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The Message of the Prophet
Rosh HaShannah 5780

I want to take us back to March 8 of last year. We are in the immediate aftermath of the horrific school shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglass High School. Seventeen students were killed and seventeen injured, and an entire community is traumatized and figuring out what to do. How do we come together? How do we respond? The children from the high school, who had experienced the lock down, hunkering down in classrooms for hours and seeing some of their own die are fed up. They are fed up with the adults in power do nothing while they get slaughtered. They are fed up with the cynicism of politicians who accept money from lobbyists to perpetuate an unacceptable status quo. So they take action. They organize rallies, and they descend upon Tallahassee to talk to members of the legislature, in hopes of getting some kind of gun safety legislation passed.

Their meetings are tough, the legislature has been very reluctant to pass any regulation in the past, but they are getting favorable press coverage and the governor does indicate some desire to get a modest bill passed. And then on March 8th, state Representative Elizabeth Porter rises to speak on the House floor and says this, "We've been told to listen to the children and do what the children ask. Are there any children on this floor? Are there any children making laws? Do we allow children to tell us that we should pass a law that says no homework, or you finish high school at the age of 12 because they want it so? No. We pass the laws because we have the age, the wisdom, the experience."¹

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/09/politics/elizabeth-porter-parkland-florida-speech-trnd/index.html>

Of course we see the blatant condescension in these words of a politician who does not want to listen to those who she deems to be unworthy of advocating for policy. But Rabbi Devorah pointed out to many of us that what we also see here is a woman who does not see what has happened to these teenagers. She does not see their trauma, the experience of crouching under their desks in locked rooms while a gunman was outside killing their classmates when they were simply trying to go to school. But she also does not see that the experience of that trauma has inspired them with a voice. They have been given a calling—a prophetic calling.

The prophet Jeremiah, when he is called by God as just a small boy raises the same concern—I’m just a boy, they won’t listen to me. In response God says, “Do not say ‘I am just a boy,’ but go wherever I send you. Have no fear of them, for I am with you. See, I appoint you this day over nations and kingdoms, to uproot and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”² Even if the call of the prophet comes to the young, it is still a call that demands our attention. But of course, it is very easy to dismiss the prophet. Just as many in our political world are dismissive of prophets, so too were they in Ancient Israel.

When we look at the message of the prophets, we can see why they were not as persuasive as they would have liked.

You see, a prophet is not exactly the kind of person that is pleasant to be around. As we often joke, he doesn’t make a great guest at your dinner party. The prophet is very judgmental, so attuned to issues of injustice that he can often have a tin ear about how his condemnations come across to others. Are those eggs from cage free chickens? Are those diamonds in your

² Jeremiah 1:7-8, 10

ring conflict free? Are your clothes made in sweat shops? How big is the carbon footprint of your transportation? Or your diet? It is exhausting to be around this kind of person, because the moral complexities of living in our day and age make it impossible to live up to the exacting moral standards of the prophet. And the delivery of his message is also hard to hear. “The prophet’s words are outbursts of violent emotions. His rebuke is harsh and relentless.”³ He is, in a word, hysterical.

And yet, the voice of the prophet is also necessary. You see, without the prophet’s voice nagging you, we all risk descending into the sin of indifference. A homeless man on the street? Maybe we notice him, maybe we don’t. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “A single act of injustice—to us it is a slight, to the prophet it is a disaster.” “We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely get indignant or overly excited. To the prophets a minor, commonplace sort of injustice assumes almost cosmic proportions.”⁴

It is true that the prophets react in a way that is over the top. But Heschel points out that we have to face up to the fact that we have an “incapacity to sense the depth of the misery caused by our own failures. Our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of humanity, but our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience.”⁵ Where Jeremiah says that he seeks to uproot and overturn, it is our state of mind he seeks to uproot. Our state of mind that is comfortable with the status quo, that does not

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Religion in a Free Society,” *The Insecurity of Freedom*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

believe that profound change can actually happen, that ignores suffering for the convenience of our tranquility in our troubled world.

As we begin a new year and reflect on the turbulent year our nation has faced, I think it is important for us to reacquaint ourselves to the prophets. It is important for us to hear the words of people who feel fiercely and who are deeply sensitive to the issues that we all too often try to evade responsibility for. To that end, I will present three prophets tonight and speak about the implications their words might have for us in the year 5780.

