

## Message from the Haftara

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# Crafting a Covenant for the Imperfect

## YITRO

The haftara for Parshat Yitro recounts the call to prophecy of Yeshayahu, a moment of initial contact with the Divine that is vivid, unsettling, and transformative. It parallels in many ways the revelation experienced by the people of Israel at Mount Sinai in this week's parsha, as they prepared to receive the Tablets of the Covenant. On the surface, both of these revelations were accompanied by an overwhelming sensory experience of thunderous sound, trembling earth, and engulfing smoke. But below the surface, they mark the beginning of a more concrete and binding relationship, one that required intensive preparation, and that did not come naturally or feel entirely comfortable at first.

In both the parsha and haftara, revelation forces its recipients to confront their humanity and imperfection. In our parsha, God instructs Moshe: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and

tomorrow; let them wash their clothes and be ready for the third day, for on that third day the Lord will descend on Mount Sinai before all the peoples' eyes" (Sh'mot 19:10–11). Encountering God requires preparation. When Yeshayahu experiences his prophetic vision, his response is deeply personal (6:5): "I am condemned, for my mouth has been defiled, one man among a people with their mouths defiled, and my eyes see the King, the Lord of Hosts". God responds not by rejecting him, but by purifying him: "One of the Serafim flew to me, and in his hand was a coal, taken with tongs from the altar top. With this he touched my lips and said, 'When this has touched your lips, your iniquity is gone, and all your sin forgiven'" (vv. 6–7).

We learn from these encounters that the divine-human relationship is not built despite human imperfection, but through an honest acknowledgement of it. God does not demand perfection as a precondition for connection; rather, He recognizes these challenges and provides us with the tools to work through them. What's more, only a person like Yeshayahu who understands his own limitations can successfully convey God's message to the people. Yeshayahu's concern about his defiled mouth reminds us of Moshe's famous concern that he was "not a man of words" (Sh'mot 4:10). In both cases,

God does not erase the limitation, but works through it, empowering the messenger to fulfill his mission despite his perceived inadequacy.

It is made clear to Yeshayahu from the outset that the people of Israel will themselves have to overcome significant challenges to be able to hear the prophet's message. "Go - tell this people: Hear, you shall hear but understand it not, see it all but know it not" (Yeshayahu 6:9). The challenge, then, is not only prophetic clarity, but human receptivity. For Yeshayahu, and for us today, the task is to find concrete avenues and methods through which we can meaningfully engage and build a relationship with God. The relationship begins from the starting point of our humanity. This is why the mitzvot, which were first given at Sinai, are designed for human beings with human weaknesses and opportunities, and not for angels.

This idea is illustrated powerfully in a well-known Talmudic story (Shabbat 88-89) in which Moshe is commanded to defend why the Torah should be given to Israel, when the angels demand that it be reserved for them. Moshe points out that the Torah declares "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt." "Did you go down to Egypt?" he asks the angels. "Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should you possess the Torah?"

The Torah, Moshe argues, is meant to guide human life, moral conduct, and the challenges of existence on earth. Our rendezvous with God, through Torah and mitzvot, is meant for fallible people, offering a path by which we draw closer to God, and He to us.

Interestingly, within the kabbalistic tradition, mitzvot are sometimes called "suggestions" (ATIN), not because they are optional, but because they are practical strategies for connection with God. This idea is expressed eloquently by Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin (Dover Tzekek p. 40) when he explains that the Jewish people heard the first two commandments firsthand from God: "I am your God" and "You shall have no other gods". According to Kabbalistic tradition, these two statements actually contain within them the spiritual kernel of all commandments, as they refer to establishing a singular and exclusive bond with God. Thus, the remaining 611 laws are essentially practical suggestions and pathways through which we can live out that bond in our everyday lives.

A truly honest assessment of our relationship with God therefore requires asking ourselves difficult questions: Are we committed to seeking God's presence in our lives? Do the mitzvot still speak to us, or has our observance become perfunc-

tory and robotic? Are we willing to invest the effort in deepening our relationship with God?

This is the enduring message that is given to the prophet Yeshayahu: you, the prophet, and they, the people, are human. Human relationships are complex and dynamic, and they require constant work and investment. That is precisely what makes the covenant between God and the Jewish people so precious. It is sanctified and purified not by perfection, but by the efforts both parties invest in it. And it is only through that sustained effort that true closeness can be achieved. 