

Defining Prophecy – A Study of Yonah

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

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Can Nevuah be changed or revoked? This is a central question of the book of Yonah. Initially Yonah prophesizes that Ninveh will be destroyed but in the end the people of the city repent and the city is not destroyed. We have previously dealt with why Yonah was so upset at this outcome and why he was initially so reluctant to share this prophecy, in this piece we will delve into the question of how this is possible at all. The fundamental question that undergirds these wondering is what is Nevuah? We will explore three approaches to the nature of prophesy as it relates to this question and analyze some of the main texts that are at the foundation of this dispute.

Three Approaches

Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato takes a very clear approach to prophecy, it is an **unchangeable prediction**. Once a prophecy is uttered it will happen – period. He explains that in the book of Yonah the actual prophecy was not that Ninveh would be destroyed but that it would be “*nehepeches*” – “flipped over.” We find that this term can be used to describe destruction (as in Sedom – Bereshis 19:25) but it can also mean they will change. In this case although initially it seemed to mean Ninveh would be destroyed it really meant that they would change their ways.

R’ Moshe Chaim Luzzato (Derech HaShem 3:4:7)

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| <p>A prophet can also get a prophecy and understand it but not fully grasp its implications. For example, the prophecy of Yonah: He was told that Ninveh will be ‘<i>Nehepeches</i>’ and included in this language are two proper explanations. First, that a punishment will occur to them because of their sins. And the second possibility, what Hashem knew would occur, that they will change from bad to good. When Hashem reversed and didn’t destroy them, He revealed it to the prophets and specifically to Yonah, that there was a new decree on Ninveh. Really it was just the second understanding of the first decree but Yonah only understood the first explanation of ‘<i>Nehepeches</i>’ and so he saw it as a new decree. This is what the Gemara means when it says that Yonah didn’t know if it was for the good or for the bad.</p> | <p>והנה עוד אפשר לנביא מן הנביאים ששיג ענין אמיתי בנבואתו, אך לא ישיג כל הענינים האמיתיים שנכללו בה. דרך משל, נבואתו של יונה בן אמיתי שנאמר לו, ונינוה נהפכת, ונכללו בדיבור הזה שתי הבנות אמיתיות, אחת - העונש שהיה מעותד להם כפי חטאם, והשנית - מה שהיה צפוי לפניו ית' שיקרה בהם, דהיינו שיהפכו מרעה לטובה. ואולם אלו לא היה נכלל באמת בדיבור אלא ענין העונש לבדו, כשהיה הקב"ה שב ונחם על הרעה, היה מגלה הדבר לנביאים ובפרט ליונה, שהיתה מתחדשת עליהם גזירה זולת הראשונה. אמנם בהיות שכלל הקב"ה בדיבור הא' שתי ההבנות, לא הוצרך חידוש גזירה עליהם, אלא שנתקיים הדיבור בהבנה הב' ולא בא'. אכן יונה לא השיג בתחלה אלא ההבנה הא' ולא הב', והוא מה שאמרו ז"ל, יונה איהו דלא אבחיך:</p> |
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Tosfos (Yevamos 50a) takes the opposite approach saying that prophecy can, and does, change. Tosfos points out that Chizkiyahu was told by a Navi that he was going to die and yet he davened and ended up living. The Gemara says that there was also a prophecy that a child would be born

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to the house of Dovid and this ended up being Chizkiyahu's son. Tosfos reasons that if Chizkiyahu had not successfully davened then this prophecy would not have occurred. We see that Nevuah is a **snapshot** of what will happen if the current status quo remains but things can change if circumstances change.

Tosfos (Yevamos 50a)

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| And if you will ask, if Chiziyahu had not prayed and would have died then the prophecy (of the child born to the house of Dovid) would have been nullified?! By force we must say that a prophecy is just what is fitting to happen if no one sins | תדע שהרי נביא עומד - וא"ת והלא אם לא התפלל חזקיהו על עצמו היה מת והיתה נבואה בטלה אלא ע"כ אין הנביא מתנבא אלא מה שראוי להיות אם לא היה חוטא |
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The Rambam¹ takes a third approach and differentiates between prophecies that foretell something good as opposed to those that warn of something negative. Anything good “*Afilu al tnai lo chozer*” will happen regardless of if someone sins. However, a negative prophecy is conditional and if the status of the people changes, as was the case for Ninveh, we should expect the prophecy to change as well. For the Rambam a positive prophecy seems to be a **promise** while a negative prophecy is a **warning**.