The first prophet I want to reacquaint ourselves with is the prophet Nathan. Nathan emerges during the most notorious story from the life of King David—his seduction of Bathsheba. Many of us have heard the story—David is filled with lust when he sees a woman on the roof bathing naked, so he has her brought to him, even though he knows she is married. After they have sex, Bathsheba conceives, and when David cannot cover up what he has done, he has Uriah, her husband, killed. After David receives the report that his plot has been accomplished, he alters the archives to cover his tracks. No one speaks up, so it seems that David has gotten away with the crime.

But then the prophet Nathan arrives at the door. To convey his message, he tells David a story of a rich man and a poor man. The rich man has a vast and numerous flocks of sheep, but the poor man has only one lamb that he loves and cares for. One day, the rich man receives a guest, and since he does not want to plunder his own flock to make a meal for the guest, he steals the lamb from the poor man, slaughters it, and prepares it for a meal. King

David is outraged by this story, declaring that the man who did this heinous crime deserves to die. Nathan then turns to him and simply says: *atah ha-ish* “That man is you!”⁶

With those two words, the prophet Nathan accomplished something that no other person was willing to do—he held a powerful person, a king no less, accountable for his actions. It often seems in our world that the old maxim might makes right is true. The powerful seem to live by a separate set of rules than ordinary folk. Consider some of the stories that we’ve heard this past year. September 21st: “A whistleblower allegedly documented the President of the United States using the powers of his office to coerce a foreign leader to turn over dirt on his political enemy.”⁷ February 7th: “Virginia Governor Ralph Northam defies calls to resign when it comes out that he wore black face in medical school.”⁸ February 19th: “Patriots owner Robert Kraft caught soliciting sex in massage parlor that engaged in human and sex trafficking.”⁹ March 12th: “Children of the rich and powerful caught in massive college admissions scandal, bribing their way into elite academic institutions.”¹⁰ July 10th: “Jeffrey Epstein arrested for repeatedly raping minors. Labor Secretary Alex Acosta negotiated a plea deal a decade earlier that minimized jail time and effectively allowed Epstein to victimize others for years.”¹¹ April 24th: “The president of the United States declares that he will resist all efforts at congressional oversight.”¹²

⁶ 2 Samuel 11-12

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/us/politics/trump-whistle-blower-ukraine.html>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/us/politics/virginia-blackface-mark-herring.html>

⁹ <https://www.cNBC.com/2019/02/22/new-england-patriots-owner-robert-kraft-charged-with-soliciting-prostitution.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-admissions-cheating-scandal.html>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/us/politics/alex-acosta-jeffrey-epstein.html>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/us/politics/donald-trump-subpoenas.html>

The powerful in our country are exceedingly good at finding ways to evade accountability. Whether by bribery, stealth, or simply declining the demand to behave ethically, we are all bearing witness to unprecedented abuses of power in our society. That is why Nathan's prophetic call is so necessary. Nathan reminds us that just because you hold power does not mean you get to define what is right and what is wrong. Because when a king is allowed to indulge his self-interest, lust, or greed, his corruption degrades the entire society.

Nathan's prophetic call is important, because our democracy depends on it. Without accountability, democracies die and are replaced by dictatorships. The unfortunate feature of the time that we live in is that because of partisan politics and party loyalty, there is a complete unwillingness to hold our leaders accountable for their actions. Actions that would have been disqualifying in the past are simply shrugged off, and the press, the institution that is tasked with holding our leaders accountable, is maligned as fake news when the headlines are damaging to the party in power.

As we enter an election year, I ask us all to take the message of Nathan seriously. When we excuse the actions of a politician in our own party that we know we would condemn if they were done by someone in the other party, we are complicit in the degradation of our country. We are complicit in the proliferation of lies that manipulate the masses. We are complicit in the destruction of democratic norms and the rule of law that our democracy depends on. We are complicit in our children learning from us that honesty, integrity, and ethical behavior is optional. Party loyalty is a false idol. Stop bowing down to it, and start making the ethical and moral character of our country priority number one.

