

## Isaiah: Prophecy of Language

How the prophet was prepared for his task

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There are quite a few tantalizing details that Isaiah reveals about his early career. Understanding these details should certainly make it easier to deciphering just about everything else he taught. By way of background, it would be worthwhile reviewing the following passages from the book of Isaiah before proceeding: 6:1-10, 49:1-5, 50:4-5 and 61:1.

Immediately before requesting a volunteer to deliver a crucial prophetic mission, God shows Isaiah a remarkable vision of the Heavenly court (6:1-10). Winged *seraphim* stand around God's throne ready to loudly proclaim God's holiness. Isaiah enigmatically reacts with the fear that neither he nor the Jewish people are deserving of such a vision. In immediate response to this criticism of his nation, a seraph touches a burning coal to Isaiah's mouth. Isaiah then enthusiastically accepts God's mission.

There is obviously some connection between what Isaiah was shown and his subsequent selection for the mission to carry some key message to the world, but what that connection is is not immediately clear. Let's think about what he saw:

- The *seraphim* employed their three pairs of wings as expressions of modest humility and intense readiness to serve. From TB Chagiga 13b we learn that the *seraphim* covered their legs out of a natural feeling of shame at being “naked” before their Master and proclaimed their praise of God through their flight (the second pair of wings). Their faces were likely covered by the third set for much the same reason that Avraham or Moshe covered their faces upon God's revelation: "who am I to stand erect and proud in God's presence?"
- By making the effort to encourage each other to engage equally in their task (וקרא זה אל זה ואמר), the *seraphim* demonstrated the ideal of Divine service as a cooperative group effort rather than the uncoordinated work of disparate individuals.
- They verbally acknowledged and proudly proclaimed God's holiness. (While "holiness" itself is not a straightforward concept, we may think of it as an expression of God's absolute separateness from the physical world.)
- They verbally acknowledged how His glory is manifest throughout all time and space (קדוש קדוש...מלא כל הארץ).
- By declaring God's glory to fill the entire world, they acknowledged a firm limit to their own role and abilities. (TB Kiddushin 31a).
- The ensuing smoke evoked the similar image of Mt. Sinai during the giving of the Torah (Vilna Gaon - see Exodus 19:16).

Now it must be noted that portrayals of Angels, *seraphim* and other heavenly creatures are not generally meant to be understood literally (see Rabbi E.E. Dessler in Michtav M'Elياهو vol IV page 115). Rather, they are instructive examples of how idealized servants of God should behave. We are meant to both note and intelligently emulate their conduct, integrating our understanding of it into our daily lives.

Could this vision not have been a verbal representation of the ideal human service of God? Could its substance not be intended to serve as the underlying tone for all of Isaiah's subsequent teachings; the foundation upon which all his lessons were to be built? Or, in other words, could sincere humility, communal concern and awareness of God's endless holiness not be the starting points for Isaiah's program for Jewish renewal?

This would seem to have been the message. But Isaiah didn't understand it quite that way. Instead, he

was overwhelmed by what he perceived as an unbridgeable gap between the prophetic ideal that was presented to him and the reality of human frailty:

"Woe is me for I am silenced, for I am a man of impure lips. And amongst a nation of impure lips I dwell..." (6:5)

In speaking so sharply about the Jewish people, the prophet erred. In fact, despite being immediately cleansed through suffering (v. 7), the residual effects of this error were eventually to cause Isaiah's death.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah, at the time, quickly recovered and unhesitatingly accepted God's mission ("Here I am: send me" - v. 8).<sup>2</sup> But still, one can't deny that the prophet was initially skeptical about the prospects for meaningful national change. Why? Perhaps because the kind of perfection (and especially verbal perfection) that Isaiah understood to be required of Jews simply seemed unattainable. The prophet might still have been unaware of both the Jewish people's truly exalted potential and of the personal qualities and special support God would assign to him.

Let's see some more of the qualities given to Isaiah.

From even before his birth, Isaiah's very nature and essence were custom-built:

"He formed me from the womb" (49:5).

The necessary tools to influence whole populations were already in place: what, after all, do the synonymous phrases "called" and "mentioned" from the verse

"From my mother's midst He called my name; God, from the womb, mentioned my name" (49:1)

...teach us? Often in Torah literature a person's "name" refers more to his reputation and impact than his actual name.<sup>3</sup> Especially in this case, where being "called" would seem to serve so little purpose, God would instead appear to be directing the unborn Isaiah to his life's task while bestowing upon him the ability to reach out to vast multitudes<sup>4</sup> and to significantly change the lives of many through indirect influence.

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1 יבמות מט: רש"י נסררה לפומיה ונח נפשיה

2 Isaiah's eagerness to accept the task is all the more startling when contrasted with the famous reluctance displayed by Moshe (Ex. 3:11-13) and, later, Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6). Perhaps Isaiah can be more accurately compared with David who, despite only two brief preparatory meetings with the prophet Shmuel, appeared somehow entirely ready - and largely self-educated - for his demanding task. See the chapter "David: Through Critical Eyes" from my book "The Royal Prophet - and other thoughtful essays on the book of Shmuel"

3 even in English, "name" can be used as: "He made a name for himself"

4 In fact, perhaps more than with any other major prophet, Isaiah's message is addressed to the entire world - see for example 49:1 and 6. Throughout human history there seems to have been no end of individuals presenting themselves and their teachings as vital agents of world change. Precious few actually had anything of value to teach. And of those, still fewer managed to command more than a moment of the world's fragmented attention. That the name "Isaiah" is, in the larger public mind, nearly synonymous with the struggle for social justice is clear evidence of just how miraculously his fame was achieved.

