

CHAPTER

1

Introduction



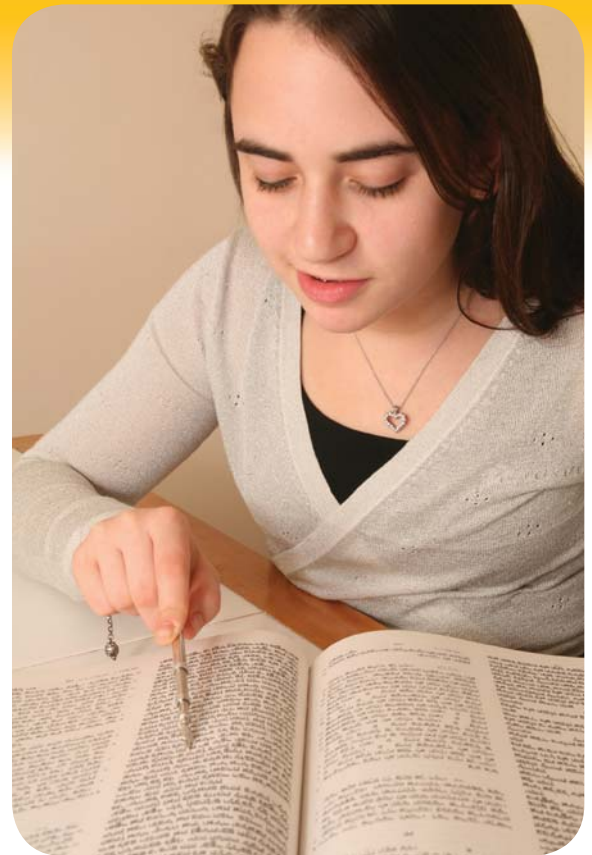
Immediately after reading the Torah on Shabbat and holiday mornings, Jews in synagogues around the world listen as a congregant chants (or reads) the *Haftarah*—a selection excerpted from the section of the Bible known as *Nevi'im*, Prophets. This ritual, which you will perform for the first time when you become a bar or bat mitzvah, originated two thousand years ago, but its beginnings are shrouded in mystery. One theory suggests that the practice of reading a *Haftarah* portion arose in response to religious persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian-Greek emperor whose anti-Jewish edicts led to the Maccabee revolt in 167 BCE. (We celebrate the success of that rebellion during Hanukkah.) But before resorting to armed resistance, Jewish authorities waged a battle of deception against their occupiers. When Antiochus outlawed reading the Torah in public, communal leaders substituted readings from the lesser known books of the prophets. To maintain a clandestine connection to the weekly Torah readings, they chose portions that related to the theme or narrative of each Torah reading. Their imaginative ploy worked, and Greek officials unknowingly allowed religious study to continue.

This explanation prompts an interesting question: Why has the practice of reading a message from the prophets on Shabbat and holidays continued long after the ruse was no longer needed? To help us answer, we must understand more about the lives of the prophets and the meaning and significance of their messages. This book will guide our exploration.

Before we meet the prophets, let's consider a few terms.

Prophecy (n'vu'ah) – Think of prophecy as God's method of communicating with the Jewish people. You might immediately imagine the burning bush aflame or Mt. Sinai quaking violently. Our sacred texts describe natural spectacles like these at moments of human contact with the Divine, but these displays are not God's message. Prophecy comes in "a still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). At the foot of Mt. Sinai, however, that voice seemed terrifying, so the Israelites pleaded with Moses to intercede, saying, "You go closer and hear all that God says, then tell us everything and we will do it" (Deuteronomy 5:24). The model of the prophetic process was established; thereafter, God would only call upon individuals to carry divine messages to the people. The chosen individual is called a *navi*, a word that entered Hebrew from an ancient Mesopotamian language and which originally meant "one who has been called." Moses is considered the greatest prophet of the Jewish people, so it is fitting that this book begins with him.

Prophet (navi) – The prophets were God's mouthpiece. Once called to speak on God's behalf, they had no choice but to obey. Amos, a prophet from the eighth century BCE whom you will meet in chapter five,



As you prepare for your bat or bar mitzvah, you can remember that whenever you chant the *Haftarah*, you share in taking this ancient practice into the next generation of Jews around the world.

From their own time and into ours, the prophets lead others toward ethical values that have sustained Judaism for centuries.



KNOW YOUR BCEs!


Centuries ago, a Christian monk decided to count time from the year of Jesus's birth, which he designated as year one. Events prior to Jesus were labeled BC (before Christ). Events after Jesus's birth, he identified as AD (*anno Domini*—in the year of our Lord). People of all faiths adopted this calendar as a matter of convenience, but scholars and non-Christian peoples prefer the non-religious terms BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era). Not surprisingly...duh...we use BCE and CE in this book!