The second prophet I want to speak about tonight is the prophet Amos. Amos lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BCE. Amos prophesied during a time of unprecedented economic growth in the Northern Kingdom. Trade was booming, the vineyards and crops were bountiful.¹³ If there were a stock market in 8th century Israel, Jim Cramer would have been going berserk shouting bull, bull, bull. The problem that our ancestors were grappling with was that the wealth was not being distributed equally. In this expanding economy, the rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer. Sound familiar?

Amos declares that the people of Israel are profaning God's name for they "trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the ground." The prophet is calling out the Israelites on their religious hypocrisy, for they use clothing taken from the poor as collateral for loans for priestly vestments and buy the supplies for sacred meals with the money they took from the impoverished. God declares that the wealthy have sold for silver those whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals. The poor are being crushed into poverty so that the rich can line their pockets and buy unnecessary luxury goods.¹⁴

Amos is a necessary voice in our culture, because he reminds us that the stock market is a very poor proxy for judging the moral character of a society. The Standard and Poors 500 can be at record highs, and at the very same moment the promise of the American dream is becoming more and more of a farce. Between the years 1989 and 2018, pretty much the span of my life, the top 1% of Americans gained 21 trillion dollars of wealth. In that same time span,

¹³ <https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/books/compassion-and-justice-books/31502-prophet-amos-say-economic-justice.html>

¹⁴ See Amos 2:6-3:2

the bottom 50% of Americans lost 900 billion dollars of wealth.¹⁵ Let me repeat that. Over the last thirty years, while the top 1% have tripled their wealth, the bottom half of Americans have lost wealth.

This is an absolute travesty, though it's not entirely unexpected. While executive pay has gone up astronomically the last few decades, wage growth has been stubbornly stagnant.¹⁶ The Federal minimum wage has not been increased in 10 years, and while companies are enjoying record profits, largely as a result of their corporate taxes being cut, the profits are not trickling down to their employees.¹⁷ Record stock prices cannot help the nearly half of Americans who are not at all invested in the stock market.¹⁸ Health care costs are skyrocketing, and higher education is becoming so expensive that we have a ticking time bomb of student loan debt that can and likely will cripple the economy.¹⁹

Speaking for God, the prophet declares to Israel: "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth, that is why I call you to account for your iniquities."²⁰ Israel is the chosen people of God, and therefore there is a higher standard of morality placed on them. They don't get to be mediocre. They have to be exceptional. That is the standard we should expect of ourselves and our country. We should not be satisfied with an economic system where the rich get monstrously wealthy while the poor lose wealth. That's not exceptional. That is tragic. We

¹⁵ <https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/compare/chart/>
<https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2019/06/14/top-1-up-21-trillion-bottom-50-down-900-billion/>

¹⁶ <https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-compensation-2018/>

¹⁷ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2019/09/26/475083/trumps-corporate-tax-cut-not-trickling/>

¹⁸ <https://www.financialsamurai.com/what-percent-of-americans-own-stocks/>

¹⁹ <https://www.pgpf.org/blog/2019/03/why-are-americans-paying-more-for-healthcare>
<https://time.com/5662626/student-loans-repayment/>

²⁰ Amos 3:2

should not accept mediocrity from our politicians and our business leaders. We should demand the excellence that will be required in order to make the American dream even a possibility once again.

For our final prophet, I want us to return to the words of Jeremiah. Jeremiah prophesied during a time of crisis. During his lifetime, the Babylonian Empire was breathing down the necks of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. For Jeremiah, the Babylonian threat represented an existential crisis for Judah. He saw the writing on the wall. If Israel didn't change its behavior and its foreign policy quickly, then the Babylonians would besiege Jerusalem, the Temple would be destroyed, and the people would be dispossessed of their homeland.

But the Kings of Israel and their people did not take Jeremiah seriously. They felt secure that God would never renege on the Covenant. And they formed an alliance with Egypt, who they felt could keep them safe from the Babylonian threat. When the people of Jerusalem heard Jeremiah's prophecies of doom, they did not react well. The priest Pashur had Jeremiah beaten and put into stocks. He became a laughing stock and an object of derision and mockery. Meanwhile in the royal court, Jeremiah's prophecies of the upcoming destruction came into conflict with other prophets, who predicted that there would be peace in the land. No matter how much Jeremiah cried out, no matter how many predictions he made, no one would listen to him. Until it was too late.

