

PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE

SEEING STRUCTURAL FLAWS, BUILDING TOWARD A BETTER FUTURE

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Source Texts:

Rabbi Lorge describes two fundamental aspects of the prophetic perspective: recognizing structural inequalities and believing that it is possible to build a better society. The pandemic laid bare the flaws in our systems, and recovery from this difficult period requires that we address these abnormalities.

Recognizing Moral Failures

Rabbi Lorge lifts up the issues of food insecurity, healthcare mismanagement, and unsafe work environments. Although much has changed since biblical times, our prophets are similarly concerned with the mistreatment of the hungry, vulnerable, and poor.

The prophet Amos delivers this warning of impending punishment for the exploitation of the poor.

Amos 2:4-8

(4) Thus said the LORD: For three transgressions of Judah, For four, I will not revoke it: Because they have spurned the Teaching of the LORD And have not observed His laws; They are beguiled by the delusions After which their fathers walked. (5) I will send down fire upon Judah, And it shall devour the fortresses of Jerusalem. (6) Thus said the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, For four, I will not revoke it: Because they have sold for silver Those whose cause was just, And the needy for a pair of sandals. (7) [Ah,] you who trample the heads of the poor Into the dust of the ground, And make the humble walk a twisted course! Father and son go to the same girl, And thereby profane My holy name. (8) They recline by every altar On garments taken in pledge, And drink in the House of their God Wine bought with fines they imposed.

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־שְׁלֹשָׁה פְּשָׁעַי יְהוּדָה וְעַל־
אַרְבָּעָה לֹא אֲשִׁיבֵנּוּ עַל־מִצְוֹתַי אֶת־תּוֹרַת יְהוָה
וְחֻקֵּי לֹא שָׁמְרוּ וַיִּתְעוּם כְּזִבְיֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר־הִלְכוּ
אֲבוֹתָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם:
הוֹשַׁלְחֹתַי אֲשֶׁ בִיהוּדָה וְאֶכְלָה אַרְמְנוֹת
יְרוּשָׁלַם: (פ)
וְכֹה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־שְׁלֹשָׁה פְּשָׁעַי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־
אַרְבָּעָה לֹא אֲשִׁיבֵנּוּ עַל־מִכְרָם בְּכֶסֶף צְדִיק
וְאֶבְיֹן בְּעִבּוֹר נַעֲלִים:
זֶה־שָׁאֲפִים עַל־עַפְר־אֶרֶץ בְּרֹאשׁ דָּלִים וְדָרָךְ
עֲנָנִים יִטּוּ וְאִישׁ וְאִישׁ יִלְכּוּ אֶל־הַנְּעֻרָה לְמַעַן
סַלֵּל אֶת־שֵׁם קֹדְשִׁי:
חֹנְעֵל־בְּגָדִים חֲבָלִים יִטּוּ אֶצֶל כָּל־מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּין
עֲנוּשִׁים יִשְׁתּוּ בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

The prophet Isaiah points to perversions of justice, especially against the most vulnerable.

Isaiah 10:1-2

(1) Ha! Those who write out evil writs And compose iniquitous documents, (2) To subvert the cause of the poor, To rob of their rights the needy of My people; That widows may be their spoil, And fatherless children their booty!

הוֹי הַחֹקְקִים חֻקֵי־אָוֶן וְמִכְתָּבִים עֹמֵל כְּתָבוּ:
בְּלִהְיוֹת מִדִּין דָּלִים וּלְגֹזֵל מִשִּׁפְט עֲנִי עֲמִי
לְהָיוֹת אֶלְמָנוֹת שְׁלָלָם וְאֶת־יְתוּמִים יָבוּזוּ:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Out of all the injustices outlined in the Amos and Isaiah texts, which strike you as most upsetting or problematic? Why?
- (b) In what ways does our current reality reflect the situation described in these excerpts? How does it differ?
- (c) Have you gained your own prophetic perspective this year? If so, what caused a shift in your perspective?
- (d) What social justice cause are you most passionate about? If you were in a prophetic role, how might you communicate about this cause to your listeners?

Faith in the Future

We recommend that you choose either Option 1 or Option 2 for this part of the discussion

Option 1:

As Rabbi Lorge reminds us, the prophet is not only focused on flaws; envisioning a brighter future is also an essential part of the job. These two texts are partially quoted at the start and end of the sermon:

Zechariah 8:3-5

(3) Thus said the LORD: I have returned to Zion, and I will dwell in Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be called the City of Faithfulness, and the mount of the LORD of Hosts the Holy Mount. (4) Thus said the LORD of Hosts: There shall yet be old men and women in the squares of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. (5) And the squares of the city shall be crowded with boys and girls playing in the squares.

