



## IS PROPHETIC JUDAISM LISTENING TO THE PROPHETS?

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where we're going to have a conversation with Rabbi Barbara Symons. Rabbi Symons was ordained by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in 1994, and she's been serving Temple David in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh, since 2006. She's deeply involved in the interfaith community, primarily through her work with the Monroeville Interfaith Ministerium, of which she's the past president, and through the Catholic Jewish Education Enrichment Program. She is the editor of our topic for today, Prophetic Voices: Renewing and Reimagining Haftarah, which came out from the CCAR Press in 2023. Rabbi Barbara Symons, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Barbara Symons: It is a pleasure to be here, Josh. Thank you.

JH: Your new book, Prophetic Voices, engages us with the Haftarah, introducing us to the corpus and offering meditations, interpretations, and excerpts of texts from across Jewish history as pertained to each of the Torah's weekly readings. It both deepens our experience of the Haftarah and offers a very useful and practical way into it with tons of great context and information as well. So for all of that, thank you very much. It's really a great book to engage with the Haftarah. I'd like to ask you to give us, if you would, a primer on what the Haftarah actually is and its basic place in Jewish worship, starting, if you would, with an explanation of your title. What do Prophetic Voices have to do with the Haftarah?

BS: So the word Haftarah sounds like Torah, but they are from different roots. The word Haftarah means conclusion, and so it is a conclusionary sacred text connected to that week's Torah portion or to the time of year. And so the idea of prophetic voices is that all of the texts come from the prophet section of the Hebrew Bible, from Nevi'im. The subtitle, Renewing and

Reimagining Haftarah, is to be able to look at those texts from a contemporary lens and through the eyes of Jews who span the diversity of Judaism in every way, and also to reimagine Haftarah and be creative with alternative texts that because Haftarah does not mean prophets, that these texts, which I like to say are prophet-like, could complement the Torah portion and the time of year.

JH: In your introduction, you speak about reimagining the Haftarah in our midst per the title of your book. Is it fair to say that Reformed Judaism has attenuated its connection to the Haftarah as a ritual component of our regular services, and that we've paid a price for it, both in terms of connecting less with our own prophetic voices, but also in terms of connecting less with our canon and our own literature?

BS: So when I presented this idea to the CCAR Press, the realization that I had was, over the years, I found it disconnected. Here we are within Reformed Judaism, talking about prophetic Judaism, right? Prophet Judaism, and yet we are increasingly not hearing the voice of the prophets for many reasons. We are ones who prefer to decrease the length of a service because that's where we hear the prophets largely. Of course, on Shabbat morning, on festivals, and we're not hearing it. One is we might hear it chanted in Hebrew, but we don't even look at the English. Think of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah student who studies for so many months and doesn't know who is their prophet, and what did they read, let alone in English? We might look at it and say, "I don't know what that said. I don't know the context. I don't understand it."

BS: Or it could actually be downright offensive. It's hard when we read something where God is seen as the husband and Israel is the wife, and God ejects the wife. And then though she is called a harlot, and though she's kicked out, and her kids are also kicked out, God brings them back. It's even a triggering idea. So what do we do if things don't work for us? We let them go. But the thing is then, what is prophetic Judaism, right? How are we going to use that term so it has substance to it? And the prophets have a lot to say to us. Yom Kippur, probably the most famous prophetic reading from Isaiah is this the fast that I desire. And then of course, in the forward to the book, Rabbi Jonah Pesner writes about that. They are calling us, frankly, not only to social justice, which I think a lot of people think it's only social justice, but they are also comforting us. They are modeling for us care and concern for one another. There are multiple facets to what the prophets do.

JH: Often we can understand why the rabbis chose a given section of the prophets as the Haftarah for a given Torah portion. So for example, in the weekly Torah portion called Vayeira, in which Abraham welcomes and displays hospitality for complete strangers who turn out to be angels, at least as we understand them, the rabbis paired a Haftarah from 2nd Kings, which describes the hospitality of the Shunammite woman for the prophet Elijah. And so the theme is pretty clear. Other times, however, it may relate to the season, which is also usually pretty clear. There are times when the choice of the Haftarah is not so easy to connect to the Torah portion to which it's assigned. In your experience, what's one of the most cryptic and difficult to suss out Haftarots for you to explain?

BS: In Vayeira, here's the thing. In the reform community, I would say largely, if not all, we don't read the entirety of the Torah portion. So if we're going to go to a different section, let's say the binding of Isaac, then we don't know what the connection to the Haftarah is. It's from elsewhere. One would have to say, "Well, before this happened, this happened with Abraham and Sarah, and therefore here's the connection." So we already have a disconnect to it that's problematic, right? You can't help it. But if you don't read the whole Torah portion out loud, or at least help people with what the whole thing is about, you already have a disconnect. But my favorite example of disconnect is Pinchas. So in Pinchas, he's a pretty radical kind of guy. And the Haftarah is about Elijah and the evolution of Elijah. We think of Seder, we think of Havdalah, and we think of being at every brass and bond, and this sort of warm and fuzzy guy. But the rabbis think that Pinchas was Elijah, and that really doesn't work, right? It really makes for a disconnect. There's not even a word that connects them necessarily. It's just really hard. So that's where we might say, "Okay, I hear that, and I always like hearing Elijah's story, so maybe I want to stick with the Haftarah, but maybe I'll do an alternative."

