

## **ACTUALIZING PROPHECY: MAN'S OBLIGATION OR GOD'S?**

**A**ny attentive member of a Religious Zionist youth group will immediately smile upon seeing an elderly couple sit on a Jerusalem park bench or children run around Gan Sacher. These seemingly insignificant occurrences in truth carry with them an over 2,000 year promise:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת עַד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וְזָקֵנוֹת בְּרֵחוֹבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעֲנֵתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מַרְבֵּץ וְרַחֲבוֹת הָעִיר מְלֵאוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת מִשְׁחָקִים בְּרֵחוֹבֶיהָ.

*Thus says the Lord of hosts: There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the broad places of the city shall be*

*full of boys and girls playing in the broad places thereof.*

**Zekharyah 8:4-5**

Tanakh is saturated with prophecies that ostensibly foreshadow the Jewish People's rise from the ashes of the Holocaust, its return to the Land of Israel, and its creation of a sovereign state.<sup>1</sup> Any Religious Zionist recognizes that the State of Israel does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it plays a critical, metahistorical role in the fulfillment of the Jewish People's destiny, expressed and outlined in the words of our ancient prophets.

Aside from perhaps putting a smile on our faces, what function do

these prophetic visions play in a halakhic life? Are eschatological prophecies merely descriptive in nature, telling us of hopeful times, where we may find comfort amidst terrible years of exile and persecution, yet not demanding anything from us in addition to a life committed to mitzvot? Moreover, perhaps prophecies and their fulfillments are "the secrets of the Holy One,"<sup>2</sup> apathetic to or even discouraging of human involvement. Or, on the other hand, are prophecies proscriptive, charging the Jewish People to *actively pursue* the messianic vision and bring about its fulfillment? Is a Jew obligated to actualize prophecy and

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I would like to thank Rabbi Dr. Yosef Bronstein whose shiurim on "The Rav, the Rebbe, and Rav Kook," and more specifically on this topic, inspired me to write this article. His and his family's Aliyah to Israel greatly inspired and continues to inspire many of his students who are passionate about doing the same.

take part in the realization of the Jewish People's destiny, even in the absence of or in a perceived conflict with halakhic obligations? This article will explore the different approaches to this question, specifically in relation to fulfilling the vision of *Berit Bein HaBetarim*, the dreams of Yosef, and eschatological prophecies of the ultimate redemption.

### I. *Berit Bein HaBetarim*: Egypt's Role in Fulfilling God's Decree

If the descendants of Avraham were destined to undergo persecution in a foreign land for 400 years,<sup>3</sup> how could Egypt have deserved punishment for bringing this prophecy to fruition? In a discussion about free will, Rambam<sup>4</sup> asks this very question and answers:

המצריים, כל אחד ואחד מאותן המצרים

והמריעים לישראל, אילו לא רצה להרע להם הרשות בידו, שלא גזר על איש ידוע אלא הודיעו שסוף זרעו עתיד להשתעבד בארץ לא להם, וכבר אמרנו שאין כח באדם לידע היאך ידע הקב"ה דברים העתידין להיות

*In regard to the Egyptians, each and every one of the Egyptians who caused hardship and difficulty for Israel had the choice to refrain from harming them, if he so desired, for there was no decree on a particular person. Rather, [God merely] informed [Abraham] that, in the future, his descendants would be enslaved in a land which did not belong to them.*

Rambam asserts that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had no place in determining how prophecy was to be manifest, especially when it entailed persecuting another people. A human is not meant to intervene with the secrets of the supernal worlds. Egypt should have waited until God's decree was fulfilled through another nation enslaving

Israel.

Ramban<sup>5</sup> rejects Rambam's view and offers his own:

והרב נתן טעם בספר המדע . . . ולא נתכנו דבריו אצלי, שאפילו גזר שאחד מכל האומות יריע להם בכך וכך, וקדם זה ועשה גזרתו של הקב"ה זכה בדבר מצוה . . .

*The [Rambam] gave an answer in Sefer Madda . . . but his words have not settled with me, for even if God decreed that one of the nations cause hardship for [Israel] through any means, and a certain nation arose and fulfilled that decree, that nation has merited performing a mitzvah.*

Had they not taken things too far, Egyptians could have performed a *mitzvah* by running to enslave the Israelites before anyone else did. Prophecy or Divine decrees are analogous to the decrees of any human king—the ruler wants his