Tangentially, I strongly suspect that the sheer diversity of his intended audience required Isaiah to employ the kind of linguistic ambiguity that makes the book so difficult to read: anything more direct would have necessarily excluded legitimate alternative readings.

What form would this ability take? Well, how is it described?

“From my mother's midst...” (ממעֵי - more literally: “stomach”).

Rabbi S.R. Hirsch understands the stomach as the body's most sensitive organ, the seat of delicate, sympathetic feelings (see his commentary to Gen. 15:4). By choosing this phrase, does the prophet not imply that he was nurtured in an environment that imbued him with the kind of sensitivity he would eventually need to understand both the problems he was sent to fight and the best methods to reach the hearts of those he would have to change?

Isaiah seems to have understood his strengths to lie in this general range, as he later described how God...

"...Gave me a tongue trained (למודים) to, in time of need, satisfy those thirsty for the Word," (50:4)

and he then begged God to

"...Awaken in me each morning an ear capable of hearing lessons (כלמודים)" (ibid)

In other words, that he would achieve the greatest success by using his sharpened senses to properly understand and then appropriately react to the needs of the moment. Imagine just how sharp these senses would need to be to accurately grasp the moods, ambitions and grumblings of large, geographically disparate populations. And especially since Isaiah's prophetic messages were written not only for his own time, but for generations, circumstances and individuals whose birth lay far off in the distant future! Indeed, for such a task he would surely need "awakened" hearing.

Doubtless it was for this reason that the prophet also saw himself as a "true arrow" (49:2): just as an arrow is a weapon that can strike accurately at distant targets, so would Isaiah's messages need to be shaped so as to find their targets over many centuries and across far-flung continents.<sup>5</sup>

The usefulness of an arrow as a weapon depends primarily on the skill of the man holding the bow. Isaiah somehow felt that skill within him and sought to employ it. However, no human can expect to overcome all his opponents relying on his personal abilities alone. This is especially true if so many of his ambitions involve mismatched confrontations with entrenched oppressive social classes and governments on behalf of the poor and powerless.<sup>6</sup> The prophet knew that great (though largely metaphoric) destructive violence must be inflicted upon his more-powerful opponents. Such violence would require an external Power greater than his. Much like the power that possession of a sharp sword affords its owner. Thus, Isaiah's mouth - the primary weapon in his battles - was made specifically "Like a sharp sword" (ibid).

Specifically in connection with those passages which serve to define Isaiah's overall mission, one must note the repeated use of the rather unusual construction "The Lord, God" (50:4-5, 7, 9 and 61:1). Perhaps these two names of God are used to emphasize a dual nature of the prophet's mission; to provide both comfort and harsh rebuke - each in its proper time and precise measure (Daas Sofrim).

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5 One might wonder why Isaiah - a prophet of God - would need to worry about the quality of his message: just say whatever the Voice within you tells you to say! This would have been true of Moshe, whose prophecy (the Torah itself) was nothing more than a precise transcription of God's Word. However other, lesser prophets were given a broad theme to communicate to their audience and were then expected to express that theme through the filter of their own personalities and creativity (see TB Sanhedrin 89a ואין שני נביאים מתנבאין בסיגנון אחד).

6 See 61: 1

By way of a summary, so much about Isaiah's origins, his mission (and the tools he would use for it) and even the idealized image of a Godly life that he was to teach, hangs on language. One cannot help but draw the conclusion that a human being's quality is largely measured by his use of his faculty of speech and that, to a large degree, achieving God's expectations for us depends on painstakingly developing refined and careful verbal practices.

If you will allow me, I have one more curious observation about Isaiah's mission: his entire effort from the very beginning was colored by the widely-known fact that he was virtually doomed to failure - or, more accurately, this his efforts alone would be far from sufficient (and that only subsequent Divinely wrought destruction would finish the job).

"And (God) said (to Isaiah): Go and say to this people 'Listen and you will not understand, see and do not fathom'. The heart of this people has grown fat, its ears are heavy and its eyes are distracted, lest they should see with their eyes and with their ears hear, and their hearts will understand and they will return and be healed.'" (6:9-10)

This provokes some serious questions: why should we expect that God's Word be largely (and even willfully) ignored? Is this powerful resistance to change a natural part of the human condition and, thus, equally a feature of every generation? Have we not seen in our own day the remarkable return of thousands of secular Jews to full observance? Their journeys are often painful and courageous, but is that the *kind* of change desired by Isaiah? Are these Jews exceptions to the general malaise described by God or are they, too, somehow changing only on some superficial level and avoiding a far more aggressive kind of self-analysis and growth?

Perhaps these words are a window through which we might catch a brief glimpse of a method of Divine service more profound than anything that is currently readily available. Perhaps a careful study of the rest of Isaiah's actual message might reveal more.