



## כוח ברוח ה' Joy: Prophetic Strength

### ■ The Spirit of G-d

Parashat Va'etchanan recounts the sublime occasion of the Stand at Mt. Sinai, the ultimate prototype of the historic phenomenon of prophecy to the Nation of Israel.

This is the one and only time in history that an entire nation hears the voice of G-d:

הַשְׁמִיעַ עִם קוֹל אֱ-לֹהִים מִדְבַּר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ אֶתְהָ וַיְחִי?

*Has a nation ever heard the voice of G-d speaking from within  
the fire, as you heard - and lived? (D'varim 4,33)*

The most sublime bond between man and G-d is that of prophecy. It is generally thought that prophetic inspiration includes some kind of wondrous vision or prophetic message that foresees the future. But we sometimes overlook the all-important concept of “prophetic missions.” Such assignments are not predictions, but rather involve high-power energies that thrust the prophet forward and grant him the great strengths he needs for his Divine missions, such as delivering rebuke.

The prophet Micha expressed this most clearly:

וְאוֹלָם אֲנֹכִי מְלֵאֲתִי כֹחַ אֶת רוּחַ ה',

וּמִשְׁפָּט וּגְבוּרָה לְהַגִּיד לְיַעֲקֹב פְּשָׁעוֹ וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל חַטָּאתוֹ.

*But I am full of the power of the spirit of G-d,  
and judgment and might, to declare to Yaakov his transgression  
and to Israel his sin. (Micha 3,8)*



We need not look far to find the source of this tremendous energy and power: It is certainly G-d, as He tells the Prophet Jeremiah:

וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה נֹתְתִיךָ הַיּוֹם לְעִיר מְבֻצָּר וּלְעַמּוּד בְּרִזָּל וּלְחֻמוֹת נְחֹשֶׁת עַל כָּל  
הָאָרֶץ לְמַלְכֵי יְהוּדָה לְשָׂרֵיהָ לְכַהֲנֵיהָ וּלְעַם הָאָרֶץ.

*For behold, I have made you this day  
into a fortified city, an iron pillar, and brazen walls against  
the whole land, against the kings of Yehuda,  
her princes, her priests, and the people of the land.*

וְנִלְחַמוּ אֵלַיךָ וְלֹא יוֹכְלוּ לָךְ כִּי אֲתָךְ אֲנִי נֹאֵם ה' לְהַצִּילְךָ.

*And they shall fight against you,  
but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you,  
says G-d, to save you. (Yirmiyahu 1,18-19)*

Undoubtedly, Hashem is the foundation for these energies and forces. But what is *man's* place in receiving these prophetic wellsprings? What is the critical component without which a prophet cannot contain the prophetic energy he is granted?

The Torah portion of Va'etchanan is the first one to be read publicly during the Days of Consolation following Tisha B'Av. Just as wellsprings of strength are required when the prophet must relay Divine anger and warn of punishments, the same is true when he must give comfort and encouragement in the absence of hope after all has been destroyed.

We learn this from the words of the Prophet Yeshayahu in the famous Haftarah of consolation: *Nachamu nachamu ami, Be comforted, be comforted, My nation* (40,1). Read aloud after Va'etchanan, on the Sabbath after Tisha B'Av, it is replete with support and encouragement:

נִתְּנוּ לַיָּגֵף כֹּחַ ... וַיַּעֲפוּ נְעָרִים וַיִּגְעוּ ...  
וְקוֹי ה' יַחֲלִיפוּ כֹחַ יַעֲלוּ אֶבֶר בְּנִשְׂרָיִם יְרוּצוּ וְלֹא יִיגְעוּ יִלְכוּ וְלֹא יִיַּעֲפוּ.

*[G-d] gives strength to the weary,  
and to him who has no strength, He increases strength.  
Youths shall become tired and weary,  
and young men shall stumble. But those whose hope is in G-d  
shall renew [their] vigor and raise wings as eagles;  
they shall run and not become weak,  
they shall walk and not tire. (Yeshayahu 40,29-31)*



We see that a prophet of encouragement also requires strength and energies – and again our question is: From where does he draw them? What drives his tireless battle to fulfill this difficult mission?