Rambam (Yesodei HaTorah 10:4)

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| Negative consequences that a prophet foretells such as saying that so-and-so will die or that a certain year will be one of famine or war or the like if this does not actually happen it is not a contradiction to his prophecy... since Hashem is merciful and regrets the evil so perhaps they repented and were forgiven like the people of Ninvehor they were given a reprieve like Chizkiyahu. But if the prophet promises good and then that good does not materialize we can be sure he is a false prophet since all good that is legislated by Hashem, even conditionally, is not repealed. | דברי הפורענות שהנביא אומר כגון שיאמר פלוני ימות או שנה פלונית רעב או מלחמה וכיוצא בדברים אלו אם לא עמדו דבריו אין בזה הכחשה לנבואתו ואין אומרים הנה דבר ולא בא שהקב"ה ארך אפים ורב חסד ונחם על הרעה ואפשר שעשו תשובה ונסלח להם כאנשי נינוה או שתלה להם כחזקיה אבל אם הבטיח על טובה ואמר שיהיה כך וכך ולא באה הטובה שאמר בידוע שהוא נביא שקר שכל דבר טובה שיגזור האל אפילו על תנאי אינו חוזר |
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With these three very different perspectives on prophecy, let's understand what some of the main sources are that relate to this question and how each of these approaches understands these sources.

¹ Meiri Sanhedrin 89b and Radak (Yonah 3:10) follow the Rambam's approach

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Examining the Sources

1) Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 89b

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| <p>A prophet who does not reveal his prophecy gets lashes... Q: How can he get lashes? Who warns him? A: Other prophets Q: How do they know? A: Hashem reveals prophecy to other prophets as well Q: Maybe Hashem revoked the prophecy [and now the prophet isn't supposed to reveal it]? A: If that had happened, Hashem would have told all the prophets Q: What about Yonah, there the prophecy was revoked and Hashem didn't tell Yonah? A: Yonah just said that the city will be 'Nehepeches' [flipped], he did not know if it meant for the good or for the bad</p> | <p>תני תנא קמיה דרב חסדא: הכובש את נבואתו לוקה. אמר ליה: מאן דאכיל תמרי בארבלא לקי? מאן מתרי ביה? - אמר אביי: חבריה נביאי. - מנא ידעי? - אמר אביי: דכתיב כי לא יעשה ה' דבר כי אם גלה סודו - ודילמא הדרי ביה. - אם איתא דהדרי ביה - אודועי הו מודעי לכלהו נביאי. - והא יונה, דהדרי ביה ולא אודעוהו! - יונה מעיקרא נינוה נהפכת אמרי ליה, איהו לא ידע אי לטובה אי לרעה.</p> |
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The Gemara raises the question that it seems that prophecy can be revoked even without warning the prophet as it was with Yonah and then answers that in Yonah's case the prophecy was ambiguous but was never really altered. On the surface this answer of the Gemara is clearly the source for the Ramchal but if we analyze the Gemara a little more we recognize that there is an issue here. In the Gemara's question that how would other prophets know if a prophecy was revoked and in the answer that Hashem would tell all the prophets if a prophecy is revoked there is an assumption that a prophecy can be revoked and changed. It seems that the Ramchal understands that this assumption of the Gemara is abandoned in the final answer and in fact prophecy does not change, it can simply be ambiguous at times. The Rambam and Tosfos will not assume that the Gemara has changed this assumption and will understand that the Gemara's assumption stands – a prophecy can be revoked.

2) Yirmiyahu 18:7-8

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| <p>One instant I may speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to uproot and to demolish and to destroy.</p> | <p>רָגַע אֲדַבֵּר עַל-גּוֹי וְעַל-מַמְלָכָה לְנִתּוּשׁ וּלְנִתּוּץ וּלְהִאָבֵיד:</p> |
| <p>And when that nation repents of its evil for which I spoke concerning it, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do to it.</p> | <p>וְשָׁב הַגּוֹי הַהוּא מִרְעֵתוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי עָלָיו וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל-הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר חֲשַׁבְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לוֹ:</p> |

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Here it seems very clear that when Hashem pronounces a negative prophecy of destruction on the non-Jewish nation and they repent, Hashem will recant and change the prophecy. The Ibn Ezra in Yonah uses this as a source to show that negative prophecies in general do change, as the Rambam and Tosfos argue². The Ramban (Bereshis 15:2) quotes this pasuk as indicating that prophecies can change, and he applies it even to positive prophecies fully endorsing Tosfos' opinion.

Others argue that these pesukim do not address our question of the nature of prophecy. The Malbim argues that these pesukim do not describe a usual prophecy since here everyone assumes the prophecy is dependent on their reaction since otherwise what would be the purpose of sending a prophet to them to give them a message and this is Hashem's intent from the outset to get them to repent. The Mizrahi (Bereishit Ch. 32) argues that these pesukim do not describe an actual prophecy at all, just a consideration of Hashem which can be changed but it is not a pronouncement (which does not change). The Maharal (Gur Aryeh there) argues that the idea that a prophecy can't change is only once it has been shared with a prophet but in the case of Yirmiyahu he is speaking about destruction that has not been shared with a prophet.

3) Talmud Bavli (Yoma 73b)

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| Although the decree of a prophet can change, the decree of the Urim V'Tumim does not | אף על פי שגזירת נביא חוזרת, גזירת אורים ותומים - אינה חוזרת, שנאמר במשפט האורים |
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The Gemara here speaks about the words of a Navi changing and Rashi there says that Yonah is an example of this. This seems to be an issue for the Ramchal who argues that Yonah's prophecy does not change and it is just reinterpreted³. The Meiri on this Gemara understands that the reference to prophecy changing is specifically about negative prophecies, in line with the Rambam's approach⁴.