Jeremiah is famous for being the weeping prophet. He reacted deeply and emotionally to the messages he was receiving from God. He felt both deep despair and depression over the

coming doom, and he felt alone and isolated that no one would hear his message. He cries out “Oh that my head were water, that my eyes were a fountain of tears! Then I would weep day and night for the slain of my people!”²¹ Being a prophet is a burden for Jeremiah. He does not want to be receiving these prophecies of violence and destruction. He feels targeted and singled out by God. But even as he deplors his prophetic mission, he knows he must complete it for the sake of his people.

The message of Jeremiah raises more questions than it answers. How do you speak out when the world is falling apart around you? How do you warn people of danger when they do not want to hear what you have to say? How do you inspire people to action before it is too late? Jeremiah was not successful. The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. They destroyed the Temple, and they exiled the King of Israel and his people.

And I worry that the Jeremiahs of our day and age are running out of time to save us from a similar fate. Consider some of the articles that have come out in the past year. On May 14th, the Washington Post reported that it was 84 degrees near the Arctic Ocean, as Carbon Dioxide hit its highest level in human history.²² On June 19th, a new study reports that the Canadian permafrost in Arctic Canada is melting 70 years earlier than expected. Climate scientists are calling it the canary in the coalmine, as the melting of the permafrost could dump triple the amount of Carbon Dioxide into the atmosphere than is already there.²³ On May 6th, a UN report finds that one million species are facing extinction as a result of human caused

²¹ Jeremiah 9:1

²² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2019/05/14/it-was-degrees-near-arctic-ocean-this-weekend-carbon-dioxide-hit-its-highest-level-human-history/>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/18/arctic-permafrost-canada-science-climate-crisis>

climate change.²⁴ On March 14th, NASA published a study that suggested that human civilization faces irreversible collapse within a few decades as a result of unsustainable resource exploitation, global warming, and unequal wealth distribution.²⁵

We are running out of time to address global warming. Our political leadership on this issue has been pathetic. We are failing as a country to be the leaders we need to be in transforming our economy into a green one. As 16-year-old Greta Thunberg showed us in her address to the UN, it is our children we are failing. Your children and grandchildren don't know if they will actually live to old age, because they don't know if they are going to have a planet to live on. Can you imagine the despair they must feel? Can you appreciate how much hope and optimism we have robbed of them?²⁶ It is time for us to stop dismissing the Jeremiahs of our time as being alarmist or partisan. We cannot afford to have them be proven right in hindsight, because we risk losing a whole lot more than a temple if the prophecies of climate scientists come true.

Sometimes it's hard to hear the voices of the prophets. They aren't the voices we want to hear. We don't want to hear about corruption, or income inequality, or global warming. It doesn't make us feel good. But as challenging and unpleasant as the voice of the prophet is, we have to listen to it. Because we can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend that the problems of the world don't exist. Because they do, and we cannot avoid their effects with wealth or

²⁴ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/mar/14/nasa-civilisation-irreversible-collapse-study-scientists>

²⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>

privilege. We are all in this together. Our democracy, our economy, our environment all depend on us.

I want to end tonight with a vision of what our world could be if we all took the voice of the prophet seriously. This vision was brought to my attention by Rabbi Janet Marder. It comes from a 2018 short story by the Jewish writer Karen Bender called “Cell Phones.” She writes, “I wanted a nation in which our leaders never lied and were elected to office because of their love for and adherence to the truth. I wanted a nation where, if people got sick, they would be cared for, swiftly, tenderly, and the only concern would be that they would get well.

“I wanted a nation that did not conjure suspicion about entire groups of people, and did not assault or kill them, a nation where everyone could look each other, kindly, in the eye and say hello. I wanted a nation that did not just roll around...in piles of money, and where people who held fistfuls of it were actually able to say, ‘Here! You have some, too.’ I wanted a nation that did not order those who wanted to be here to just get out, go away, and brutally cart them off, but instead welcomed them, and learned and kindly said all their names.

“I wanted a nation where women could stroll leisurely through dark parking lots, city streets, everywhere, and never look behind them because they would never have any fear.....I wanted a nation where peoplewanted the best not just for themselves but also for each other. I wanted a nation where people loved one another, even strangers, because they had that much feeling inside of them, because they were that alive.”²⁷

²⁷ <https://www.betham.org/sermon/what-we-do-love>

An unlikely and hopelessly naïve dream? Certainly. But it doesn't have to be.