### ■ The Points of a Triangle

The Sages of the Talmud (P'sachim 117a) revealed the secret of the process that enables the advent of prophecy:

**The Divine Presence dwells not amidst idleness, sadness, frivolity, light-headedness, chatter and idle pursuits – but rather through the joy of mitzvah, as written: 'And now, bring me a musician' [said King Saul], and when the musician played, the spirit of G-d rested upon him.** (Kings II 3,15)

Having established the fundamental concept of “joy of mitzvah” as the basis for *prophecy*, the Gemara then quotes another teaching, by Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav, that the same is true in matters of Jewish Law: *Torah study* must begin with and be founded upon the joy of mitzvah. And the third ideal that must be predicated on the joy of mitzvah is *prayer*, as the Gemara teaches elsewhere:

**Our Rabbis taught: One must not begin to pray amidst sadness, laziness, frivolity, idle chatter, light-headedness, or idle pursuits – but rather through the joy of mitzvah.** (B'rachot 31a)

We thus have an Isosceles triangle of *prophecy*, *Torah* and *prayer*, in which the two equal angles are Torah and prayer, and the vertex is prophecy – and all three of them require the joy of mitzvah.

*Torah* is the path set by G-d to direct our lives and give them meaning. *Prayer* is the longing of the soul, the expression of our yearning for the Light of G-d to ever shine upon us. The apex, *prophecy*, includes vision and mission. And the triangle's base leg on which all three of these concepts stand, Chazal teach us, is that of *simchah shel mitzvah*, the joy of performing mitzvot. Let us return now to Parashat Va'etchanan and find references to this triangle.

### ■ Greatness

In his parting speech to the People of Israel before they begin their campaign to conquer and settle the Promised Land, Moshe Rabbeinu emphasizes that even if they are numerically small, they are actually a “great” nation:



...וַאֲמָרוּ רַק עִם חָכָם וְנָבוֹן הֵגוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה.  
*...and [the nations] will say,*  
*“It can only be that this great nation*  
*is a wise and understanding people.”* (D'varim 4,6)

What renders Israel deserving of such a designation? *Prayer* and *Torah*, as Moshe elaborates in the next two verses:

כִּי מִי גוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ אֱ-לֹהִים קְרִבִים אֵלָיו,  
 כֹּה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ בְּכֹל קְרָאֵנוּ אֵלָיו.  
*For what great nation is there that has G-d so near to it,*  
*as Hashem is whenever we call to Him.* (verse 7)

Moshe Rabbeinu is amazed at Israel's power of prayer. Is there any other nation in the world that can long for G-d so completely and sense such closeness to Him, to the extent that it receives a response every time it calls to G-d?!

And the next verse emphasizes Israel's greatness in Torah:

וּמִי גוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים צְדִיקִים,  
 כְּכֹל הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם.  
*And what great nation has such just laws and precepts*  
*as this entire Torah that I place before you today.* (verse 8)

That is to say, nowhere in the entire world can we find such true, just and perfect laws as those in the Torah that G-d has presented to Bnei Yisrael via Moshe.

These two verses explain the two equal angles of the triangle, that of *Torah* and *prayer*, and how they make Israel into a *great nation*: Israel is “great” in the Torah it received and in its bonds with G-d. What about the vertex, the world of *prophecy*? This we find later on in the same chapter:

כִּי שְׂאֵל נָא לְיָמִים רִאשׁוֹנִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לְפָנָי...  
 הֲנִהְיָה כְּדָבַר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה אוֹ הִנְשָׁמַע כְּמָהוּ?  
*Ask, please, regarding the earlier days...*  
*Was there ever such a great thing*  
*or was anything like it ever heard?* (verse 32)

What is this *great thing*? The next verse continues, as we saw above: *“Has a nation ever heard the voice of G-d speaking from within the fire, as you heard – and lived?”* This, of course, refers to the world of prophecy – the



source of the strength so necessary for Israel in the desert to ready them to arrive in Eretz Yisrael and combat the Seven Nations – the goal spelled out by the Torah a few verses later:

לְהוֹרִישׁ גּוֹיִם גְּדֹלִים וְעֲצָמִים מִמֶּךָ מִפְּנֵיךָ...

