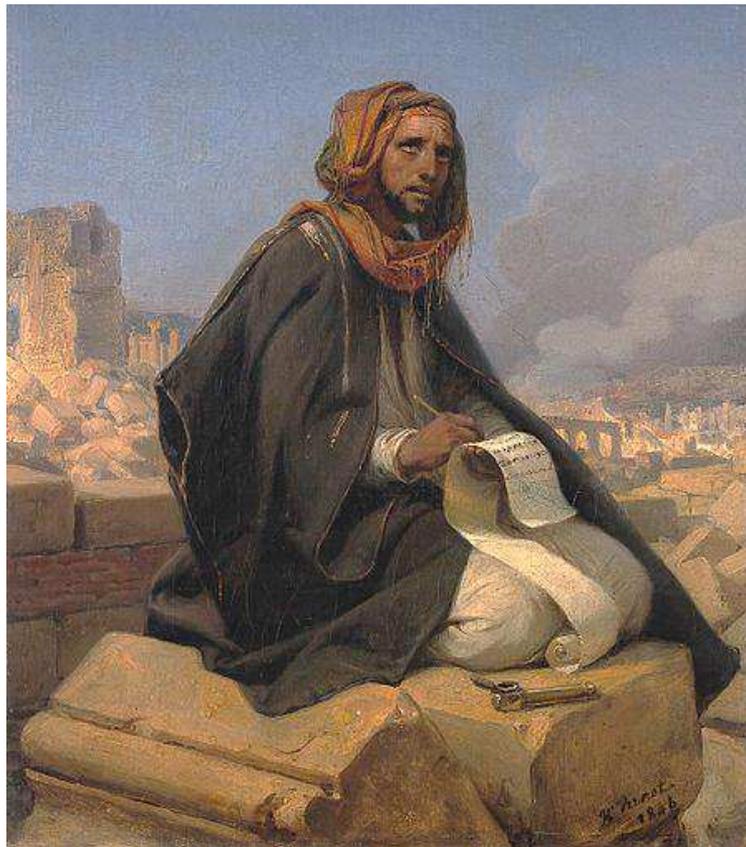


**YLJC Judaism 101**

# **THE PROPHETS**

**Study pack**



## KEY PROPHETIC TERMS

Prophecy (n) – *pro-fe-see* – a prophetic statement

Prophecy (v) – *pro-fe-sigh* – to deliver a prophetic statement

נְבִיא (n) – *nah-vee* – a prophet (plural נְבִיאִים – *n'vee-im*), incl false prophet

נְבִיאָה (n) – *n'vee-ah* – a prophetess

לְהִנָּבֵא (v) – *l'hi-nah-vay* – to prophesy

מִתְנַבֵּא (v) – *mit-nah-bay* – he ranted-like-a-prophet/ in an ecstatic state

נְבוּאָה (n) – *n'voo-ah* – a prophecy

√נבא in Arabic means 'speaking in a low voice', also 'being exalted'.

The prophetic perfect is a tense in Biblical Hebrew that describes future events which are so certain to happen that they are referred to in the past tense as if they already happened.

## KEY PROPHETIC MOMENTS

And it came to pass, when King Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him: "Is that you, troubler of Israel?" Elijah said: "I have not troubled Israel, but rather you and your Father's house have, in that you have abandoned God's commandments and begun to worship Baal. So now, gather for me at Mount Carmel all the prophets of Baal."

And Elijah gathered all the prophets of Baal, and all the children of Israel.

And Elijah came close to all the people and said: "How long will you hop on two branches? If the Eternal One is God, walk after the Eternal One, and if Baal is god, walk after him!" But the people did not answer him a word.

Elijah said to the people: "I stand alone as a prophet of the Eternal One, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty men. Let two bulls be given us, and let them choose one bull for themselves, and let them put it atop the wood, but fire they shall not put on it. I will prepare the other bull and place it atop the wood, but fire I will not put on it. And you are to call on the name of your god, while I will call on the name of the Eternal One. And it will be: the god who answers with fire, that is the true God." All the people answered, they said: "The matter is good!"