JH: You think it's more interesting to do the alternative than to do the detective work of figuring out what they probably intended?

BS: No, I think it's really interesting to read the Torah portion and the given Haftarah portion. And as we study, we always like other voices. So we look at commentary, we might talk to other people, we bring in our own experience, and we dig in. But there are some times when it either doesn't match well, or in fact, if it's prophetic Judaism, it's not calling us to do something. We think of prophets as speaking truth to power, and that kind of language, afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. That's not my language. But that's what we think of largely. And so part of the idea of the book is that every interpretation, they're very short, written by all of these remarkable contributors, have a call to action at the end. Some are direct, go and do this thing. Some ask a question, some are more subtle, but prophetic Judaism is about doing. You don't just say, "Oh, that was interesting," or "Oh, there was a connection, and okay, we'll just leave the synagogue and go on our way and have the rest of Shabbat." But rather that we take it beyond the synagogue out into the world. And so one of the ideas for this book is that it's not only to be studied on Shabbat necessarily, it might be at the board meeting or at the interfaith gathering or on Tuesdays during Dadi. They feel, "Oh, this is the Torah portion, here's an alternative voice that we can hear connecting into it."

JH: And the sources that are drawn from and the comments by your contributors are really wonderful. It's just extremely rich.

BS: They span the diversity of Judaism. Jews of color, Jews who are queer, Jews from different countries, Jews of all ages, rabbis had to have cantors 'cause they work so closely with the Haftarah, educators and lay people who are all a part of this saying, in a sense, this is ours. Any of us can do this.

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JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning and masterclasses for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect). Now, back to our interview.

JH: In her contribution, Rabbi Elizabeth Behar dives in really compellingly to the varieties of meaning, what is, indeed, a prophet in the Bible. Personally, what definition of prophet do you think can speak best to today's Jewish communities?

BS: One of the ways I like to teach is to invite people to create a job description for a prophet. They are first and foremost spokespeople for God. We'll remind ourselves there are 55 prophets per our tradition, 48 male, seven female, not all Jewish. But with that, first of all, God has to choose you. So, you can't be a self-chosen prophet. You have to be a spokesperson for God who is good at outreach and communication, who's able to use metaphor or repetition or different means to get the ear of the people in order to, in some way, get them back on track or to comfort them in times of distress. So, they have to be multifunctional in those ways, and they have to be ones that really are talented in being able to get the people to listen to them.

JH: All right. So, they have to be golden-tongued and they have to be called by God. And you've articulated already that the message that they convey has to call us to some kind of action. And I think it's fair to say that Reform Judaism is very comfortable with the social justice message of the prophets. I think we're quite well-pleased to be reprimanded by Micah to, "Act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God." On the other side, and you've alluded to some of the more difficult texts - which of the Haftarah texts is the hardest for you personally, as a rabbi, as an individual, as a Jew, to wrangle into some kind of positive interpretation?

BS: So, there is a pastor PhD named Roberta Weems who wrote a book about the Old Testament prophets. And she talks about the problem of the metaphor, and I'm going to use her as my example. So, Hosea 2 verses 4-7, Remonstrate your mother, remonstrate her, for she is not my wife and I am not her husband. And let her put away her boredom from her face and her adultery from between her breasts. Else I will strip her naked and leave her on the day she was born. And it goes on like this, I will also disown her children for they are now a whore's brood. I mean, this is our God talking, right? And so it certainly captures our attention. But she writes this in her book. She says, Why should I, as a reader, leave the world where I presently live, where violence against wives is unjustifiable, to inhabit a world where violence against wives is taken for granted? The marriage metaphor is useless, therefore, for shedding light on the theological question of punishment and judgment. So, I mean, again, we might call that triggering, right? But it doesn't do anything for us granted, for that and for the other half truth that people who wrote their 250-word remarkable interpretations of the call to action, they brought forward contemporary ideas, sometimes challenging it.

BS: But this idea of what do I do with this? I don't want to read this. This doesn't help me be a prophetic Jew. They're speaking in a language that we can't hear. No longer do we speak in that way. If I were to get up there onto the bema and give a sermon and say something along these

lines, in terms of our relationships, people would look at me like, "What are you saying?" So, it's hard to be able to hear metaphors that are frankly downright offensive. So, when we give out honors, we give an option of sharing the English. And when we get to this one, I say, "We can have it written in the booklet and invite people to read it, but I don't think we want to honor someone by reading it out loud."

