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SOURCES & RESOURCES

NO GUARANTEES IN LIFE

Our patriarchs frequently express fear, apprehension, and trepidation. God tells Abraham (Genesis 15:1) and Jacob (46:3) not to be afraid. In the first case, the divine assurance appears immediately after Abraham's military victory over the four kings. Abraham may have been nervous about a revenge attack, about whether or not the death toll was justified, or about exhausting his storehouse of reward. In Jacob's case, the patriarch stands on the cusp of descending south to Egypt. He may have been nervous about leaving Canaan, about reuniting with Joseph after so many years, or about initiating the prophecy of 400 years of exile. Earlier, Jacob was "afraid and greatly troubled" (32:7) before encountering Esau. The two verbs indicate either extreme fear or two distinct sources of trepidation.¹

Other stories also telegraph the characters' intense nervousness about how history will play itself out. When Jacob flees Canaan escaping Esau's murderous rage, he vows that if God will be with him and protect him, he will repay God with a tithe (28:20–22). The three stories in which our forefathers claim that a wife is instead a sister indicate great concern for their own physical safety. Abraham asks God, "How will I know that I will inherit it?" (15:18). Although Abravanel interprets this question to be about the timing of inheriting the land, Ramban and others understand that Abraham wants to know what his descendants need to do in order to achieve that inheritance.² Apparently, the patriarchs experienced concern and doubt about receiving the divine bounty.

All this worry seems odd in light of the many divine promises the *avot* receive. God informs Abraham early in his career that his offspring will inherit the land (12:7). God reiterates this promise after Lot departs and He adds that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the

¹ See Rashi and Radak on 32:7.

² Ramban on 15:8. For Abravanel, see p. 210 in the Jerusalem 5744 edition.

dust of the earth (13:14–16). Using a slightly different metaphor, God subsequently states that our first patriarch’s children will be as numerous as the stars (15:6). In the covenant between the pieces, God instructs Abraham that his children will be enslaved and oppressed but will emerge from slavery with great wealth and return to Canaan (15:13–16). The second covenant reiterates the recurring themes of the land and progeny (17:4–8). After the *Akeida*, the angel of God informs Abraham that his children will be as many as the sand upon the shore and that his children will inherit the gates of their enemies (22:17). Isaac hears from God that He will fulfill the promise made to Abraham regarding both land and offspring (26:3–4). When Jacob dreams about angels on a ladder, God tells him once again that he will inherit the land and build a large family (28:12–14).

Given the reasonable assumption that the *avot* trusted in God’s word and believed in His power, they should have gone through life in a much more tranquil mood. A happy ending was divinely guaranteed. The juxtaposition of the divine promise and Jacob’s immediately following vow is particularly striking (28:13–22). Having just heard good tidings, Jacob still feels the need to make a deal with God indicating a lack of assurance. Why were our patriarchs so nervous after receiving so many divine promises? Let us clarify that the essential question is not why the patriarchs take action to avoid difficulty. The divine promise may assume realization comes only through human initiative. Jacob could feel secure that Esau will not harm, in the end, his family while being unsure whether he should prepare for war, offer a peace inducing gift, or pray. Ramban utilizes this idea to explain why Moses cries out as the Egyptian army approaches.³ The more difficult question stems from the explicit mention of their fright. Given a divine promise of a positive outcome, what explains their panic?

Contingency of Prophecies

R. David Kimhi consistently explains that sin may alter the prophetic promise, which is implicitly contingent.⁴ In other words, God will carry through on his promise provided that the recipient remains worthy of it. The contingency of some prophecies seems apparent. When the people of Nineveh repent, Jonah’s prophecy that “in another forty days Nineveh will be overturned” (Jonah 3:4), does not come to fruition. Is this the case for every prophecy and should we differentiate between positive and negative predictions?

³ Ramban on Exodus 14:15.

⁴ Radak on 12:12, 28:20, and 32:4; and see also *Berakhot* 4a.

One passage in Jeremiah supports the universality of an implicit condition.

At one instant I may speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to break down and to destroy it; but if that nation turn from its evil, because of which I have spoken against it, I repent of the evil that I thought to do to it. And at one instant I may speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; but if it do evil in My sight, that it not listen to My voice, then I repent of the good of which I said I would benefit it (18:7–10).

Here, Jeremiah envisions the outcome of prophetic predictions changing both from reward to punishment and from punishment to reward based on modified human behavior.

Many rabbinic voices discuss this question in the context of determining how we evaluate the authenticity of a prophet. The Torah seems to say that we simply check whether the prophet's words come true (Deuteronomy 18:22). However, if every prophetic prediction is contingent, how would results ever establish the prospective prophet's status? Perhaps the prediction did not come true because the people whom the prediction targeted changed their behavior.

Rambam deals with this dilemma by differentiating between positive and negative prophecies. Although predicted punishments are contingent, foreseen rewards are locked in and can be used to test a prophet.⁵ Among other things, this distinction reflects God's preference for the positive. This is seen in a variety of traditional sources supporting Rambam's position, such as the statement: "R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Yossi: 'Every word that God utters for the good, even with a condition, He does not retract'" (*Berakhot* 7a). This suggests that the guarantee applies specifically to positive predictions. A different passage in Jeremiah may also support Rambam. After the Jews begin the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah famously predicts 70 years of exile before a return to Canaan (Jeremiah 25:12, 29:10). In contrast, a false prophet named Hanania predicts the temple vessels returning from Babylon in two years (Jeremiah 28:3). In debating with his rival, Jeremiah states:

The prophets who have been before me and before you of old prophesied against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war, and of evil, and of pestilence. The prophet who prophesizes of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord has truly sent him (Jeremiah 28:8–9).