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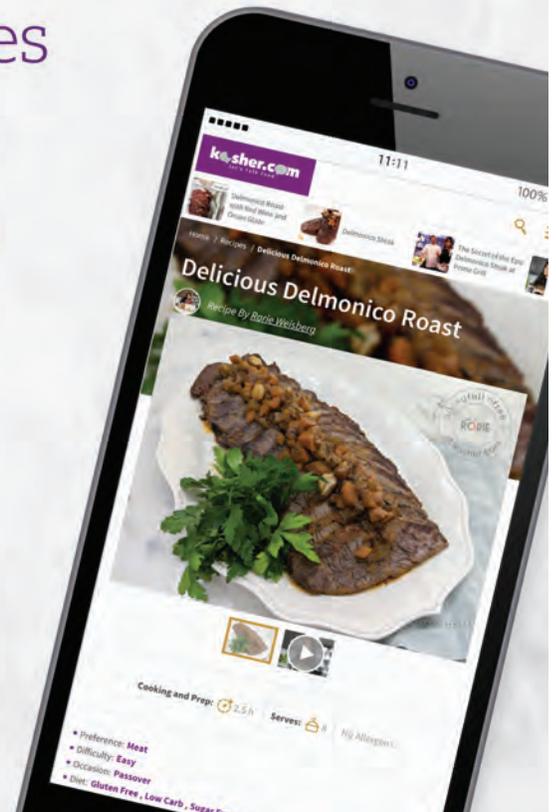
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constituents to actively fulfill his command and not tarry in bringing it to fruition. Ramban, unlike Rambam, understands there to be a value or perhaps obligation in fulfilling prophecy, even in face of sinning<sup>6</sup> by persecuting another nation<sup>7</sup>. Aligning one's destiny with God's promises has real *halakhic* consequences.

## II. Yosef and his Dreams

Commentators struggle with determining Yosef's course of action as the viceroy of Egypt in relation to his brothers. Accusing the brothers of espionage, not contacting his father for years, as well as Yosef's other erratic behavior motivate commentators to explain Yosef as slyly encouraging repentance, testing his brothers, or even taking revenge.<sup>8</sup> Ramban,<sup>9</sup> however, understands that Yosef had a different goal in mind:

ולפי דעתי . . . כי בראות יוסף את אחיו משתחוים לו זכר כל החלומות אשר חלם להם וידע שלא נתקיים אחד מהם בפעם הזאת . . . וכיון שלא ראה בנימן עמהם חשב זאת התחבולה שיעליל עליהם כדי שיביאו גם בנימין אחיו אליו לקיים החלום הראשון תחילה.

*It seems to me . . . when Yosef saw his brothers bowing to him, he remembered his dreams that he dreamt about them and understood that at present one of them was not fulfilled (because not all of the brothers had bowed down) . . . when he saw Binyamin was not with the brothers, Yosef conjured up this plan to accuse the brothers so they would bring Binyamin to him to fulfill his dream.*

Yosef actively pushes to fulfill his dreams, which he realizes have foretold his ascent to power in Egypt. Only once *all* the brothers bow down to him will Yosef be able to reveal his identity and contact his father. For the

moment, however, Yosef can continue neglecting his responsibility to contact his father.<sup>10</sup>

Rabbi Yitzchak Arama<sup>11</sup> strongly objects to Ramban's assumption that human action should be directed to fulfill divine prophecy:

ותמהני ממה שכתב הרמב"ן ז"ל שעשה כדי שיתקיימו חלומותיו כי מה תועלת לו בשיתקיימו ואף כי יהיה תועלת לא היה לו לחטוא כנגד אביו. אבל היה לחשוך עצמו מחטוא לו והחלומות העושה יגש פתרונו גם שתראה סכלות עצומה שישתדל האדם לקיים חלומותיו שהרי הם הדברים אשר יעשו שלא מדעת הבעלים:

*I am bewildered at Ramban's explanation that Yosef did what he did in order to make his dreams come true. What did this benefit him? And even if it profited him, he should not have sinned against his father. As for the dreams, leave it to Him Who sends them to make them come true. It seems infinitely foolish for a man to strive to fulfill his dreams which are matters beyond his control.*

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## According to Rav Kook, a Jew acts in tandem with God's Hand rather than passively wait for the Redemption to come.

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Like Rambam above, Rabbi Arama understands dreams and prophecy to exist outside of the realm of human decision making. Furthermore, were there even some value in actualizing prophecies, Yosef could not have bypassed real halakhic obligations such as honoring his father to achieve

this secondary goal.

