



The Ziegler School  
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

להתהלך בצדק  
Walking with Justice

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# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

To speak about God and to think about theology are wonderful pursuits, but the cause of theology is justice for human beings. Loving your neighbor is a sweet sentiment, but doing right by your neighbor will change the world. In this unit we will explore how the cause of justice is an essential message of the Biblical prophets.

I will begin this exploration with the greatest prophet of them all - Moses. Starting with Moses, we see that revelations to prophets often come when a new social reality has become necessary. Moses' message was a radical break with the social reality of Egypt. When God told Moses, "Let My people go!" the command was a deliberate subversion of a social order where the Pharaoh was thought of as a god and people could be bought and sold:

The Holy One said, "I have seen, surely seen, the fate of my people in Egypt and have heard them cry out because of their taskmasters, because I am aware of their pain. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, one flowing with milk and honey, the place of the Canaanites .... at this very moment the cry of the children of Israel has reached Me, and I have also seen the way the Egyptians oppress them. Come, now, and I shall send you to Pharaoh; bring out my people, the children of Israel, from Egypt."<sup>1</sup>

Judaism believes that there is one God Who is not restricted by other gods or the realm of fate. So God, Who has total freedom, sent Moses to free the people; just as God is free to act, so each person must be free to act. Just as God is not bound by the restrictions of other powers and is unique, so each individual should not be bound by other human beings and is unique.

God sent Moses to denounce the exploitation of people by demonstrating compassion, to oppose the static order and oppression of human empire with a dynamic act of God. The liberation from Egypt, as important as it was, should not be seen as a one-time event. It is an imperative, a directional sign of what we must strive for in every generation. It should undermine the false narratives and distorted social practices of human kingdoms. When God, through Moses, outperforms the Egyptian magicians by bringing the ten plagues, the point is that the real power is from God. No pharaoh or king or human political leader is God. No empire or state, ancient or modern, is God. God rules in freedom and all people must be free.

This is a powerful legacy for a people. God's self-identification, as we see in the first of the Ten Commandments,<sup>2</sup> is as the One Who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Social justice, then, is not a goal that humans decide to strive for; it is the commandment of the Just God. God commanded the Israelites to create a society based on the values embodied in laws designed to ensure equality and fairness for all.

## SOLOMON'S KINGDOM AND ITS INJUSTICE

The Exodus story is, in a sense, easy to embrace: the Israelites are the victimized good guys and Pharaoh and the Egyptians are the cruel bad guys. Moses leaves the palace of power to join with his oppressed brothers and sisters. God through Moses tells Pharaoh: "Let *My* people go!" The Israelites are God's people and the enemy king thinks he's God. The role of the prophet is to liberate those who have been crushed under the burdens of social injustice.

But let's move on now to a more complex story, in which the good guys and the bad guys are all Israelites, in which a prophet will have to denounce an Israelite king and the social injustice he has inflicted on his subjects. In order to understand the role of the prophets in the Bible, we will have to understand the historical background involved in each case. Biblical texts did not spring out of a vacuum, or as expressions of idealistic theories, but from the lives and experiences of real people.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3:7-10

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:2



# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Fast forward three hundred years. Solomon is a powerful king who rules over a united kingdom of the Israelite tribes. He is a mighty monarch, known for his justice. Many of us know the famous story of the two prostitutes with one live and one dead baby, who come to their king for a decision as to whom the live baby belongs.<sup>3</sup> Solomon, in threatening to kill the live baby, uncovers the identity of its true mother. The story is testimony to his wisdom and his fine sense of fairness. When offered any gift from God, Solomon requests wisdom so he can dispense justice to the people of the land.<sup>4</sup> He is known as the wisest man in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Solomon created administrative districts in place of the old tribal territories, partly so the kingdom rather than the individual tribes would command the first loyalties of the people but partly in order to administrate the commandeering of the abundant provisions required for his sumptuous court life. He built up Jerusalem, the capital city conquered by his father David. He erected a great and beautiful temple to God. The kingdom knew unprecedented economic success: “Judah and Israel lived secure, each person under their own vine and fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.”<sup>6</sup> This is a Messianic vision of equality. What a wonderful picture; it seemed as if nothing could be better!