*To drive out greater and stronger nations than you...* (verse 38)

Israel required, and received, tremendous prophetic energy – this sense of strength, vision and mission provided by hearing G-d's word directly from Him – to enable it to fight and defeat larger and more powerful nations.

### ■ The Large House

The above verses help us understand the Talmudic dispute between R. Yochanan and R. Yehoshua ben Levi (Megilla 27a) regarding the relative importance of a house of study (Beit Medrash) and a house of prayer (Beit Knesset).

The question is: Which of the two is more sacred? Is it the synagogue, where we raise up our prayers to Hashem? Or is the Torah study hall even more sacred? This is not just an academic query, but rather determines the answer to a very practical question: Is a community permitted to turn a synagogue into a house of Torah study, given that we are not permitted to lower a building's level of holiness? If the Beit Medrash is more sacred, then it is permitted, because this increases the building's sanctity; but if the sanctity of a synagogue is greater, then it is forbidden.

Jewish Law rules in favor of R. Yehoshua's opinion, that one may turn a house of prayer into a Beit Medrash, as the latter is even more sacred than a synagogue. The Gemara there explains that this dispute also impacts upon the explanation of a verse in the Book of Kings:

וַאֲתָת כָּל בַּיִת גָּדוֹל שָׂרַף בְּאֵשׁ.

*...[The King of Babylonia] burned every great [large] house in fire.* (Kings II 25,9)

R. Yochanan holds that the “*great houses*” in this verse are buildings where prayer is raised up – synagogues – while R. Yehoshua says it is speaking of buildings in which Torah study takes place, i.e., Batei Medrash. We immediately ask: Why don't the two great Sages simply understand the verse as referring to large-sized buildings? What leads them to explain them as synagogues or yeshivot?



Based on what we established above, the answer is clear: They drew their inspiration from the above-quoted verses in Va'etchanan – where Israel is described as “*great*” because of both its prayers and its Torah study.

### ■ **Man and the Tree of the Field**

Let us return to the “base” of our special triangle, that of the “joy of mitzvah.” To better understand the role of this special happiness in joining Torah and prayer en route to the pinnacle of prophecy, let us consider the world of plants.

The Torah itself draws a parallel between man and plants, in the famous verse (D'varim 20,19) כי האדם עץ השדה *Is the tree of the field a man?* The comparison is more detailed in the opening verses of the Book of Psalms:

אֲשֶׁרִי הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלֵּךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים... כִּי אִם בְּתוֹרַת ה' הִפְצֹו...

*Fortunate is He who has not walked in the paths of the wicked... and whose desire is rather in G-d's Torah.*

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שְׂתוּל עַל פְּלִגֵּי מַיִם אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעֵתוֹ וְעֵלְהוּ לֹא יִבּוֹל...

*He is like a tree planted beside streams, one that produces fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither.* (Psalms 1,1-3)

In order to glean the maximum benefit from this parallel, let us first review the components of an astounding process that takes place in nature every single day, wherever the sun shines: the process of photosynthesis.

The green leaves of plants receive their color from the substance called chlorophyll. It has the amazing trait of being able to “catch” the energy given off by the sun, and to then use it to effect a chemical reaction between two energy-poor elements within the leaves: Water (H<sub>2</sub>O), drawn in from the earth by the plant's roots, and carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), which is absorbed from the air.

In any chemical reaction, the molecules of elements are broken down to their atomic levels, and the atoms are then rearranged to form other elements. In photosynthesis, specifically, the molecules of the water and the carbon dioxide meet inside the chlorophyll. Using the energy produced by the sun, the chlorophyll breaks down the molecules into atoms, which then rearrange themselves in a new manner, forming molecules of energy-rich sugar (glucose), with which the body of the plant is then built.



In other words: While we, humans and animals alike, take nourishment from plants, the plants themselves build themselves up on their own, with the help of the sun's energy and the water and carbon dioxide that they absorb from their surroundings. When we eat the plant or its fruits, we absorb the energy stored within its sugar molecules, and store it in our muscles and the other cells. At its source, the original energy came from the rays of the sun, which received it from the Creator of the World.

What is even more fascinating about this physical process going on all around us is that there is a corresponding spiritual process taking place *within* us.

