



Mediating Between the Divine and the Human: The Prophet's Other Central Role

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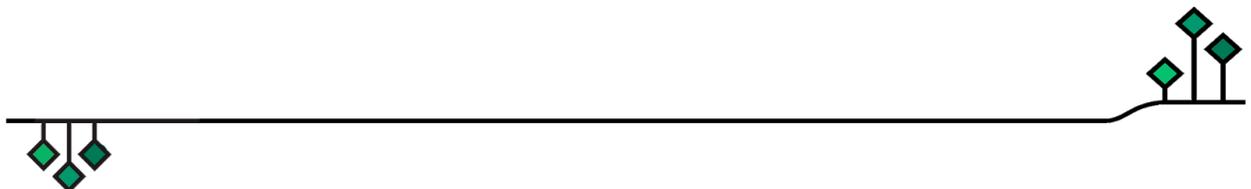
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Most people see that the prophet's important and primary role is to serve as the deliverer of God's messages and spokesperson for the Divine.¹ Our *parashah*—together with the Yitro narrative of the Sinai entrance into the covenant—highlights a second no less vital role: to represent the people to God, and to urge God to behave in accordance with the covenant. In our *parashah*, this second role made the difference between life and death for the people and the prophet.

In the runup to accepting the Sinai covenant, the Torah gave many hints that entry into the *berit* was fraught with danger for both sides. The Infinite Divine energy had been willed by God to be contained within the laws of nature which sustain the universe in the first universal covenant.² But the pent up covenantal energy was so explosive that contact between the Divine and the human had to be limited, shielded to flow safely through special people or

¹ See Reuven Kimelman's masterful treatment of this prophetic role in "Prophecy as Arguing with God and the Ideal of Justice" in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 2014, vol. 68 (1), pp. 17-27. Kimelman's Torah has influenced me and shaped me for many decades.

² This covenant is spelled out in Genesis 8:21-22; 9:9-17. For the requirement of God's self-limitation in forming covenant, see my essay on Parashat Noah, "Covenant," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant>.



places. Now, the Divine was to further self-reduce to come closer to the people of Israel. But that concentrated energy had the potential to overflow, or be driven by anger, and harm the Israelites. Hence, the warnings to the people not to come too close or to touch the mountain lest they die (Exodus 19:12-13, 21-22; 20:15-16).

The danger on the Israelites' side was that the people might not be able to live up to such a commitment or act dependably by covenantal guidelines. They might have violated—or even forfeited—their commitment, endangering themselves. In this way, accepting the *berit* had the possibility of being detrimental to their health.

The prophet Moses made Sinai acceptance possible. Frightened by the thunder, lightning, and the high voltage energy surrounding them—and afraid of death—the people turned to Moses and asked him to be their shield and receiver, which he agreed to do (Exodus 20:15-18; Deuteronomy 5:19-28). The prophet stepped in between God and the people and took responsibility for the behavior of both. This allowed both partners to enter into the covenant and not be deterred by fear of hurting or being punished by the other.

In the spies fiasco of our *parashah*, marked by breakdown and death, the greatest prophet of all, Moses, again plays the prophet-protector role. “God would destroy them had not Moses, His chosen one, stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath” (Psalm 106:23). The intensity of this mediator role—and the prophet's total commitment in putting himself on the line to do it—is made even clearer when we read the way the spies' mission goes to pieces in light of the narrative of the Golden Calf, the other great crisis of the Sinaitic people and covenant. After that event, out of disgust with their acts of idolatry, God was determined to wipe out the Israelite nation and replace it with Moses and his family (Exodus 32:10-14; 30-34).



Without hesitation, Moses said to God (in my paraphrase): “If You intend to destroy this people, You will have to kill me first. I will not accept Your offer to become an alternate covenant nation. I will not leave my people behind—not even to go with You.”³

This direct confrontation stopped the divine anger in its tracks. Going forward, Moses worked on the people, teaching and grooming them to function in the *berit*. When they complained unjustifiably and decided that manna from heaven wasn’t good enough (Numbers 11:4-6), when they demanded food and tidbits (like in the good slavery menu!),⁴ Moses rebuked them. Yet, with God’s help, he sought to give some response to satisfy them. Later, when the spies returned from Canaan with their report to go ahead to the land of milk and honey, despite its formidable challenges, the people panicked and wanted to retreat and regress (14:1-4). Moses stood up and urged them to act on their trust in the past record of liberation (Deuteronomy 1:30-31). He steadfastly argued, urged, insisted—up to the point where he is confronted by an out-of-control mob ready to stone him and Aaron to death (Numbers 14:10).

It turns out that the threat to the prophet’s life was always more from the people. Again, God offers to wipe the ever-backsliding Israelites out and replace them with Moses and his family (14:12). But Moses once more puts his life on the line to stop the Divine anger. He turns to persuade the Lord to be forgiving in the face of bad behavior under such aggravated circumstances. He presses God to forgive this outrageous, sinful behavior. He evokes God’s covenantal commitment to forgive, to be compassionate and gracious, to hold back the anger and overflow with covenantal love (14:13-19).

³ “And now if you will forgive their sin, and if you will not [let the people live], wipe me out of your book” (Exodus 32:32).

⁴ They talk about the cucumbers, leeks, garlic, melons, fish, and meat that they used to eat in Egypt!



On the night of the confrontation over the spies' mission, Moses goes through the same drill as at the Golden Calf episode. He again makes clear that he will never abandon the people, not even to get an assured place in God's plan for the future. He again argues that God's representative in the world is bound up with His people. He appeals to God's covenantal self-description and asks the Deity to hold steadfastly with the covenant and with the people. When the Divine dooms the Exodus generation to die in the desert (14:21-23)—which obviously threatens Moses' animating dream of entering the Land of Israel—he says not a word of censure for this penalty. He tries to get the people to reconcile with the decree and go forward as best as they can.⁵ When the people try to wriggle out of the Lord's decree, and flip flop from instant retreat to immediate conquest (14:40), he patiently and firmly tries to get them not to set out on a futile and self-destructive campaign to enter into the land of Canaan. He continues to educate the people to grow up and act responsibly, even as he continues to wrestle with God to stay with the covenant and move forward with the people.

Of course, the whole episode ends disastrously. The impulsive entry campaign is squashed by local tribes (14:45). The decree of doom is passed. Nevertheless, thanks to Moses, the worst outcome, the harshest Divine intention—to wipe out the Israelites—is not consummated.

In this *parashah* (as at the Golden Calf), Moses holds up the banner of a religious role model and leader. The prophet is ready to give his life for the people. To be religious is to be ready to give one's life for others—not to seek exemptions from danger on the grounds of being devoted to Torah. The prophet does not simply judge the people in God's name. The religious leader brings the people's needs and concerns to God and, sometimes, asks for different

⁵ This includes raising the next generation to take responsibility and take on the task of conquering a homeland.



instructions. The prophet does not lay the blame on the people, and he will stand with them and even take punishment with them as he tries to sustain them through failure or loss of nerve.

At the same time, the prophet is not just a paragon, but rather is very human. Moses also gets thrown and flustered, angry and depressed, from time to time. The mediating, double-mission prophet is not just put before us to be on a pedestal. The prophet is held up as a human being of great spirit and courage, to be imitated and followed in our own lives.

