



Yaakov and Elisha the Prophet: Prophecy and Joy By Rabbi David Silverberg

The Torah in Parashat Vayigash gives an unusual description of Yaakov's response to the news that his beloved son, Yosef, was alive: "*va-techi ru'ach Yaakov*" – "Yaakov's spirit was revived" (45:27). The plain meaning of this phrase, presumably, is that it refers to newfound joy, the end of Yaakov's two decades of grief and bereavement. Nevertheless, the Torah's unusually dramatic depiction of his response indicated to the Sages that a deeper transformation took place. Thus, *Targum Onkelos* translates this phrase to mean, "the holy spirit rested upon Yaakov." The *Midrash Tanchuma* and Rashi similarly explain that Yaakov regained his prophetic capabilities upon learning that his son was alive.

Maimonides cites *Targum Onkelos*'s translation of this verse in the seventh chapter of his *Shemoneh Perakim*, amidst his discussion of the prerequisites of prophecy. He explains that Yaakov's prophecy was withheld during the years of Yosef's absence because prophecy cannot be experienced in a state of melancholy. Yaakov's angst over the loss of his son prevented him from receiving prophecy, since prophecy can be conveyed to a prophet only in a state of joy. Maimonides emphasizes in this context that although prophets do not need to be flawless human beings, prophecy can never be achieved while one feels despondent or angry. These two emotions unconditionally negate the possibility of experiencing prophecy. The "holy spirit" could not rest on Yaakov during his years of mourning because his condition of sorrow rendered him unfit for prophecy. Only once he learned that Yosef was alive did he regain his prophetic capabilities.

As an example of anger negating the possibility of prophecy, Maimonides points to the prophet Elisha, who was approached by Yehoram, king of Israel, and Yehoshafat, king of Judea. They enlisted the prophet's assistance as they waged war against the nation of Moav, and Elisha required a musician to play music before he could receive a prophecy to convey to the kings (Melakhim II 3:15). The Sages explained that Elisha grew angry looking upon Yehoram, an idolater, and his anger had to subside before he was fit to receive a prophetic vision, thus requiring the services of a musician. Maimonides draws proof from this incident that anger disqualifies a prophet from receiving prophecy.

The two examples that Maimonides cites in this section – Yaakov's despondency, and Elisha's aggravation – are characteristic of the two different causes of distress that people experience: personal sorrow, and frustration in the face of evil. The case of Yaakov represents grief triggered by personal reasons – physical or emotional pain, financial worry, lack of fulfillment, and so on. In the case of Elisha, the cause of distress was not personal pain, but rather the frustration of beholding evil. The sight of the idolatrous king brought to mind all that was wrong with the Jewish people, diverting Elisha's attention away from the nation's spiritual accomplishments, and showing him

firsthand the forces of paganism that had unfortunately seized control of the Northern Kingdom. Elisha, who cared deeply about the state of *Am Yisrael*, was overcome by feelings of anger toward the pagan leader.

God's refusal to grant prophecy to Yaakov in his state of bereavement, or to Elisha in his state of anger, reflects the importance of containing even these natural emotional responses. Personal loss and the sight of evil threaten to rattle a person's faith, or, perhaps more commonly, to destroy one's vitality, idealism and sense of purpose. Connecting with God and the divine will, which occurs at the highest level in the experience of prophecy, requires overcoming these emotions and remaining joyful and optimistic despite personal grievances or the moral degeneration we see all around us. The true servant God is the one who rejoices in the privilege of bearing this title even during life's more difficult periods and upon confronting the evil in the world. One can hardly blame Yaakov for mourning the loss of his son, or Elisha for feeling resentful toward the pagan Israelite king. However, the withholding of prophecy during these periods demonstrates the ideal of joy, optimism, vitality and vigor even in the face of hardship and disappointment. Imperfect as our lives and the world we may be, we are expected to exult in the opportunity to serve our Creator each day of our lives.