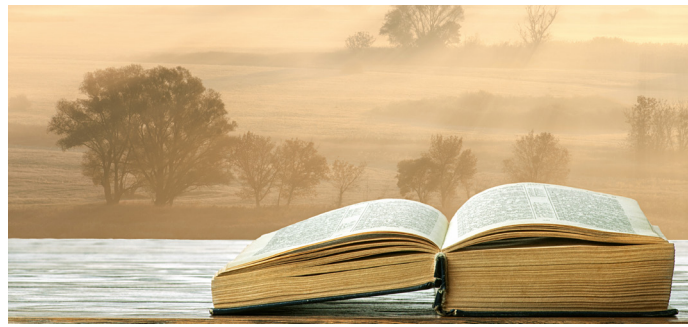


This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Prophecy: God's Word to Us

Prophecy is one of the most exciting, relevant, and yet misunderstood topics of our time. We cannot ignore the fact that we are living in prophetic time. More prophecies are coming to pass right now than perhaps any time before us – the ingathering of God's people from the four corners of the globe with the help of Gentiles (Isaiah 11:12; 49:22), the reestablishment of the Jewish state (Zechariah 8:7–8), and the revitalization of the land itself (Isaiah 51:3), to mention a few.

And yet, it is extremely important that we understand the true purpose and meaning of prophecy so that we can best know how to relate God's Word to our lives.

Many of the prophecies in the Bible were given with the purpose of rebuking the nation of Israel, and warning them of the consequences if they did not return to God. However, we must understand that these prophecies were given with love – with a desire to help the nation of Israel – and also that they were said “within the family.”

Think about your own family situation. There are certain things that we might say to family members for their own good that we would never say to a stranger. In much the same way, the prophets spoke with harsh, critical words to the nation of Israel as family members, and never intended people from other nations to take those words and misconstrue them.

The same was true when Jesus criticized the Pharisees for their hypocritical attitudes, as he did in Matthew 23. He did so out of love and the hope that they might change for the better. He spoke as a brother to them, as a family member, never intending for his words to be used against them, or Jews in general, by others.

Unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding

of prophecy and its purpose, much pain and suffering has ensued. As the church denied its Jewish roots, it took the words of the prophets and used them against the Jews. The church used the books of the prophets to suggest that God had broken His covenant with the Jewish people and had written them off for good. This is often referred to as “replacement theology,” where Jews and Judaism have been displaced in God's plan by the Church and Christianity.

The result was millennia of hatred and misunderstanding between Christians and Jews. It has been my calling and my life work to reverse 2,000 years of animosity, misunderstanding, and yes, even fratricide, by building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews.

I believe that we have made great strides in breaking down those barriers on both sides. Christians are rediscovering the rich and ancient Jewish roots of their faith (Romans 11:17–18), and Jews are discovering that Bible-believing Christians are their greatest supporters and friends.

As part of our study this month we will look at the true purpose of prophecy. We will reconnect to the Jewish roots of Christianity and understand how the prophecies of the Bible are meant to instruct us today. In next month's *Limmud* study we will look at how prophecy relates to the end times from both Jewish and Christian perspectives.

The Jewish tradition teaches that in the time of the Messiah, prophecy will be a widespread phenomenon. As we read in Joel 2:28, “*And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.*” Let's prepare for that time through our study today.

Rabbi Eckstein

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— Joel 2:28



What is Prophecy?

*“I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.
I say, ‘My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.’”*

– Isaiah 46:10

At its core, prophecy in both the Christian and Jewish faith is God communicating with people. The idea that God can and does communicate with humanity is so important in the Jewish faith that Maimonides, a 12th century rabbi and one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all time, included this idea in his revered 13 principles of faith. In principle number 6, Maimonides states: “I believe with complete faith that God communicates with man through prophecy.”

In the Christian Bible, the Apostle Peter reminded the early Christian church of the importance of prophecy and its ultimate source, when he said, *“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”* (2 Peter 1:20–21).

In fact, in the Christian faith, prophecy is regarded as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. According to Paul, who was trained under Jewish teachers, prophecy is the *greatest* gift: *“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy”* (1 Corinthians 14:1).

However, as much as prophecy is an integral part of both the Jewish and Christian belief systems, it is often misunderstood. When most people think about prophecy, they think about predicting the future. But this is not the main purpose of prophecy at all. Rather, the point of prophecy is to help people stay on course. Through the prophets, God spoke to a person or a nation in order to inspire, rebuke, guide, or enlighten.