So the prophets of Baal took the bull, and they called upon the name of Baal, from daybreak until noon, saying: "O Baal, answer us!" But there

was no voice, and no one answering. And they hopped all around the altar that they had prepared.

Now it was at noon, that Elijah taunted them. He said: “Call out in a great voice, for he is a god! Maybe he is busy – maybe doing his business’ – or maybe on the road; perhaps he is asleep and needs to be woken up!”

So they called out in a great voice and gashed themselves after their practice with swords and lances, until blood spilled out over them. But there was no voice, no one answering, and no attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people: “Come close to me!” And the fire of God consumed his bull.

And it came to pass in a little while, that the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Eternal One was on Elijah; and he girded up his loins, and ran before Ahab all the way.

### *1 Kings 18*

This is what God showed me: God was standing on a wall, holding a plumb line, and declared, “I am going to apply a plumb line to My people Israel; I will pardon them no more. The shrines of Isaac shall be laid waste, and the sanctuaries of Israel reduced to ruins; and I will turn upon the House of King Jeroboam with the sword.”

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent this message to King Jeroboam of Israel: “Amos is conspiring against you! The country cannot endure the things he is saying.” And Amaziah said to Amos, “Seer, off with you to the land of Judah! Earn your living there, and do your prophesying there. But don’t ever prophesy again at Bethel; for it is a royal palace.”

Amos answered Amaziah: “I am not a prophet, and I am not a prophet’s disciple. I am a cattle breeder and a tender of sycamore figs. But the Eternal One took me away from following the flock, and God said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel.’ And so, hear the word of God. You say I must not prophesy about the House of Israel or preach about the House of Isaac; but this, I swear, is what the Eternal One said about you: Your wife shall play the harlot in the town, your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line. And you yourself shall die on unclean soil; for Israel shall be exiled from its soil.”

### *Amos 7*

“Oh, disloyal sons!” declares the Eternal One, “Making plans against My wishes, weaving schemes against My will!

“Now, go, Isaiah, write it down on a tablet and inscribe it in a record, that it may be with them for future days, a witness forever. For it is a rebellious people, faithless children, children who refused to heed the instruction of God, who said to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ to the prophets ‘Do not prophesy truth to us; speak to us of smooth things, prophesy delusions. Leave the way! Get off the path! Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel!”

“Assuredly,” said the Holy One of Israel, “because you have rejected this word, and have put your trust and reliance in that which is fraudulent and tortuous, this iniquity shall work on you like a spreading breach that occurs in a lofty wall, whose crash comes sudden and swift.”

### *Isaiah 30*

King Asa of Judah took all the silver and gold from the treasuries of the House of the Eternal One and the royal palace, and sent them to the King of Aram, who resided in Damascus, with this message: “Let there be a pact between me and you. I herewith send you silver and gold; go and break your pact with King Basha of Israel.” The King of Aram acceded to King Asa’s request; he sent his army commanders against the towns of Israel and ravaged Iyon, Dan, Abel-maim, and all the garrison towns of Naphtali.

At that time, Hanani the seer came to King Asa of Judah and said to him, “You relied on the king of Aram and did not rely on the Eternal One your God! For the eyes of the Eternal One range over the entire earth, to give support to those who are wholeheartedly with God. You have acted foolishly in this matter, and henceforth you will be beset by wars.”

Asa was vexed at the seer and put him into the prison house, for he was furious with him because of this incident.

King Asa’s successor, Jehosaphat, made an alliance with Ahaziah, King of Israel, whose ways were wicked. The two kings agreed to construct a fleet of trading ships. After these were built, Eliezer, son of Dodavahu of Mareshah, prophesied against Jehosaphat, saying, “Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the Eternal One will destroy what you have made.” The ships were wrecked and were not able to set sail to trade.

### *2 Chronicles 16, 20*

## KEY PROPHETIC CHARACTERISTICS

What manner of man is the prophet?

Sensitive to evil: He delivers orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalised, and rave as if the whole world were a slum. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.

Luminous and explosive: The prophet's images do not shine: they must burn. The prophet is intent on intensifying responsibility, is impatient of excuse, contemptuous of pretence and self-pity. His words are often slashing, even horrid – designed to shock rather than to edify. Reading the words of the prophets is a strain on the emotions, wrenching one's conscience from the state of suspended animation. The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is an assaulter of the mind.