## III. Actualizing Eschatological Visions: The State of Israel

This debate presented above has continued to pervade the discussion about our relationship with the State of Israel today. When asked whether prophecies or Kabbalistic ideas that foretold of redemption's secular, anti-religious beginnings provided any legitimacy to the Zionist project, Rabbi Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik<sup>12</sup> (the Brisker Rav) called upon *Berachot* 10a, which discusses King Chizkiyah's sudden illness and subsequent conversation with Yeshayah:

אָמַר לִיה: מַאי פּוֹלֵי הָאִי? אָמַר לִיה: מְשׁוּם דְּלֹא עֲסַקְתָּ בְּפִרְיָהּ וְרִבְיָהּ. אָמַר לִיה: מְשׁוּם דְּחֻזְאֵי לִי בְרוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ דְּנִפְקֵי מִינַאי בְּנִין דְּלֹא מְעֵלוּ. אָמַר לִיה: בְּהַדֵּי כְּבָשִׁי דְרַחֲמֵנָא לְמָה לָךְ? מַאי דְמִפְקֵדְתָּ אִיבְעֵי לָךְ לְמַעֲבָדָהּ, וּמָה דְנִחָא קַמִּיָּהּ, קוּדְשָׁא בְרִיךְ הוּא לְעֵבֵד.

*Hezekiah said to him: For what transgression am I being punished? Isaiah said to him: Because you did not marry and engage in procreation. Hezekiah said: I had no children because I envisaged through divine inspiration that the children that emerge from me will not be virtuous!? Isaiah said to him: Why do you involve yourself with the secrets of the Holy One, Blessed be He? That which you have been commanded, the mitzva of procreation, you are required to perform, and that which is acceptable in the eyes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, let Him perform, as He has so decided.*

The Brisker Rav's proof comes from Chizkiyah's original plan: by neglecting to fulfill the vision of having kids and instead opting to avoid something halakhically reprehensible (i.e. raising unvirtuous

children), Chizkiyah clearly displayed that prophecy cannot overrule halakhically problematic actions. Similarly, prophecies hinting at secular Zionism being the harbinger of Messianic times do not sanction an individual to act in support of secular Zionists who clearly expressed their opposition to Torah values (something the Brisker Rav considered a formal halakhic prohibition).<sup>13</sup> Metahistorical values emerging from Tanakh and Kabbalah cannot compete with the technical laws laid out in the *Shulkhan Arukh*.

The consistent opinion of the Ramban<sup>14</sup> reflects the attitude of many Religious Zionist leaders at the movement's founding until today. For example, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook writes<sup>15</sup> that upon witnessing the beginnings of prophetic

fulfillment one must contribute to achieving full realization:

ועתה מי הוא העור שלא יראה בזה יד ד' הנוהגת אותנו, ומי לא יחוש חובה לעצמו להיות פועל עם אל ועתידה בת קול להיות מפוצצת בראשי ההרים ואומרת: כל מי שפעל עם אל יבא ויטול שכרו.<sup>16</sup> מי יוכל להפטר מלסבב מצדו תוספת ברכה ומהירות ישועה, לעורר לבות רבות לשוב אל אדמת הקודש, לנחלת ד', להאחוז בה, לישיבה בעסקים ובבנינים, בקניית קרקעות, בנטיעות ובזריעה, ובכל דבר שהוא מקור חיי ישוב נכון ומסודר

*And now, who is so blind that he does not see the Lord's hand guiding us in this, and does not feel obligated to work along with God? A heavenly voice in the future will cry aloud from the top of the mountains and say, 'Whoever has wrought with G-d, let him come and receive his reward.'*<sup>17</sup> *Who can exempt himself from doing his part in bringing additional blessing and swifter salvation; from awakening many hearts to return to the Holy Land, to the Lord's legacy,*

*that they may become a part of it, to settle it with enterprises and buildings, to purchase property, to plant and sow, to do everything necessary for the foundation of life of a stable and organized settlement.*

According to Rav Kook, a Jew is obligated to react to historical shifts on the world stage and recognize their significance for Jewish destiny.<sup>18</sup> A Jew acts in tandem with God's hand rather than passively wait for the redemption to come.

Even Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik—who articulated his own hesitancy of an over-fervent Messianic Zionism<sup>19</sup>—expresses a similar perspective on fulfilling prophecies:

*Halakhic man discerns in every divine pledge man's obligation to bring about its fulfillment, in every promise a specific norm, in every eschatological vision an everlasting commandment.*<sup>20</sup>

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According to the Rav, one does not live halakhically if messianic visions do not translate to commands by which one lives his/her life. Active building and working the Land, as well as perhaps playing or sitting in the streets of Jerusalem, fulfill obligations as they realize the visions of old.