The role of a prophet was not to predict the future. It was to shake people up, to open their eyes to the truth, and help them see what they needed to do. Sometimes this was accomplished by foretelling the future. For example, Isaiah was sent to describe the messianic era in order to encourage people and assure them that there will be a reward for obedience and a good ending to human history. (Read Isaiah chapters 54–66.)

At the same time, Isaiah (Chapter 58) was sent to rebuke the people, telling them that their fasts were not effective since the ritual had become empty instead of leading people to a “true fast” — feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and comforting the needy. Jeremiah was sent to foretell the destruction of the Temple so that the people might mend their ways (starting in Jeremiah chapter 1). And the prophet Samuel was sent simply to relay the message to Saul that God wanted him to go to battle against Amalek (1 Samuel 15).

And in the Christian Bible, Paul reminded the church in Corinth that *“But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort”* (1 Corinthians 14:3).

As we can see, prophecy has many purposes, but how is prophecy relevant to us today?

First, we must understand that according to Jewish tradition, there were 1.2 million prophets in history, but only prophecies that had eternal significance were written down for posterity. That means that every prophecy in the Bible contains a meaningful message for us today.

The second idea to remember is that when it comes to predictions in prophecy, we must tread very lightly. We cannot suppose for one moment that anyone can fully understand God’s plan for the future. As we read in Isaiah 55:8, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways . . .”* There are many ways that God’s plan and promises can unfold.

Prophecy in the Jewish tradition is about God’s providence, not predictions. Jews don’t look forward and say such-and-such will happen in this exact way. Rather, we look back and see God’s footsteps. We marvel at how history has unfolded just as God promised it would in the Bible, and find comfort in knowing that while we might not know God’s plan, we know He has a plan — and everything is happening exactly as it should be.

At the same time, we can listen to the ancient words of the prophets and find guidance relevant to what we should be doing today. In fact, many prophecies were written especially for the very time we are living through now. The prophets of old were speaking to *us*, to the generation of today.

think about it...

1. In our study, we looked at some prophecies that have come to pass in our times. How does this recognition influence your faith in prophecies yet to be fulfilled?
2. If there were a verified prophet alive today and you could ask him or her one question, what would it be? Why?
3. How have the prophecies of the Bible influenced your life? Can you identify one prophecy in particular that guides or inspires you the most?



Hearing God's Word

We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. – 2 Peter 1:19

Imagine that there was a person you could go to with any problem, any physical ailment, or spiritual impediment that you might be facing, and that person would give you advice that was 100 percent accurate, emanating from Divine wisdom. You would walk away confident that you had the tools to solve any problem in your way. This was what it was like in biblical times when prophecy flourished.

People didn't go to a doctor when they were sick; they went to a prophet. They wouldn't go to a psychologist if they had disharmony in their home; they went to the prophet. Prophets were there to provide a person with the wisdom of God and perfect direction on how to fix anything in their lives so long as they were willing to follow what the prophet told them.

According to Jewish tradition, prophecy as a common phenomenon ceased after the destruction of the first Holy Temple some 23 centuries ago. It continued in a smaller capacity through the 70-year exile and the return to the Holy Land. Yet, some years after the beginning of the Second Temple period, 530 BCE, prophecy literally ceased altogether.

Still, Maimonides' principle that God speaks to man remains true, albeit in a different form. Since the time of prophecy there is another type of supernatural wisdom called *Ruach HaKodesh*, meaning "Divine Inspiration" or "spirit of the holiness," which remains accessible today. In the Christian Bible, Jesus promised his followers that God would send them the Holy Spirit to guide and help them: "*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*" (John 14:26).

4. Read Psalm 19. What are some ways that you can get in touch with your own connection to God's voice?

5. Jewish tradition teaches that everything we see and experience each day contains messages from God. As your day concludes today, think about what messages God might have been sending you.

6. How might you serve as a partner in bringing God's promises and prophecies to complete fruition in our times?

Throughout the last two millennia until today, Jews believe that the *Ruach HaKodesh* rests among the most righteous men and women among us. These holy souls are said to write books intended to shed wisdom and knowledge from the Holy Spirit, to advise others through the Spirit, and to know things beyond the natural means through the Holy Spirit. With *Ruach HaKodesh*, people have been able to know future events, past events that they had no other way of knowing, and see deep into a person's soul.

The Jewish sages also taught that every day God's voice emanates from Sinai calling us to return to the ultimate truth found in the *Torah*. However, as one rabbi asked, what's the point of the voice if nobody hears it? The answer is that we do hear it, even if we are not fully conscious of it or always obedient to what we hear.