But Solomon was not as wise and just as God wanted him to be. This beautiful picture was drawn with the tools of its own destruction. In explaining why the kingdom split into two parts, the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, after Solomon’s death, the Biblical account emphasizes Solomon’s apostasy, his worship of other gods. What leads directly to the break-up of the kingdom, however, has nothing to do with Solomon’s faith and everything to do with the injustices caused by his building projects. Solomon wanted to transform the united kingdom of Judah and Israel into a mighty empire, and change of these proportions was costly. Magnificent building projects required huge numbers of workers and tremendous amounts of money. Solomon forced first non-Israelites, and then Israelites from the north, from the area called Israel or the House of Joseph<sup>7</sup> to engage in back-breaking, difficult labor.<sup>8</sup>

One imagines an Israelian saying, “I might as well be a slave to Pharaoh!” And so it is that Jeroboam, the young man that Solomon has placed over the corvée labor, becomes the leader of a rebellion against Solomon. Jeroboam seems to have spoken out from his position of responsibility and criticized the onerous burden that Solomon had placed on his people. It does not matter that we are speaking of an Israelite king. It does not matter that Solomon was the son of David, or the builder of the Temple, or a famous wise man. Injustice and inequality cannot be tolerated in any kingdom. Injustice perpetrated by Israelites is unacceptable to the God of Justice:

The Holy One said to Solomon, ‘Because of what you have done, that you have not kept My covenant and the laws which I commanded you, I shall tear, yes tear, the kingdom from you and give it to one of your servants ...’<sup>9</sup>

A prophet, Ahijah of Shiloh, a city prominent in the traditions of the old tribal league that David and Solomon had replaced with their federal kingdom, is called by God to symbolically present Jeroboam with the ten northern tribes that will constitute a second nation, the newly-founded Kingdom of Israel.

...Jeroboam left Jerusalem and the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh met him on the way. He was wearing a new robe and when only the two of them were in the open country, Ahijah took hold of the new robe he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. “Take ten pieces,” he said to Jeroboam, “for this is what The Holy One, God of Israel has said: I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon’s hand, and I will give you the ten tribes...”<sup>10</sup>

The new kingdom announced by Ahijah, formed because of the injustices that had severed the united kingdom, now had to demonstrate that it could form a just society. Though created with the blessing of prophets, the same prophets would turn against their own creation if it did not bring justice to its new citizens.

<sup>3</sup> *I Kings 3:16-28*

<sup>4</sup> *I Kings 3:9, 11, 28*

<sup>5</sup> *I Kings 10:23*

<sup>6</sup> *I Kings 5:5. While it seems strange to our modern ears to hear that there were two Israelite kingdoms during one period of history, the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah co-existed for two centuries. Those unfamiliar with this historical fact have heard of ‘the Ten Lost Tribes’; these tribes constituted the northern Kingdom of Israel.*

<sup>7</sup> *Israel is called the ‘House of Joseph’ because the prominent tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were descended from their father Joseph.*

<sup>8</sup> *See, for example, I Kings 9:15-22 and I Kings 11:26-28.*

<sup>9</sup> *I Kings 11:11*

<sup>10</sup> *I Kings 11:29-31*



# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

## NABOTH'S VINEYARD AND ITS SYMBOLISM<sup>11</sup>

The Kingdom of Israel turned out to be a painful disappointment to God and the prophets; the very kind of injustices that led to the division of the United Kingdom became the unfortunate hallmark of the new kingdom as well. During this period of Israelite history, the population consisted of free Israelite slaves, resident aliens (*gerim*), and descendants of the Canaanites. Israelites might be enslaved for periods of time for debt but the permanent slave class was foreign, usually people who had been acquired by purchase or in war, or their descendants. While not slaves as such, poor Israelites and *gerim* possessed nothing but their ability to work. Most of the people were farmers, herdsman, fruit-growers, artisans, small merchants, unskilled wage-laborers and slaves.

To use a prominent sequence, the rich took the poor people's land, then the clothing off their backs, and finally owned and sold their very bodies. There were ways of legalizing such robbery. The most important biblical text concerning robbery of family lands is the story of Naboth's vineyard.<sup>12</sup> Naboth, the Jezreelite, owns a vineyard in Jezreel and King Ahab (869-850) wants to expand his estate. He offers a more-than-equitable price or exchange for the vineyard. Why doesn't Naboth agree? He cannot do so, because the land involved has been in his family for centuries, it is his patrimonial inheritance.

Ahab is so depressed by Naboth's response that he cannot eat. One assumes that he is not this upset over a vineyard. He feels that he is king but cannot make his subjects do his will. The old values, of family and inheritance, still supersede his power. He tells his wife Jezebel what has happened and she, who has been a princess of the kingdom of Tyre and who is an ardent worshipper of the pagan god Baal, promises him that she will procure the vineyard for him. She does not see this act as a mere attempt to expand her husband's estate. She says: "Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel."<sup>13</sup> Jezebel wants the expanded power of the monarchy to displace the old ways.

Jezebel organizes a plot in which the judicial process will be manipulated to condemn Naboth to death. Established judicial procedures – the community acting as a jury – and laws concerning witnesses are followed in an evil and subversive way, with the result that Naboth is stoned to death.<sup>14</sup> The murder of Naboth by Jezebel represents in broader terms the royal manipulation and violence that destroy law and religious observance, two important foundations of social stability.