### ■ The Chlorophyll of the Soul: Joy

The sun's rays correspond to the Divine light, which shine powerfully down upon man's soul. The spiritual light absorbed in the soul becomes a source of energy, with which the soul breaks down the "molecules" of two important elements - Torah and Prayer - and turns them into a new element full of energy, vigor, strength and inspiration. This new element is the world of Prophecy.

How does the soul catch this tremendous spiritual light? What is the "chlorophyll" of the soul, that substance that enables this wondrous process to take place? The answer is: Joy – specifically, the happiness of performing the Torah's commandments: *simchah shel mitzvah*.

Both the Torah and prayer, taken separately, can be said to be "low in energy." The Torah is something that "erodes man's strength," the Sages teach. Its many commandments and laws, and their thousands of detailed sub-clauses, require a tremendous investment of effort, time, and strength. The Torah is thus like water: energy-poor.

Prayer, too, on its own, demands of us tremendous emotional and psychological strengths. It is accompanied by great humility, seriousness of purpose, and outpouring of one's soul. Just like CO<sub>2</sub>, it is low in energy.

But then, so very wondrously, when the joy of mitzvot appears on the scene, these two energy-poor worlds – that of Torah and that of Prayer – break down and re-join together in a most uplifting and energetic form: Prophecy.

Only then, when learning Torah and engaging in prayer in a state of joy, do we begin to sense a feeling of power and mission, of strength and vision, to act and accomplish even under difficult conditions.



Chazal expressed this in their dual definition of Torah. On the one hand, the Gemara teaches (Sanhedrin 26b):

*“He gave marvelous counsel, made great wisdom, תושיה”* (Yeshayahu 28,29): **R. Chanan said: Why is the Torah called תושיה [from the root meaning “weakness”]? Because it weakens man’s strength.**

And on the other hand, the Medrash (Medrash Tehillim 21) tells us the opposite:

**There is no עוז, strength, other than Torah, as is written** (Psalms 29,11):  
ה' עוז לעמו יתן, ה' יברך את עמו בשלום, *May Hashem grant strength to His nation, May he bless his people with peace.*

Torah without joy saps our strength – but with joy, it gives vigor, energy, and might.

So says the Prophet Yirmiyahu:

נִמְצְאוּ דְבָרֶיךָ וְאָכַלְתִּים וַיְהִי דְבָרְךָ לִי לְשִׁשׁוֹן וְלִשְׂמֹחַת לִבִּי  
כִּי נִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עָלַי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת.

*Your words were found and I ate them; Your word was for me a joy and a rejoicing of my heart, for Your name was called upon me, O Lord, G-d of Hosts.* (Yirmiyahu 15,16)

Let us delve further into the parallels between the physical and spiritual worlds.

A tree or plant is essentially an inverse reflection of a man. The tree’s head, its control center, lies in the ground, and its legs extend upwards to the sky – quite the opposite of a human. A plant absorbs carbon dioxide and emits oxygen, while people do the opposite.

In addition, the water nourished by a tree comes from the ground, while man’s spiritual nourishment, the Torah, is absorbed from G-d in Heaven. Carbon dioxide, on the other hand, is absorbed by the tree from the air above, whereas prayer breaks through to the heavens, having arisen from the innermost parts of man.

Man’s joy-of-mitzvot, corresponding to the plant’s chlorophyll, catches the Divine Light, and uses it to create a melting pot in which to combine the essence of Torah and prayer. And from this union, a new compound grows upward – the powerful World of Prophecy.



When we speak of prophecy, we note that it is not just for prophets; it refers to every sense of mission and every performance of a mitzvah. It is critical that a sense of strength granting the confidence and ability to harness the necessary resources and people, accompany the construction of any great spiritual enterprise.

There is one difference, however. The chlorophyll of plants is an inherent and built-in component, while in man, joy is not automatic. It is rather dependent on free choice and work, and is something that we must acquire:

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת ה' בְּשִׂמְחָה בְּאוֹ לְפָנָיו בְּרִנָּה.

*Serve [work] G-d with joy;*

*come before Him with gladness.* (Psalms 100,2)

Thus, we must infuse our service of Hashem – our Torah study, our prayers and our sense of mission in doing mitzvot – with joy, so as to maximize their potential and reach their highest heights.

