

Parashat Beshalach 5773, 2013

Prophets and Maidservants: New Visions

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

The Rambam (1135-1204) begins the seventh chapter of *Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah* with this statement regarding the fundamental doctrinal significance of prophecy: “ One of the bases of religion is to know that G-d visits people in prophetic visions...” In his view, prophecy is one of the constitutive elements of the Torah. It is nearly always limited to a small group of people with unique characteristics that set them apart from the general population. As the Rambam states: “... [Prophetic visions] come only to exceedingly wise people of outstanding characteristics, whose inclinations never lead them to earthly matters but who always conquer their inclinations, and who are of correct temperaments.” This highly circumscribed class of individuals obtains the ability to receive prophecy through arduous philosophical and theological speculation, and through assiduous study of esoteric Torah literature. Moreover, he or she must stay totally focused upon the pursuit of that which is holy and pure:

A person who is full of all these qualities and is physically sound [is fit for prophecy]. When he enters the *Pardes* [the place of spiritual and mystical speculation] and is drawn into these great and sublime concepts, if he possesses a accurate mental capacity to comprehend and grasp [them], he will become holy. He will advance and separate himself from the masses who proceed in the darkness of the time. He must continue and diligently train himself not to have any thoughts whatsoever about fruitless things or the vanities and intrigues of the times. Instead, his mind should constantly be directed upward, bound beneath [G-d's] throne [of Glory, striving] to comprehend the holy and pure forms and gazing at the wisdom of the Holy One, blessed be He, in its entirety, [in its manifold manifestations] from the most elevated [spiritual] form until the navel of the earth, appreciating His greatness from them. [After these preparations,] the divine spirit

will immediately rest upon him. (This and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger].

According to the Rambam, prophecy is multilevel in nature. Hashem vouchsafed His divine visions on different levels to different prophets. Just as there are no two people who are exactly alike, there are no two prophets who receive exactly the same degree of prophecy: “There are [many] levels of prophecy - in the same way that one person can be wiser than another, so can he be more prophetic.” In addition, with the exception of *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe), with whom Hashem communicated *panim el panim* (face to face, *Sefer Devarim* 34:10), all prophets received their divine communication via parables. Thus the Rambam states (7:3):

When a prophet is informed of a message in a vision, it is granted to him in metaphoric imagery. Immediately, the interpretation of the imagery is imprinted upon his heart, and he knows its meaning. For example, the ladder with the angels ascending and descending envisioned by the patriarch, Jacob, was an allegory for the empires and their subjugation [of his descendants]. Similarly, the creatures Ezekiel saw, the boiling pot and the rod from an almond tree envisioned by Jeremiah, the scroll Ezekiel saw, and the measure seen by Zechariah [were all metaphoric images]. This is also true with regard to the other prophets. Some would relate the allegory and its explanation as these did. Others would relate only the explanation. At times, they would relate only the imagery without explaining it, as can be seen in some of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah. All of the prophecies come in the form of metaphoric imagery and allegories.

Furthermore, the Rambam maintains that the Prophets always received their prophecy in visions of the night or in deep sleep during the day. Thus, the prophetic process caused a temporary physiological change in the prophet, so that his or her mind would be free to focus solely upon the vision and its interpretation. The Rambam formulated these ideas in the following fashion (7:2):

There are a number of levels among the prophets. Just as with regard to wisdom, one sage is greater than his colleague, so, too, with regard to prophecy, one prophet is greater than another. They all, [however, share certain commonalities]. They receive prophetic visions

only in a visionary dream or during the day after slumber has overtaken them, as [Numbers 12:6] states: “I make Myself known to him in a vision. I speak to him in a dream.” When any of them prophesy, their limbs tremble, their physical powers become weak, they lose control of their senses, and thus, their minds are free to comprehend what they see, as [Genesis 15:12] states concerning Abraham: “and a great, dark dread fell over him.” Similarly, Daniel [10:8] states: “My appearance was horribly changed and I retained no strength.”

The halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Shemot*, known as the *Mechilta*, presents us with a singular difficulty in light of Maimonides’ analysis of prophecy. In commenting upon the famous verse found in our *parasha*: “...this is my G-d and I will extol Him, the G-d of my fathers and I will raise Him up” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2), the *Midrash* teaches us:

R. Eliezer says: From where can one say that a maidservant saw at the sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets never saw? As it states [*Sefer Hoshea* 12:11]: “And I spoke to the prophets, and I increased their visions; and to the prophets I assumed likenesses.” In addition it is written: “Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year in the fourth [month] on the fifth day of the month, as I was in the midst of the exile by the river Chebar - the heavens opened up, and I saw visions of G-d.” (Underlining my own, *Tanach* translation passages, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Clearly, this passage is a blatant contradiction to the normative understanding of prophecy as presented by the Rambam. Perhaps this is what led Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (1080-1158), known as the Rashbam, and the 13th century Provencal exegete, Rabbi Chizkiah ben Manoach, known as the Chizkuni, to declare: “Even though a person does not actually see anything, [metaphorically] it may be said regarding [something] ‘this’ (*zeh*).” In other words, it was anathema to the Chizkuni and to the Rashbam to imagine that a common maidservant was able to see that which was hidden from the likes of Yeshiyahu and Yechezkel. Therefore, these commentators viewed our *Midrash* as a metaphor, rather than as a statement depicting what actually transpired at the crossing of the *Yam Suf* (Sea of Reeds).

An entirely different approach to "...this is my G-d and I will extol Him..." was taken by Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), in his illuminating Torah commentary entitled, *Torah Temimah*. Unlike the Rashbam and the Chizkuni, he takes the *Mechilta's* analysis at face value and as a singular exception to the general rules of prophecy. He therefore states:

[This *Midrash* is actually] very straightforward. This is because they [the Prophets] saw Him, so to speak, solely in a vision, whereas on the Sea [of Reeds] they saw Him [G-d] in a true physical manner (*b'reiah muchashit*). Moreover, when the *Midrash* states: "even a maidservant," this, too, is easy to understand. [This is the case] since the *Midrash* is making use of the expression "even the lowliest of people," as is found at the end of *Talmud Bavli, Ketuvot* 112a, wherein it states "even a maidservant among the Jewish people."

According to Rav Epstein, the Jewish people witnessed G-d's presence in a unique and never-to-be repeated manner. For one instant in the history of our people, everyone felt the palpable existence of Hashem. For one bright shining moment, He revealed Himself to His entire beloved nation. Therefore, we all declared as one "...this is my G-d and I will extol Him, the G-d of my fathers and I will raise Him up."

We live, unfortunately, in the age of *hester panim* wherein Hashem hides His presence from us. In many ways, our lives in our post-prophetic age are quite lonely, since we search seemingly in vain for our *Yedid Nefesh* (the most Beloved of our Soul, i.e. Hashem). Yet, every time we witness a magnificent sunset, behold a majestic mountain, or see a mighty flock of birds, we know that Hashem's hand is writ large within Nature. It is, perhaps, at these sublime and exquisite moments in our lives, that we finally realize that we are not alone. Moreover, we are able to understand that Hashem, while hiding from us directly, nonetheless reveals Himself to us in a myriad of ways. This is when, both the Prophets and the simplest among us, can declare in unison just as our ancestors

did on Mount Carmel (*Sefer Melachim* I:18:39) “*Hashem Hu HaElokim, Hashem Hu HaElokim*” (“G-d is the one and only G-d, G-d is the one and only G-d”). May we be *zocheh* to have many such moments, in our lives and to feel the presence of Hashem amongst us. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.

*** Interested in 21st Century Jewish Education? See my blog: <http://21stcenturyjewisheducation.org>