God and the prophets cannot allow the murder of Naboth to go unpunished. Elijah is instructed to prophesy that in the very place where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, they will also lap up Ahab's – and indeed, that prophecy comes to pass, not only for Ahab but for Jezebel too.<sup>15</sup>

When Elijah stands up to Ahab, he symbolizes the prophetic cry against all of the rich who seized lands of the poor, lands that constituted their family inheritance. He was not the only prophet to do so – the great prophet Isaiah also highlighted the seizure of family lands,<sup>16</sup> and the prophet Micah cried:

Ah, those who plot iniquity  
And plan evil on their beds;  
When morning dawns, they do it,  
For they have great power.  
They covet fields, and seize them;  
Houses also, which they take away.  
They defraud men of their houses,  
And people of their family lands.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> On Naboth's vineyard, see F. I. Andersen "The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident" *JBL* 85 46-57 1966; Jerome T. Walsh "Methods and Meaning: Multiple Studies of I Kings 21" *JBL* 11 ½ (1992) 193-211.

<sup>12</sup> I Kings 21

<sup>13</sup> I Kings 21:7

<sup>14</sup> I Kings 21:8-14

<sup>15</sup> See I Kings 22:38 and II Kings 9:34-36

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 5:7-8. It is interesting that in this passage, Israel and Judah are described as God's vineyard.

<sup>17</sup> Micah 2:1-2



# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The prophets also criticized the existing social order because it did not embody the values of Israelite religion. The economic and political structure of the society must be based on ethical and religious standards. Instead, those who live in luxury do not worry about the destitute at their doors, land-owners are greedy, creditors are heartless, the rich in general are vain and irresponsible.<sup>18</sup> Hosea speaks about murder,<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah talks of the trapping of men like birds,<sup>20</sup> and Micah speaks of the ruling classes as cannibals who eat the flesh of those who are undernourished.<sup>21</sup> All of this was denounced by the prophets in the strongest terms, but it continued anyway. And as it continued, God's anger, and the content of the prophetic denunciations, changed accordingly.

We fast forward again about one hundred years. The northern kingdom of Israel, under a king named Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE), is prosperous and powerful. And yet inside the fabric of success is rampant social injustice.

## WHAT MADE AMOS FAMOUS

Picture a man standing on the steps of the temple in a foreign city, condemning the people of that country for injustices, predicting that they will face God's wrath and certain doom if they do not change their ways and correct the injustices that they perpetrate on the powerless:

This is what The Holy One has said:  
For three transgressions of Israel,  
For four, I will not call back the punishment:  
Because they have sold the righteous for silver  
And the poor for a pair of sandals.  
They trample the heads of the poor  
Into the dust of the earth  
And pervert the course of the humble!  
Father and son both go to the same girl,  
So as to profane My holy name.  
They lie perversely by every altar  
On garments they took in pledge,  
And in the House of their God  
They drink wine bought with their fines.<sup>22</sup>

The man on the steps, Amos, is not considered one of the major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel, but he left a powerful legacy for those who came after him. Amos preaches dire warnings: If the kingdom does not change for the better, it will face the worst consequences imaginable.

Note how concrete and specific the sins and crimes are. This is not just a set of blanket denunciations of sinfulness. Amos talks about robbery with violence<sup>23</sup> and commerce in human life.<sup>24</sup> People are so anxious to make money that they will take bribes, subvert justice, steal clothes and use unbalanced scales.

The Book of Amos brings us back to a wonderful period in the history of the northern kingdom. It is one thing to denounce a kingdom that is doing poorly and to criticize it for its failures. It is quite another to denounce a nation that is rich, successful and mighty.

In the reign of the powerful Jeroboam II, the nation of Israel was doing very well indeed. A famous prophet named Jonah son of Amittai promised that God would help the kingdom expand and Jeroboam II "restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-Hamath [in the north] to the sea of the Arabah [in the south]."<sup>25</sup> But increases in territory, population and prosperity also increased the gap between the elite of the urban centers and the common people of the villages.

<sup>18</sup> Hosea 4:4-6; 5:1; Micah 3:5, 6, 11; Amos 4:1;  
6:1-7; Isaiah 3:1-3, 13-15

<sup>19</sup> Hosea 6:8, 9

<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah 5:26

<sup>21</sup> Micah 3:1-3

<sup>22</sup> Amos 2:6-8

<sup>23</sup> Amos 3:10

<sup>24</sup> Amos 2:6

<sup>25</sup> II Kings 14:25, cf. Amos 6:13, 14



# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The powerful abused the poor by exploiting them, denying them compassion and through corruption denying them justice.