Iconoclastic: The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions. Their words may sound blasphemous.

Compassionate: The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind. Every prediction of disaster is in itself an exhortation to repentance. The prophet is sent not only to upbraid, but also to bring 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.

Makers of sweeping allegations: If justice means giving every person what they deserve, the scope and severity of the accusations by the prophets of Israel hardly confirmed that principle. The prophets were unfair to the people of Israel. Their sweeping allegations, overstatements, and generalisations defied standards of accuracy. In terms of statistics the prophets' statements are grossly inaccurate. Yet their concern is not with facts, but with the meaning of facts. Few are guilty, but all are responsible.

Endowed with a blast from Heaven: To a person endowed with prophetic sight, everyone else appears blind; to a person whose ear perceives God's voice, everyone else appears deaf.

Distrusted: The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority, and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders. By the standards of ancient religions, the great prophets of the Israelites were rather unimpressive. Evidence such as miracles were not at their disposal.

Lonely and miserable: None of the prophets seems enamoured with being a prophet nor proud of his attainment. To be a prophet is both a distinction and an affliction. The mission he performs is distasteful to him and repugnant to others; no reward is promised him and no reward could temper its bitterness. The prophet's duty is to speak to the people, whether they hear or refuse to hear. Thus the prophet bears scorn and reproach. He is stigmatised as a madman by his contemporaries, and, by some modern scholars, as abnormal.

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

## THE PROPHETS IN BRIEF

The commentator Rashi identified, albeit without any clear definition, 48 **Israelite prophets**, seven **Israelite prophetesses** and one *gentile prophet* in the Hebrew Bible:

<b>Aaron</b>	Brother and assistant of *Moses, and first High Priest
<b>Abigail</b>	Outsmarted King *David and eventually married him
<b>Abraham</b>	Made the first covenant with God
<b>Ahijah</b>	Foresaw the separation of the two kingdoms of Israel
<b>°Amos</b>	Prophetic proponent of social justice
<b>Amoz</b>	Father of *Isaiah; had no other function but regarded as a prophet
<b>Azariah</b>	Exhorts King Asa to carry out reforms including the destruction of idols
<i>Balaam</i>	Sorcerer charged with cursing the Israelites, but actually blessed them
<b>Baruch</b>	Discipline, scribe and secretary of *Jeremiah
<b>David</b>	King of Israel and author of many psalms
<b>Deborah</b>	Ruled Israel from under a date tree
<b>Eli</b>	High Priest; saw *Hannah's tearful prayer and blessed her
<b>Eliezer</b>	Rebuked King Jehosophat; Jehosophat ignored him; his ships sank
<b>Elijah</b>	Whisked off to Heaven in a fiery chariot; herald of the messianic age
<b>Elisha</b>	Student of *Elijah and a general miracle worker
<b>Elkanah</b>	Husband of *Hannah
<b>°Esther</b>	Selected to marry King Ahasuerus, and saviour of the Jews of Persia