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה שְׁבַתִּי אֶל־צִיּוֹן וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם וְנִקְרְאַהּ יְרוּשַׁלַם עִיר־הַאֱמֻת וְהַר־יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הָר הַקֹּדֶשׁ: (ס)
דָּפָה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עַד יִשְׁבוּ זָקְנִים וְזָקֵנוֹת בְּרַחֲבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעֲנֵתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מַרְב יָמִים: הַוְרַחְבוֹת הָעִיר יִמְלְאוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת מְשֻׁחָקִים בְּרַחֲבֹתֶיהָ: (ס)

Isaiah 26:1-7

(1) In that day, this song shall be sung In the land of Judah: Ours is a mighty city; He makes victory our inner and outer wall. (2) Open the gates, and let A righteous nation enter, [A nation] that keeps faith. (3) The confident mind You guard in safety, In safety because it trusts in You. (4) Trust in the LORD for ever and ever, For in Yah the LORD you have an everlasting Rock. (5) For He has brought low those who dwelt high up, Has humbled the secure city, Humbled it to the ground, Leveled it with the dust— (6) To be trampled underfoot, By the feet of the needy, By the soles of the poor. (7) The path is level for the righteous man; O Just One, You make smooth the course of the righteous.

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יוֹשֵׁר הַשִּׁיר־הַזֶּה בְּאֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה עִיר עֲזוֹלָנוּ יִשׁוּעָה יִשִּׁית חוֹמוֹת וְחָל: בְּפִתְחוֹ שְׁעָרִים וַיָּבֵא גוֹי־צַדִּיק שְׁמֵר אֱמֻנִים: גִּנְצָר סְמוּדָה תִּצָּר שְׁלוֹם | שְׁלוֹם כִּי בָהּ בְּטוּחַ: דַּבְּטַחוּ בַיהוָה עַד־עַד כִּי בִיָּהּ יְהוָה צוּר עוֹלָמִים: הַכִּי הִשָּׁח יִשְׁבִּי מְרוֹם קִרְיָה נִשְׁגָּבָה יִשְׁפִּילָנָה יִשְׁפִּילָה עַד־אֶרֶץ גִּיּוּעָנָה עַד־עַפְרָה: וְתַרְמִסְנָה רַגְל רַגְלֵי עֲנֵי פַעְמֵי דָלִים: זָאֲרַח לְצַדִּיק מִיִּשְׁרָיִם יִשָּׁר מַעְגַל צַדִּיק תִּפְלֵס:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) In both of these texts, faith and God play a key role in the rebuilding of the city. What role, if any, does faith play in your own pursuit of social justice?
- (b) What do you make of Isaiah 26:5-6, the reversal of fortune for the rich and the poor? Does this align with your own vision of a just future, or do you envision something different?
- (c) If you were to write your own prophetic text to provide hope in the midst of this difficult time, what kind of future would you describe?

Option 2:

Prophets must have faith in the possibility of a brighter future alongside their unflinching recognition of current injustices. The tension between these two poles is found in the following text and its alternative interpretation:

Psalm 37:25

I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous man abandoned, or his children seeking bread.

נָעַר וְהָיִיתִי גַם-זָקֵן וְלֹא-רָאִיתִי צְדִיק נִעְזָב
וְיָרְעוּ מִבֶּקֶשׁ-לֶחֶם:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) This text is quoted in *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after meals, said three times daily by observant Jews. Why do you think this line was given such a prominent place?
- (b) Given that the Tanach has always acknowledged the needy among us, it is unlikely that this statement accurately described reality. What purpose is served by reciting this statement as though it were true?
- (c) How does this verse align with your own prophetic perspective?

Alternative Reading of Psalm 37:25 by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman:

For years, the only way I could read [the blessing above] was to supply my own punctuation. Since classical Hebrew texts come unpunctuated, and supplying them with periods and commas is a modern innovation, it is sometimes possible to read lines differently from the way they appear in print. So I decided to read it as:

“I have been young and now grown older, but I have not seen! There are righteous people abandoned by God, with their children seeking bread.”¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think of Rabbi Hoffman’s version of this blessing compared to the more standard reading?
- (b) Does this alternative reading reflect faith in the future? Why or why not?
- (c) How does this verse align with your own prophetic perspective?

¹ 1 Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Way Into Jewish Prayer* (New York: Jewish Lights 2004), 140.