But it seems, as in the case of Solomon's kingdom, that it was Israel's success that brought social injustice with it. Who is to blame? The king, the priests and the professional prophets are responsible. What do those prophets want? They know that the world has changed. They do not think that the clock can be turned back. But they want the old traditions of the covenant to provide a context for the new socio-economic order. The prophets want the morality and ethics of God's words to remain the foundation of Israelite society.

And so Amos, a farmer from Judah, who says that he is un-schooled in prophetic traditions, feels so moved by the call of God that he travels to the north to bring a warning of doom if that nation does not change its behavior. We cannot be certain, but Amos may have been a wealthy man himself. The fact that he both raises herds and grows sycamore trees may indicate that he was a prosperous businessman. Indeed, Jewish tradition sees Amos as a landowner and a moderately rich owner of livestock. Amos is not against wealth but is vitally concerned with how one acquires and uses it. He does not see the poor as more righteous than the rich, only as innocent and powerless against the rich who exploit them.<sup>26</sup>

Amos says, to paraphrase: "God brought you out of slavery in Egypt. Now look at what you're doing!" It is therefore fitting that God inflicts plagues on Israel such as pestilence and an earthquake (Amos 1:1). It may have been the occurrence of an earthquake after Amos' prediction that made Amos famous.

As we're reading the Book of Amos, those of us who know the history of the period might ask, "What did social injustice have to do with the Assyrian conquest?" For the truth, if we look through a historical lens, is that social injustice and God's warnings through Amos had nothing to do with the end of Israel. Instead, decades after Amos spoke, the Ten Tribes of Israel were transported into exile by the superpower Assyria (from modern-day Iraq) and assimilated into other peoples of that empire. This left one Israelite kingdom, Judah, which eventually gave its name to the Jewish people and its religion, Judaism. In which case, what message can we draw from Amos, or indeed from the other prophetic texts we have considered in this essay?

## CONCLUSION

The prophets are saying to the people: God's protection is predicated on your keeping of the covenant. And part of the covenant is treating others well. If you are unjust, you break the covenant. The covenant is not just about ritual; what good is ritual, which is supposed to be directional toward the good, if one is evil towards one's fellow human being? Ritual teaches discipline by its very nature and serves to reinforce goodness. To perform rituals and then sin or commit crimes is an unbearable contradiction.

One can read through the prophetic books and think that the admonitions to be ethical are monotonous and boring. But the truth is that ethical behavior requires constant reminders and reinforcement. And so the prophets exhort the people to be charitable and merciful to the poor and to help those who were defenseless and needy, widows and orphans, oppressed people, strangers and those without legal rights. They stipulate impartiality in justice, and fairness. They insist on respecting the property of others. They demand respect for every human life.

<sup>26</sup> Amos 2:6, 5:12



# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – TEXT 1

## שמות ה:א-ד

א וְאַחַר בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה־אָמַר יי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שַׁלַּח אֶת־עַמִּי וַיְחַגּוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר:  
ב וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה מִי יי אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמְעֵ בְקִלּוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־יי וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח:  
ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרָיִם נִקְרָא עָלֵינוּ נִלְכְּה־נָא דָרָךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחַה לַיי אֱלֹהֵינוּ פְּרִי־זִבְעֵנוּ בַדָּבָר  
ד אוּ בְחָרֵב: ד וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים מַלְךְ מִצְרַיִם לָמָּה מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן תַּפְרִיעוּ אֶת־הָעָם מִמַּעֲשֵׂיו לָכוּ לְסַבְּלֵתֵיכֶם:

## Exodus 5:1-4

After that, Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, “Send out my people so they can hold a festival for me in the desert.” Pharaoh replied, “Who is this The Holy One, whom I should obey and send out Israel? I do not know The Holy One, and I shall not send Israel out.” Then they [Moses and Aaron] said, “The God of the Hebrews has called us: let us go, please, three days’ journey into the desert, where we will sacrifice to The Holy One our God, lest God smite us with plague, or by way of the sword.” Then the king of Egypt said, “Moses and Aaron, why should you disturb the people from what it needs to do? Go away, and carry on suffering.”