#### IV. Conclusion: But How do we Know?

Ramban and Rav Kook have won out in the Religious Zionist world against those who argue that metahistorical sensitivity and the realization of dreams are not essential in living a proper halakhic life. Nonetheless, one glaring question remains: how can anyone be audacious enough to postulate that the visions of the prophets specifically refer to our generation and *this* State of Israel? Can we really know with certainty? The Gemara<sup>21</sup> relates:

אמר רבי אלכסנדר רבי יהושע בן לוי  
רמי כתיב (ישעיהו ס:כב) "בעתה" וכתיב  
"אחישנה" וכו' אחישנה, לא זכו בעתה.

*Rabbi Alexandri said: Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi posed a contradiction: The verse (Isaiah 60:22) says God will bring the redemption in "its fixed time," and then the verse states God will "hasten the redemption?" If Israel merits the redemption, God will "hasten it." If they do not merit it, God will bring it "in its affixed time."*

There is a fixed time in history that redemption is destined to come; at that point, the visions of old will be realized. Nevertheless, R. Yehoshua Ben Levi tells us that prophecy and redemption are flexible, and each can fit into different periods of history; while eschatological visions will describe a redemption fixed for, say, the year 6000, the Jewish People

have the capabilities of reeling the redemption closer to the present day and have those very same prophecies realized in the present.

In our days, the ancient visions do perhaps foreshadow our current situation; the history of Zionism and the modern State of Israel may very well have the potential to fit into the prophetic narrative. Only we can decide whether to actualize them.

#### Endnotes

1 See for example: Yeshayah 11:11-12, Yechezkel 37, Michah 4:8 and Malbim there.

2 See *Berakhot* 10a.

3 Bereishit 15:13-14.

4 *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhos Teshuvah* 6:5.

5 Bereishit ad loc. Interestingly, Ramban also disagrees with another assumption Rambam makes. Rambam, as we saw above, understands the decree to be open for any nation to fulfill. Ramban (Bereishit 12:10) asserts that the decree was destined to be fulfilled through the Egyptians alone.

6 *Meshekh Chokhmah* (Bereishit 15:13) asserts that the by persecuting Israel, Egyptians formally violated the Noahide command of setting up courts and a justice system (*dinim*).

7 Ramban ad loc. also extends this principle to the actions of Sanheriv and Nebuchadnezzar who were both called upon by prophets to persecute *Malkhut Yehudah*. Both rulers were punished since they did not act to fulfill the divine decrees but rather to glorify their names and kingdoms. I thank Rabbi Mayer Twersky for pointing this out to me.

8 Radak Bereishit 42:1, *Seforno* 44:2, *Keli Yekar* 42:7 for different explanations.

9 Ramban Bereishit 42:9. See also *Aderet Eliyahu* of the Gra and Netziv ad loc. who say similarly to Ramban. Netziv writes that Yosef only had to fulfill the prophecy because he was the prophet. A prophet cannot "give up" on his prophecies (See *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 11:5).

10 For Ramban, this answer directly

addresses how Yosef neglected his father : "How is it that Yosef, after living many years in Egypt, having attained a high and influential position in the house of an important Egyptian official, did not send his father even one message to inform him (that he was alive) and comfort him? Egypt is only six days' travel from Chevron, and respect for his father would have justified even a year's journey! ... [It would] have been a grave sin to torment his father by leaving him in mourning and bereavement for himself and for Shimon; even if he wanted to hurt his brothers a little, how could he not feel pity for his aged father?" (Ramban Bereishit 42:9)

11 *Akedat Yitzchak Sha'ar* 29:9.

12 Quoted in *Shu"t Teshuvot V'hanhagot* 2:140.

13 It is unclear how exactly the Brisker Rav understands the end of the Gemara where Yeshayah clearly disapproves of Chizkiyah's tactics.

14 Ramban remains consistent in yet another example of fulfilling prophecies. According to Ramban (Bereishit 49:10), the prophecy of *lo yasur shevet M'Yehuda* (Bereishit ad loc.), which confirms that the kingship is reserved for the tribe of Judah, halakhically binds all of Israel to not ascend to the throne if they do not come from Judah. The Hasmoneans (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E), who were kohanim, were ineligible to be kings and violated this prophecy. This set up their ultimate downfall. I thank Efraim Wagner for pointing this out to me.

15 Kook, *The Great Call*, (הקריאה הגדולה), 1907.

16 Rav Kook is referencing *Vayikra Rabbah* 27:2.

17 See previous footnote.

18 See, for example, *Orot HaMilhama* where Rav Kook writes about World War I and its implications for ushering in the Messianic Era.

19 See Community, Commitment, and Conversation, 163-164, for an articulation of the Rav's stance towards the religious significance of the State of Israel. See also *Kol Dodi Dofek* (also known as *Fate and Destiny*).

20 *Halakhic Man*, 100.

21 *Sanhedrin* 98a.