<b>°Ezekiel</b>	Lived in exile in Babylon, but shared visions of a comforting future
<b>Gad</b>	Personal prophet to King *David; author of a lost book?
<b>°Habakkuk</b>	Warned that God is using the Babylonian empire to punish the Israelites
<b>°Haggai</b>	Prophesied about the need to press ahead with building the Temple
<b>Hanani</b>	Imprisoned by King Asa for criticising alliance with Syria; father of *Jehu
<b>Hannah</b>	Wept in the Temple at her childlessness, and was granted a child
<b>°Hosea</b>	Commanded by God to marry a prostitute to protest against idolatry
<b>Huldah</b>	Encouraged the reforms, and Temple building works, of King Josiah
<b>Iddo</b>	Prophet and historian of the early Kings of Israel
<b>Isaac</b>	Son of *Abraham
<b>°Isaiah</b>	Prophesied against Israelite evil and idolatry (fat lot of good that did)
<b>Jacob</b>	Son of *Isaac
<b>Jahaziel</b>	Cautioned against fear
<b>Jehu</b>	Son of *Hanani; condemned royal idolatry
<b>°Jeremiah</b>	Foresaw the fall of Jerusalem; author of the Book of Lamentations
<b>°Joel</b>	Used a locust plague as an allegory for apocalypse
<b>°Jonah</b>	Occupant of a fish
<b>°Joshua</b>	Successor of *Moses
<b>°Malachi</b>	Upbraided the priesthood for offering lacklustre sacrifices
<b>Mehseiah</b>	Father of *Neria; had no other function but regarded as a prophet
<b>°Micah</b>	Conveys God's accusation that the Israelites have broken the covenant
<b>Michaiah</b>	Discipline of *Elijah, consulted by the king re military strategy
<b>Miriam</b>	Sister of *Moses, who led dancing at the Red Sea
<b>Mordecai</b>	Cousin of *Esther, who supported her in saving the Jews of Persia
<b>Moses</b>	Burning bush etc
<b>°Nahum</b>	Prophesied of God's power and the destruction of mighty Nineveh
<b>Nathan</b>	Court prophet to, and frequent reprimander of, King *David
<b>Neria</b>	Father of *Baruch; had no other function but regarded as a prophet
<b>°Obadiah</b>	Prophesies of the fall of Edom, descendants of *Jacob's brother Esau
<b>Oded</b>	Spoke out against slavery
<b>Phineas</b>	Grandson of *Aaron, and resisted heresy in the wilderness
<b>°Samuel</b>	Miracle child born to *Hannah and *Elkanah, and instituted the Kingship
<b>Sarah</b>	Wife of *Abraham, granted a miraculous child late in life
<b>Seraiah</b>	Brother of *Baruch; had no other function but regarded as a prophet
<b>Shemaiah</b>	Intervened to prevent a civil war between the two kingdoms of Israel
<b>Solomon</b>	King of Israel and author of various Biblical poetic and wisdom literature
<b>Urijah</b>	Son of *Shemaiah, persecuted by King Jehoiakim
<b>°Zechariah</b>	Prophesied of the end of days; grandson of *Iddo
<b>°Zephaniah</b>	Warned of the end of days, when God will judge all humankind

° Has a book of the Hebrew Bible named after them

\* Another prophet in this list

## THE PROPHETS IN ETERNITY

We tend to think of a prophet as a foreteller of the future. But the word doesn't necessarily mean that, either in Greek or in Hebrew. It simply means a person who speaks for another. In the case of the great Hebrew Prophets, what they say about the future always flows from their understanding of the past, and most of all they are concerned with the present; and in all three they have one overriding interest, which is the will of God.

Politicians interpret history politically, economists interpret it economically. Prophets probe further. They look beyond the operation of political and economic laws to discover the workings of the moral law which, at a still deeper level, governs history. The questions they ask about the past are questions of right and wrong, so that the correct remedies may be applied in the present for the sake of the future.

They may make predictions, and they may back up their message with signs and wonders. But that, says our Torah portion, is not the point. The truth of the message is in itself. Never mind the pyrotechnics. If what the prophets say rings true, if it coheres with what deep down we know to be true and good, then we may believe them. Otherwise they are charlatans.

When the Hebrew prophets look into the past what they chiefly see there is all the mistakes that were made. Most of the time, therefore, they urge the people not to continue or repeat those mistakes, and warn them about the disasters which will undoubtedly befall them if they do. Occasionally, however, they draw reassuring lessons from their reading of history, and the prime example of that unusual, optimistic mood is the Second Isaiah. Israel, he thinks, has suffered long enough. Relief is on the way.

How did the prophets do it? The traditional view is that they received revelations unavailable to ordinary mortals. And yet they were human and fallible, and the best proof is that they were sometimes wrong. Zechariah, for instance, wrongly predicted the success of Zerubbabel.

But if that is so, if prophets are fallible, if what they have to say is not due entirely to supernatural knowledge but to sustained reflection, then it should not be entirely impossible for us to read history as they read it.

*Rabbi John D Rayner*

The Eternal One said to Moses, "See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet."

*Exodus 7*