## מלכים א יא:כט-לב

כט וַיְהִי בַעֲת הַהִיא וַיִּרְבְּעוּ יָצָא מִירוּשָׁלַם וַיִּמְצָא אֹתוֹ אַחִיָּה הַשִּׁילֹנִי הַנְּבִיא בַדָּרָךְ וְהוּא מִתְכַּסֶּה בְּשַׁלְמָה  
חֲדָשָׁה וּשְׁנֵיהֶם לְבָדָם בַּשָּׂדֶה: ל וַיִּתְפֹּשׂ אַחִיָּה בְּשַׁלְמָה הַחֲדָשָׁה אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיִּקְרַעָהּ שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר קָרְעִים:  
לא וַיֹּאמֶר לְיִרְבְּעָם קַח־לְךָ עֲשָׂרָה קָרְעִים כִּי כֹה אָמַר יי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנְּנִי קִרַּע אֶת־הַמַּמְלָכָה מִיַּד שְׁלֹמֹה  
וְנָתַתִּי לְךָ אֶת עֲשָׂרָה הַשְּׁבֵטִים: לב וְהַשְּׁבֵט הָאֶחָד יִהְיֶה לּוֹ לְמַעַן | עַבְדֵי דָוִד וּלְמַעַן יְרוּשָׁלַם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר  
בְּחַרְתִּי בָּהּ מִכָּל שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

## I Kings 11:29-32

At that time, Jeroboam left Jerusalem and the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh met him on the way. He was wearing a new robe and when only the two of them were in the open country, Ahijah took hold of the new robe he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. “Take ten pieces,” he said to Jeroboam, ‘for this is what The Holy One, God of Israel has said: I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon’s hand, and I will give you the ten tribes. I will leave him one tribe, though, for the sake of my servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem which I chose out of all the tribes of Israel.”

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- What are the differences in the way Moses deals with Pharaoh and the way Ahijah deals with Solomon?
- Why do you think they took two different approaches?
- Do you think one approach was more effective than the other? Why/why not?
- What do you think motivated Moses and Ahijah?

[You may find it useful to look at the wider context of both quotations when you answer these questions.]



## THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – TEXT 2

### מלכים א כא-כ

א ויהי אחר הדברים האלה פרום היה לנבות היזרעאלי אשר ביזרעאל אצל היכל אחאב מלך שמרון: ב וידבר אחאב אל-נבות | לאמר ותנה-לי את-פרמך ויהי-לי לגן-ירק כי הוא קרוב אצל ביתי ואתנה לך ותחתינו פרום טוב ממנו אם טוב בעיניך אתנה-לך כסף מחיר זה: ג ולאמר נבות אל-אחאב חלילה לי מיי מתתי את-נחלת אבתי לך: ד ויבא אחאב אל-ביתו סר וזעף על-הדבר אשר-דבר אליו נבות היזרעאלי ולאמר לא-אתנו לך את-נחלת אבותי וישכב על-מטתו ויסב את-פניו ולא-אכל לחם: ה ותבא אליו איזבל אשרתו ותדבר אליו מה-זה רוחך סרה ואינך אכל לחם: ז ותאמר אליו איזבל אשרתו אתה עתה תעשה מלוכה על-ישראל קום אכל-לחם ויטב לבך אני אתנו לך את-פרם נבות היזרעאלי:

ח ותכתב ספרים בשם אחאב ותחתם בחתמו ותשלח הספרים אל-הזקנים ואל-החורים אשר בעירו הישבים את-נבות: ט ותכתב בספרים לאמר קראו-צום והשיבו את-נבות בראש העם: י והושיבו שנים אנשים בני-בליעל נגדו ויעדוהו לאמר ברכת אלהים ומלך והוציאהו וסקלהו וימת: יא ויעשו אנשי עירו הזקנים והחורים אשר הישבים בעירו כאשר שלחה אליהם איזבל... כאשר כתוב בספרים אשר שלחה אליהם: יב קראו צום והשיבו את-נבות יד וישלחו אל-איזבל לאמר סקל נבות וימת: טו ויהי כשמע איזבל כי-סקל נבות וימת ותאמר איזבל אל-אחאב קום רש את-פרם | נבות היזרעאלי אשר מאן לתת-לך בכסף כי אין נבות חי כמות: טז ויהי כשמע אחאב כי מת נבות ויקם אחאב לרדת אל-פרם נבות היזרעאלי לרשתו:

יז ויהי דבר-י אל-אליהו התשבי לאמר: יח קום רד לקראת אחאב מלך-ישראל אשר בשמרון הנה בכרם נבות אשר-יך שם לרשתו: יט ודברת אליו לאמר כה אמר יי הרצחת וגם-גרשת ודברת אליו לאמר כה אמר יי במקום אשר לקחו הכלבים את-דם נבות ילקו הכלבים את-דמך גם-אתה: כ ולאמר אחאב אל-אליהו המצאתני איבי ולאמר מצאתני...

### I Kings 21:1-20

Naboth the Jezreelite owned a vineyard in Jezreel, next to the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. Ahab spoke to Naboth, and said, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may use it as a vegetable garden, since it is right next to where I live. I will give you a better vineyard instead, or I will pay you its price in money if that is what you would like." But Naboth replied, "The Holy One forbid that I should give you my ancestral lands!" Ahab went home annoyed and sulking because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him: "I will not give you my ancestral lands!" [Ahab] lay down on his bed and turned his face to the wall and refused to eat. Jezebel his wife came to him and asked him what was wrong...and said to him, "Are you the king of Israel, or not? Get up! Eat something, and cheer up: I will get you Naboth the Jezreelite's vineyard!"

She wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters to the elders and leaders who lived in the same town as Naboth. In the letters she wrote as follows: "Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth in front of all the people. Put two worthless rogues opposite him, and let them testify against him: "You have cursed God and king!" Then take him out and stone him to death." His townsmen - the elders and leaders who lived in his town - did as Jezebel had told them...and sent word to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned to death." When Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite which he refused to sell to you, because Naboth is no longer alive: he is dead." When Ahab heard this he got up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite and take possession of it.

Then the word of The Holy One came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Get up! Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel who is in Samaria. At this very moment he is in Naboth's vineyard; he has gone down there to take possession of it. Say to him, "This is what The Holy One has said: Have you both murdered and taken possession? This is what The Holy One has said: In the very same place where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, they will lap up yours." Then Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, my enemy?" and [Elijah] said, "I have found [you]"...

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why doesn't Naboth agree to Ahab's request?
- Why do you think Jezebel goes so far to get the vineyard for her husband?
- Does it make a difference that the piece of land is a vineyard, rather than an orchard or a field? Why?
- What do you think motivated Elijah?





## THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – TEXT 3

### ישעיה נח:א-ז

א קרא בגרון אל־תחשך בשופר הַרם קולך והגד לעמל פִּשְׁעֵם וּלְבַיִת יַעֲקֹב חַטָּאתָם: ב וְאוֹתֵי יוֹם יוֹם יִדְרֹשׁוּן  
וְדַעַת דְּרַכֵּי יַחֲפָצוּן כְּגוֹי אֲשֶׁר־צָדְקָה עָשָׂה וּמִשְׁפָּט אֱלֹהֵיו לֹא עָזַב יִשְׁאַלְוּנִי מִשְׁפָּטֵי־צֶדֶק קִרְבַּת אֱלֹהִים  
יַחֲפָצוּן: ג לָמָּה צָמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עֵינֵינוּ נִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִדְעֵהוּ בְיוֹם צָמְכֶם תִּמְצָאוּ־חֹפֶץ וְכֹל־עֲצָבֵיכֶם תִּנְגָּשׁוּ: ד הֲ  
לָרִיב וּמִצָּה תִצְוֵמוּ וּלְהִכּוֹת בְּאַגְרֵף רָשַׁע לֹא־תִצְוֵמוּ כְּיוֹם לְהִשְׁמִיעַ בְּמִרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם: ה הֲכִזָּה יִהְיֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵינוּ  
יוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם נִפְשׁוֹ הִלְכֵף כְּאִגְמוֹן רָאִשׁוֹ וְשָׁק וְאֶפֶר יִצְיַע הִלָּה תִקְרָא־צוֹם וְיוֹם רָצוֹן לִי: ו הֲלֹא זֶה צוֹם  
אֲבֹתֵינוּ: פִּתַּח חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשַׁע הִתֵּר אֲגַדְוֹת מוֹטָה וְשַׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפָשִׁים וְכֹל־מוֹטָה תִּנְתָּקוּ: ז הֲלֹא פָרַס לָרַעֲב  
לְחֻמֶּךָ וְעֵנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תִּבְיֵא בַּיִת כִּי־תִרְאֶה עֵרֶם וְכִסִּיתוֹ וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:

### ISAIAH 58:1-7

Cry aloud! Hold nothing back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Tell my people their transgressions and the house of Jacob its sins.  
Yet they seek me, every day; they want to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation which had behaved justly,  
which had not abandoned the rule of its God.  
They ask for just rulings,  
they want to be near to God.  
“Why have we fasted, but you do not notice?  
Why have we afflicted our souls, but you do not know?”  
See! On the very day of your fasting you seek your own wishes,  
you oppress all your workers.  
You fast so as to argue and fight, so as to strike with an evil fist –  
a fast like today’s will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is this really the fast I have chosen –  
a day for people to afflict themselves,  
to bow down their heads like bulrushes,  
to spread out sackcloth and ashes underneath them?  
Do you really call that a fast, a day God will find acceptable?

No! This is the fast I have chosen -  
To break open the ties of evil,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the crushed go free,  
to undo every yoke.  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
to bring the homeless poor into your houses,  
when you see those who are naked, to cover them,  
not to ignore your own flesh?

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Who is speaking in this passage?
- What can you infer about society from the way it is described?
- Why do you think we read this passage as the haftarah on Yom Kippur morning?
- What do you think motivated Isaiah?



## THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – TEXT 4

### עמוס ב-ח

ו כֹּה אָמַר יי על־שִׁלְשָׁה פְּשָׁעַי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־אַרְבַּעָה לֹא אָשִׁיבֶנּוּ עַל־מִכְרָם בְּכֶסֶף צְדִיק וְאֲבִיוֹן בְּעִבּוֹר נְעֻלִים:  
ז הַשְּׂאֵפִים עַל־עַפְר־אֶרֶץ בְּרֹאשׁ דָּלִים וְדָרָךְ עֲנוּיִם יָטוּ וְאִישׁ וְאִבּוֹ יִלְכוּ אֶל־הַנְּעִרָה לְמַעַן חַלֵּל אֶת־שֵׁם קֹדֶשׁ:  
ח וְעַל־בְּגָדִים חֲבָלִים יָטוּ אֶצֶל כָּל־מִזְבְּחַ וַיִּין עֲנוּשִׁים יִשְׁתּוּ בֵּית אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

### Amos 2:6-8

This is what The Holy One has said:  
For three transgressions of Israel,  
For four, I will not call back the punishment:  
Because they have sold the righteous for silver  
And the poor for a pair of sandals.  
They trample the heads of the poor  
Into the dust of the earth  
And pervert the course of the humble!  
Father and son both go to the same girl,  
So as to profane My holy name.  
They lie perversely by every altar  
On garments they took in pledge,  
And in the House of their God  
They drink wine bought with their fines.

### עמוס ה, יב

י שָׁנְאוּ בַשַּׁעַר מוֹכִיחַ וְדֹבֵר תְּמִים יִתְעַבּוּ... יב כִּי יִדְעֵתִי רַבִּים פְּשָׁעֵיכֶם וְעַצְמִים חֲטָאֵתִיכֶם צָרִי צְדִיק לְקַחֵי  
כֹּפֶר וְאֲבִיוֹנִים בַּשַּׁעַר הֵטוּ:

### Amos 5:10,12

They hate the one who reproves in the city gate,  
they loathe the one who speaks what is perfect...  
I know how many transgressions are,  
how innumerable your sins,  
you who persecute the righteous,  
who take bribes,  
who turn aside the needy in the gate.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- How many specific sins can you find in these passages?
- Is there a theme that connects them all? What is it?
- Why are these sins so particularly repugnant?
- What do you think motivated Amos?



# THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

## POSTSCRIPT: HOW SHOULD I THINK ABOUT THE PROPHETS TODAY?

We can consider three possibilities for how we can understand the words of a prophet:

- 1 The prophet's words are the exact words of God; the prophet is like a radio, transmitting the waves from God;
- 2 God has communicated the Divine will to the prophet, who expresses the content of that will in words that the audience will accept as authentic Divine language;
- 3 The prophet is really a person with values and beliefs that are in consonance with the traditions of his people; he believes that God has directed him to speak to the people.

Since I am writing for a modern audience, any discussion of the biblical prophets must reckon with the question: If I don't believe in God, and cannot think about God speaking to a special group of individuals, how should I see a prophet? As crazies on the fringe of society who were insane enough to believe that they heard voices from the outside?

If I don't believe in God, how should I think about their call for social justice? If they were not simply radio transmitters for God, what were they?

The non-believer might see the prophets as the voice of the voiceless. Who could be the voice of these common people? We do not see revolutions by the lower classes during these times. Instead, we see that they had spokespersons who could criticize the powerful and (generally) get away with it. The poor and the disenfranchised could not speak for themselves but the prophets were safe in their criticisms of the politically and economically powerful. The prophets, in their angry denunciations of the rich landowners and the royal class, vented the frustrations of the people who could not speak for themselves.

The prophets demanded changes in the social order. They demanded these changes in the name of God. They clothed the supernatural message in stereotypical holy covenant language, thus meeting group expectations, and delivered the message supported by the authority of God and the aspirations and hopes of the downtrodden group.

The prophets reaffirmed traditional values. They were a conservative voice in a society undergoing rapid social change. They rejected the recent innovations and the new gods. They hoped for a return to the older ways, to the older religious, moral and social values.

Thus even if one does not believe in God and does not believe that the prophets were called by God, the content of their words makes them important figures in the history of the Israelites and significant for us, the descendants of the people to whom they were speaking. If we can read the prophets and understand that they also are speaking to us, we will truly appreciate the Biblical message.

- Rabbi Benjamin Scolnic



# SESSION SUGGESTIONS – THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

## INTRODUCTION

In this session the group will consider the prophetic messages about social justice from Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). It will be a good idea to have copies of the Tanakh – Hebrew and English – available.