Bible Architecture: The Hebrew bible is divided into three sections: the five books of Moses, which we call *Torah*; the books of the Prophets, called *Nevi'im*; and a collection of liturgical poetry, wisdom literature, love songs, and history books, called *Ketuvim* (Writings). By combining the first letter of the Hebrew name of each section (T-N-Kh), we derive the acronym *TaNakh*.

described his helplessness: "A lion has roared, who can but fear? My God has spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8).

Although the prophets lacked free will to resist God's call, they maintained creative freedom in how they communicated God's message. For example, wails and laments characterized Isaiah's style (he even went naked for three years; you'll meet Isaiah, albeit with his clothes on, in chapter six), while Jeremiah (who is introduced in chapter seven) developed an angry, ranting style. Today, we use the word "jeremiad" to describe a prolonged, angry harangue, like many that poured out of Jeremiah. Regardless of their individual prophetic styles, all the prophets were courageous; they needed to be because the messages they delivered often rebuked people's behavior.

The prophet's message (*divrei n'vi'ut*) – *Nivi'im* is divided into two parts: Early Prophets and Later Prophets. The later prophets introduced in this book are Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah. They are considered literary prophets because they wrote down their prophecies. The early prophets you'll meet in these pages are Samuel and Elijah. Like other prophets in this category, they never wrote about their lives and prophecies but, instead, they appear in books that are primarily about Israel's history.



All around you there are teenagers as well as adults who walk in the footsteps of the prophets. You can look in your own family, school, and town. You can also find examples at www.thejewishprophets.com.

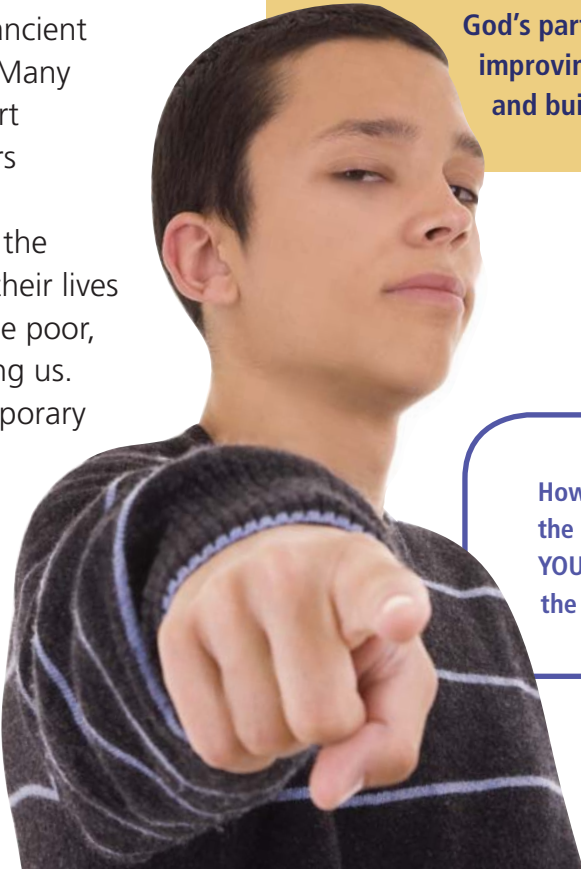
THE AGE OF PROPHECY

The main difference between the early and late prophets, though, is their message. The early prophets directed most of their energy toward centralizing the religious authority of the nation against pagan practices of the surrounding peoples. In contrast, the later prophets lived during times when the national religion was firmly established but faced external threats. Their message focused on the people's moral lapses, which the prophets believed threatened the nation's existence. Invading empires like Babylonia were God's instruments, punishing the people for their immorality. If Israel would return to the ways of justice and compassion, then their enemies would be subdued. The prophetic ideal of building a just society, which weaves its way through many *Haftarah* portions, has inspired Jews for centuries. Hearing this message each week not only links us to the great prophets of our tradition, it also motivates us to work toward fulfilling their sacred vision.

Fortunately, we're not dependent on ancient history to inspire us to pursue justice. Many courageous people, like Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and others you will find in this book and at www.thejewishprophets.com, walk in the prophets' footsteps. They have spent their lives speaking truth to power, defending the poor, and helping the most vulnerable among us. You'll find vignettes of several contemporary prophets in this book. Their inspiring stories remind us that the work of creating a better society remains unfinished. From their example, we learn that God's voice speaks through us when we stand up to injustice.

The Sages of the Talmud teach that the age of prophecy began with Moses in the thirteenth century BCE and ended with Malachi in the fifth century BCE. According to this perspective, when Malachi died, the Divine spirit departed Israel and God's will was no longer accessible to human beings.

There is an alternative view, however, and it asserts that the age of prophecy continues, even in our own time. For those who hold this idea, God is less like a parent controlling the human family from above, and more like a force in the universe that stirs the human heart and awakens us to act righteously. The biblical prophets, from this perspective, were inspired personalities who felt a keen moral responsibility to bring godlike behavior into the world. We too can hear the divine call that summons us to become God's partners, working toward improving the human condition and building a better society.



How will the lives of the prophets inspire YOU to speak out in the name of justice?