Right now there is Italian music playing in whatever room we're sitting in. There is also hip hop music and news broadcasting at the same time. We can't hear it if we don't have a radio that is tuned to the proper station, but nonetheless, it is there.

In the same way, God is always talking to us. The question is are we tuned into what He is saying? Sometimes we will hear God's voice in the form of a gut feeling, a strong urge to say or do something, or just a gentle knowing of how we might solve the problem at hand.

God sends us messages through everything we see throughout our day, at times through the people He brings into our lives, and through everything that we experience every day. They are guidance from God that we can benefit from greatly if we are both aware and open to receiving His messages to us.

And it goes without saying that studying God's Word in the Bible is the best way we can obtain Divine guidance at any time. In Deuteronomy 11:13, we read: "*if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today . . .*" In Hebrew this verse literally reads: "If you listen, you will listen to the commands I am giving you today."

The sages understood that the double usage of the words "listen" teaches us that if we truly listen with all our heart we will hear the directions God gives to us today so that we might live lives that honor God and fulfill our greatest potential.

As Paul instructed his young disciple, Timothy, in the Christian Bible, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).



Prophecies Unfolding Before Our Eyes

*“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman
and the planter by the one treading grapes.
New wine will drip from the mountains
and flow from all the hills,
and I will bring my people Israel back from exile.
“They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them.
They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;
they will make gardens and eat their fruit.” — Amos 9:13–14*

Over 3,000 years ago the *Torah* made some bold predictions, promises that seemed impossible to come to pass. The Bible claimed that if the Jewish people were not obedient to God He would expel them from the land of Israel and “scatter you among the nations” (Leviticus 26:33). This is exactly what happened to the nation of Israel, which was exiled to all four corners of the globe.

Yet, astonishingly God also promised that though they would be dispersed and persecuted, they would also return to the land. In Jeremiah 31:8, God promised, “See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth . . . a great throng will return.”

No other nation in the world has been exiled from its land and survived to return to it. The Jewish people have done it not once, but twice – the first after a 70-year Babylonian exile (see Ezra 1:1–11), and the second after nearly two millennia! These things are not happenstance. They are the hand of God as prophesied in the Bible.

This is what we mean when we say that we can look at the promises and predictions in the Bible and appreciate prophecies coming alive today. Those prophecies, and so many more like them, are especially for our generation. The moment we open our eyes and see that God is bringing about one promise after the other, it enlightens us to the fact that we are living in extremely spiritually significant times, and inspires us to do our part in the process we are witnessing. The prophet Amos said,

“The days are coming . . .” Those days are now!

In 1867, Mark Twain visited the Holy Land. This is what he saw: “. . . A desolate country . . . given over wholly to weeds . . . a silent mournful expanse . . . Even the olive tree and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.” The land that Mark Twain saw was the way that the land had looked for more than 2,000 years.

As foretold in the Bible, once the children of Israel were exiled, the land ceased to blossom: “I myself will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled” (Leviticus 26:32). Every great empire in the world tried to settle and revive the land of Israel from the time the Jews were exiled until their return, but they couldn’t. Yet, miraculously, today, the land of Israel has been transformed into a virtual garden of Eden as foretold by the prophet Ezekiel 36:8: “But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home.”

More importantly, how are we reacting to these prophetic times?

God has given us the ability to know that we are in important times and He has given us the opportunity to participate in bringing these prophecies to complete fruition. Those words written so many years ago were not written to impress us with God’s omniscience, but rather to impress upon us the importance of the time we live in and to cause us to act on that knowledge in fulfilling God’s plan for His world.

apply it...

- 1. LIVE THE PROPHECIES.** Isaiah was sent to speak words of prophecy thousands of years ago. In Isaiah 58:7 the prophet spoke this message from God: “. . . share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them . . .” How might you integrate this message into your life today?
- 2. KEEP A JOURNAL.** There are things that we see or experiences that make an impact on us every day. Each day write down some of the most compelling aspects of your day and notice if there are any patterns.
- 3. BE A PARTNER.** God said that He would bring the children of Israel home, that the land would blossom, and that He would comfort His people. Join us at *The Fellowship*, www.ifcj.org, as we do our part in bringing these prophecies about.
- 4. LOOK FOR GOD’S FOOTSTEPS.** How many biblical prophecies can you find unfolding in the world today? Take some time to read God’s Word on future events and see just how many prophecies match up with events of the last century.
- 5. LISTEN FOR AN ANSWER.** Read 1 Samuel 3:7–11 and 1 Kings 19:12. Whether we call it the Holy Spirit or Divine Inspiration, when we ask God a question, if we are still and silent, we just may “hear” the answer we are seeking.