Introduce the session. Recap briefly which prophets and messages were dealt with in the essay – Moses, Ahijah, Elijah, Amos. Explore in what context (hopefully, other than haftarat) people might have encountered the prophetic literature before. Ask: what makes a prophet a prophet?

## CHAVRUTA STUDY

Hand out the texts for chavruta study. Each of the texts has a shared question relating to what motivates the prophet, and the answers are likely to vary dependent on the specific texts. The Isaiah text was not discussed in the essay – but it is part of the haftarah for Yom Kippur morning as well as being a searing indictment of injustice.

## GROUP STUDY

The text supplied is a postscript to Rabbi Scolnic's essay. It raises what he considers to be a critical question – how do we understand the prophets today given that there is a spectrum of belief in God? This should provide the basis for an in-depth discussion.

If anyone in the class has access to the internet, an alternative activity might be to brainstorm for contemporary 'prophets' and explore their messages. Who might the class include in this category? Gandhi? Martin Luther King? Nelson Mandela? What about women? What exactly makes these people prophets, and what role do they play in society?

Other possibilities might be:

- Ask people to write their own piece of prophecy. If God were to speak to them about contemporary evils, what would their message to society be?
- How might people use contemporary media to disseminate prophetic messages? They could create advertisements, designs for web pages, TV shows...
- People can collage, draw, paint – the prophet and his/her surroundings.

You might wish to close the discussion/activity by focusing once again on prophetic motivation. What qualities are required to be a prophet? Can we access such qualities today, and what would society be like if we were to do so?

## CONCLUSION

Allow time for participants to update and amend their personal manifestos. Hand out the essay for next time and conclude the session.



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## INTRODUCTION

See the various essays on social justice at [www.bradartson.com](http://www.bradartson.com)

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# MUSICAL PLAYLIST TO ACCOMPANY EACH SESSION

Compiled by Noam Raucher

You can use any or all of the songs in the suggested sessions. They are listed in the order of title-artist-album, and all are available on iTunes. Please note that one or two have explicit lyrics – these are clearly marked.

## Introduction

How Come – Ray LaMontagne – Trouble  
For What It's Worth – Buffalo Springfield – Buffalo Springfield  
If I Had A Hammer – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary  
What's Going On – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On

## The Prophets and Social Justice

Fuel – Ani DiFranco – Little Plastic Castle  
Chimes of Freedom – Bob Dylan – Bob Dylan: The Collection  
Keep On Rockin' In The Free World – Neil Young – Greatest Hits

## The Ethical Impulse in Rabbinic Judaism

Talkin' Bout A Revolution – Tracy Chapman – Tracy Chapman  
Blowin' In The Wind – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter, Paul and Mary  
Down By The Riverside – Waste Deep In The Big Muddy And Other Love Songs

## A Torah of Justice – A View from the Right?

Hands – Jewel - Spirit  
The Times They Are A Changin' – Bob Dylan – The Essential Bob Dylan  
We Are One – Safam – Peace By Peace

## A Torah of Justice – A View from the Left?

He Was My Brother – Simon and Garfunkel – Wednesday Morning, 3AM  
Oxford Town – Bob Dylan – The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan  
A Change Is Gonna Come – Sam Cooke – Ain't That Good News

## Environment

The Horizon Has Been Defeated – Jack Johnson -On and On  
Holy Ground – The Klezmatics – Wonder Wheel  
Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On  
Big Yellow Taxi – Joni Mitchell - Dreamland

## Business Ethics

Working Class Hero – John Lennon – Working Class Hero: The Definitive Lennon  
Carpal Tunnel – John O' Conner – Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways  
We Do The Work – Jon Fromer - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

## International Economic Justice

We Are The World. – USA For Africa – We Are The World (Single)  
Outside A Small Circle of Friends – Phil Ochs – The Best of Phil Ochs  
El Salvador – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary

## Special Needs

What It's Like – Everlast – The Best of House of Pain and Everlast – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**  
Mr. Wendall – Arrested Development – 3 years, 5 months, and 2 days in the life Of...  
The Boy In The Bubble – Paul Simon – The Essential Paul Simon

## Kashrut

All You Can Eat – Ben Folds – Supersunnyspeedgraphic, The LP – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**  
Mr. Greed – John Fogerty - Centerfield  
We Just Come To Work Here, We Don't Come To Die –Anne Feeney - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

## Israel

Hope: Pray On – Sweet Honey In The Rock - 25  
Yihyeh Tov – David Broza – Things Will Be Better, The Best Of David Broza  
Misplaced – Moshav Band

## Afterword

With My Own Two Hands – Ben Harper – Diamonds On The Inside  
Living For The City – Stevie Wonder – Number 1's  
Redemption Song – Bob Marley - Legend





Published in partnership with the  
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,  
the Rabbinical Assembly,  
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs  
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF  
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