JH: You speak about metaphor and it's positive power, but also its power to obfuscate insofar as it might draw on images to which we really don't have access anymore. And I'd like to pick up on this complicated power of metaphor and embed it into the broader genre of poetry. My colleague, Rick Saracen at the Hebrew Indian College, in his magnificent and really magisterial contribution, he points out how medieval poetry embeds and pairs the Torah to the Haftarah and quotes from both in a yearly cycle of poems that he cites from the poet Yannai. But it's an example of the presence of poetry throughout here. So, why is poetry in particular an important element in reading and internalizing the prophets?

BS: Going back to what I said, I think in part is it captures our attention and also a metaphor, I'm going to just quote Dr. Weems' book again, Sallie McFague, I'm not sure if that's how you pronounce her name, says, Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known. So, it opens up a world for us through a very small number of words that narrative doesn't do so easily. So, I do think that it allows us into a different way of seeing and thinking, rather than just hearing that narrative line, right? It's a sort of quicker way to get our attention. And Haftarah are generally 20 plus or minus verses long. It's not a terrifically long piece of text.

JH: I'd like to go back to this really profound difficulty that we encounter again and again in the Haftarah and in the prophets in general of familial relationships, sometimes husband and wife, sometimes parent, child, sometimes widow or barren woman, often by the way, with a disproportionate and rather remarkable focus on women's experiences as the texts understand them. These relationships, even when they're designed to inspire a sense of solace and connectedness to God and to each other, they almost always rely on roles that feel not only calcified and outdated, but as you said, often downright offensive. I'd love you to tell us a bit about your journey as a reader, as an individual, in relating to such texts from the prophets.

BS: I felt for years, but I only realized it looking back over my history, that on the one hand, we called ourselves prophetic Jews. I know I keep going back to that and yet at camps, at biennial, we weren't hearing it. And I was thinking, "Well, why not?" And at camp, I said, "You know what? Even if it's not that week's Haftarah, can't we have something that is a prophetic voice? Can't we sing a song about prophets?" And by the way, I'm now working with musicians to create music based on the traditional prophets as well as on these modern prophet-like voices. But it's really been hard because there isn't a connect. I will speak to sometimes a smaller tourist study group, 10 to 30 people or a larger congregation. And I will say to them, "I'm going to count to three and when I do, yell out your prophet from your bar or bat mitzvah, or that of your grandchild or your spouse or whoever." I go, "One, two, three."

BS: And very few people can even give the name, right? The name, let alone if I were going to go into what is this about. And so it's just hard because we're offered this sort of carrot of prophetic Judaism stands for something lofty, something where our religious action center is getting involved in doing really important work. And yet we're not actually hearing the voices behind it. But I will also say this. I wrote a piece for the CCAR Journal called *Between the Blessings*, making the point that when you talk about women in metaphors and imagery and so forth, that women are often the subject of the object.

BS: And so when we have an alternative Haftarah, that is by a woman, then we hear the voices in a whole different way. So when we hear an alternative, for example, from Ruth Bader Ginsburg, or from one of our many fabulous female poets, it brings their voice to a different level. We can hear them differently. And the contributor who brought it forward is giving an interpretation, tying it into the Torah portion or the time of year. So we're raising women's voices, not about women, but from women. And that is really so important. And by the way, if we talk about this cycle of the American Jewish holidays, which there are 42 of them, then we also hear when it is Trans Visibility Day or when it is Indigenous Peoples Day, there are magnificent choices from within the community. So it's authentic. They choose the alternative text, and then they interpret it. And it's hearing the voice that I could never give to this, but now, similar to a special Haftarah before, let's say, Purim, we could have one of these be the kind of announcement Haftarah into the holiday that is coming up. But we are hearing the true voices of the community being represented.

JH: I'd like to close the interview with a question that draws on your experience in the interfaith arena, particularly with Christianity. The fact that so much of our scripture is both shared and competitively claimed, that fact accounts for both our capacity to talk to one another about a shared topic or object or text, but also is the locus for contention. And I'd like to focus that observation more pointedly on the single theme of messianism, which is also both a point of shared understanding and contention. What do the prophets teach you about messianism that relates to your interfaith work?

BS: So I don't know if you remember the book, *There Is No Messiah and You're It*, but it was a great book that traces understanding of messianism within Judaism through the ages, through false messiahs and so forth. And one of the ideas is that if we all work toward messianism, that is when it comes. And to me, that's very connecting. It means that it is within our power, and we have to work harder and then harder still in order to bring that. I do think that's connecting in the interfaith community. And I think that what this book does is allow Christians who frankly are much more familiar with the Hebrew prophets, ironically, than I will say I am, but I am going to say that many of our colleagues are, but they're seeing it through the lens of an announcement, a pronouncement that Jesus is coming and so forth. We're not reading it, obviously, through that lens. But the idea that our Hebrew prophets are calling us toward a world that can simply be better.

JH: Well, on that note, thank you, Rabbi Barbara Symons, for joining us on the College Commons podcast. Congratulations on the publication of your book. And thank you for the pleasure of the conversation.

BS: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

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