4) Talmud Bavli (Shabbos 55a)

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| No positive promise that Hashem ever spoke was revoked aside from | אמר רבי אחא ברבי חנינא: מעולם לא יצתה מדה טובה מפיו הקדוש ברוך הוא וחזר בה לרעה חוץ מדבר זה, דכתיב גויאמר ה' אליו עבר בתוך העיר בתוך ירושלים והתוית תו |
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² See the Abarbanel who understands that the pesukim refers to both good and bad prophecies that can change. He quotes a number of different opinions in the Rishonim including Rav Chadai Creskas who gives a distinction similar to the Achronim quoted in the next paragraph. The Abarbanel himself says that the pasuk is simply saying that one should not test a Navi's veracity based on their prediction of the future since the future can change but rather on their ability to demand changes in nature.

³ It seems clear from the incident of Chana and Eli (see Brachos 31b) that 'chozeres' here can't mean reinterpreted since Eli did misinterpret the Urim V'Tumim's message. If so, how the Ramchal would interpret this Gemara needs further study.

⁴ As noted above, this is his opinion elsewhere as well.

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| this [incident when the second Beit HaMikdash was destroyed] | על מצחות האנשים הנאנחים והנאנקים על כל התועבות הנעשות בתוכה וגו'. |
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This Gemara seems to specifically say that a positive prophecy is never revoked, and this would be in line with the Rambam. The Maharitz Chiyus says this Gemara is the source of the Rambam quoted above.

Although the Gemara seems to say there is only one exception we could understand the exception to be broader than this one example. Rashi seems to say that the ‘exception’ is when there is a need to revoke the prophecy in order to punish sin. If so, then this Gemara would, in fact, support Tosfos’ approach.

The Maharasha (Brachos 4a) points out the seeming contradiction between the idea of ‘*shema yigrom haChet*’ (Yaakov’s concern that his sins may cause him not to be able to actualize Hashem’s promise to him) expressed in Brachos and this Gemara. He explains that our Gemara means that a sin alone never causes a positive prophecy to be revoked (aside from this exception) but that once a person’s merits are worn down by many good things and they have no more merits then sin certainly can cause a prophecy to be revoked. This would be another way to understand the Gemara within the worldview of Tosfos that prophecy is a snapshot.

Alternatively, we might point out that the Gemara does not specifically say that it refers to prophecy and ‘*midah tova m’pi Hakadosh BaruchHu*’ may not refer to our topic of the definition of prophecy at all. However, most Achronim⁵ do seem to assume our Gemara does need to be reconciled with other Gemaras about prophecy and understand it to have a similar meaning to the Gemara in Brachos (7a) that any divine pronouncement that is positive is not revoked even if it is said conditionally (*afilu al tnai*).

Is G-d’s Word Always Prophecy?

This question of if Hashem’s word is always considered prophecy is an important idea to consider. This is a longer discussion that relates to Yaakov’s fear of Eisav even after Hashem gave him assurance⁶ about his future and also Avrohom’s similar fear and need for a proof even after Hashem’s promise⁷. The Maharal (Gur Aryeh Bereshis 32:8), based on the Rambam (introduction to his commentary on the Mishna), explains that prophecy and a promise (*havtacha*) are actually very different, and one should be careful to identify when there is a prophecy as opposed to a havtacha. A prophecy is a prediction that is related to the event itself and therefore we have the above discussion of if it can ever be changed. However, an assurance from Hashem is completely dependent on the person who has been assured and will only occur if they remain at their current level. If Hashem assures a Tzaddik that something will occur it is

⁵ Pnei Yehoshua, Maharsha, Maharal etc.

⁶ See Bereishis Ch 32 and commentaries there

⁷ See Bereishis Ch 15 and commentaries there

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dependent on him remaining a Tzaddik and similarly if a Rasha is assured of negative consequences this is only if he does not repent.

Conclusion

In our current times we no longer have prophecy, but we see that prophecy may not have been the unchangeable oracular pronouncement we thought it was, even when it was functioning. We have seen possibilities that prophecy may be a warning or a prediction based on current circumstances but not an unchangeable prediction. Perhaps this message is an important reason why Yonah is read on Yom Kippur. At times, things may feel unchangeable and impossible to impact. This can lead to feelings of despair. Yonah reminds us that even Divine pronouncements may not be set in stone and that repentance, prayer and changing ourselves are a path forward and that we must not lose faith.

Additionally, this year in particular, it behooves us to remember one prophecy that is guaranteed: *Netzach Yisrael Lo Yishaker* (Shmuel Alef 15:29) – the continuity of the Jewish people will never cease. Even when the plight of individuals feels fraught, we always know that the Jewish people will live on in strength fulfilling these words. Am Yisrael Chai!