⁵ *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 10:8–9.

This speech distinguishes between negative and positive prophecies and seems to connect a prophet's authentication with the latter. Indeed, Rambam cites this to bolster his position.⁶ At the same time, Jeremiah may have a different message in mind. Abravanel explains that Jeremiah comments upon Hanania's popularity at that time; clearly, the prospect of a two-year solution will win over the masses more than a 70-year process. Yet, posterity will remember those prophets whose words came true more than those who sounded appealing in the moment. Jeremiah reminds Hanania that earlier prophets foresaw calamity and are remembered as the genuine seers. Hanania, despite his encouraging words, will go down in history as a false prophet. For Abravanel, the distinction between prophecies of reward and punishment is not about contingency but about short-term popularity and the judgment of history.⁷

According to Rambam's view, that positive prophecies are irreversible guarantees, we must still understand the fears of the patriarchs. Rambam explains why Jacob was afraid of sin cancelling the divine promise. He clarifies that only prophecies delivered over to the masses are guaranteed, but not those which God reveals to the prophet as an individual. Since the *avot* received this latter type of forecast, their promised destiny remained contingent upon their actions.⁸

Other authorities disagree with Rambam's distinction between positive and negative prophecies, arguing that divine justice should take into account a change in behavior in either direction. Will God grant bounty to the currently corrupt just because that fellow once received a promise of future reward? R. Hasdai Crescas posits that prophecies of both reward and punishment are contingent but the predictions at the start of a prophet's career are locked in so that the public can evaluate his reliability as a prophet. Once a prophet's status is established, the contingency of all predictions kicks in.⁹ Abravanel suggests that we test a prophet through signs and wonders and not via predictions. He notes that Moses proves his prophetic role by performing wonders before the people (e.g., a staff turning into a snake).¹⁰ According to this approach, all prophecies can be contingent on subsequent behavior. Both Crescas and Abravanel raise another possibility of privileged knowledge unrelated to reward and punishment, such as Samuel's awareness of the location of Saul's donkeys. Perhaps such knowledge authenticates prophets.

⁶ See Rambam's Introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishna*.

⁷ Abravanel's commentary on Jeremiah, p. 376 in the Jerusalem 5739 edition.

⁸ Rambam, *ibid*.

⁹ *Or Hashem, ma'amar 2, kelal 4, perek 2*.

¹⁰ Commentary on Deuteronomy, pp. 181–182.

In sum, one answer to our opening question emphasizes the contingency of all prophecies to explain the apprehension of the patriarchs. Yet one potential problem remains. Certain divine predictions are accompanied by an oath or a *berit* (covenant). The entire point of these added elements may be to change a contingent prophecy into one of total assurance. Ramban understands Abraham's question, "how will I know?," as reflecting concern about how things might change. Perhaps he will turn to sin or the Canaanite nations will repent from their immoral behavior, and then he would not acquire the Land of Israel. "God forged a covenant with him so that he would inherit the land in any case," suggests Ramban.¹¹ Along similar lines, Radak comments on the oath following the *Akeida*: "Even if the children sin, they will not be prevented from becoming a great nation."¹² If so, we can question why the patriarchs were concerned about items promised to them in a covenant or with an oath.

Ibn Ezra's explanation for Jacob's nervousness before he meets Esau opens up another type of solution. "Even if God said to him: 'your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth,' he did not know if it referred to these [children] or to others."¹³ That is, a person can have a guarantee yet remain clueless about how that guarantee will play out. Theoretically Esau's band could wipe out all of Jacob's current family and Jacob would still become a father of a great nation that would ultimately inherit Canaan. Disaster can strike in the here and now, and positive prophetic promises can still come about through some unforeseen future development. Such a possibility would not relieve Jacob about his current anxiety for his family facing Esau's threat.

Even when prophecies come with definitive dates, ambiguity remains. When God informs Abraham that his children will undergo a 400-year servitude (15:13), it is unclear when the count begins. Rashi suggests that it starts with the birth of Isaac, while Ibn Ezra starts the clock from the moment of the Divine prediction.¹⁴ In any case, anxious Israelites in Egypt with a tradition about the duration of exile might still have no idea when to expect redemption. Along the same lines, the Babylonian exile's 70-year prediction left an uncertain timeline. Do the years begin with the ascendancy of Nebuchadnezzar, the exile of Jehoiachin, or the exile

¹¹ Ramban on 15:8.

¹² Radak on 22:16.

¹³ Ibn Ezra on 32:9.

¹⁴ Rashi and Ibn Ezra on 15:13. The ambiguity may extend to the location of the suffering as well. Ramban notes that the oppressing people could have been an entity other than the Egyptians, see *Hilkhot Tesbuva* 6:5.

of Zedekiah (*Megilla* 11b)? What appears superficially quite clear does not actually provide certain foreknowledge.

Dual Meaning

The previous model indicates a prophecy with a correct answer of which we remain unaware. Alternatively, some prophecies may intentionally allow for two interpretations with the ultimate meaning dependent on human choices. Abravanel explains that Jonah's warning to Nineveh contained a purposeful ambiguity. In another 40 days, Nineveh "*nehapabet*" (will be overturned) could refer to destruction or to a society undergoing a change of heart and repenting in a way that upends the societal norm. Lamentations uses the metaphor of *nehpakh libi bekirbi* (1:20) as meaning just such a change of heart: "My heart is turned within me." The reaction of the people of Nineveh controls which interpretation comes to fruition.

Radak offers another example. Rebecca deals with her confusion about her difficult pregnancy by seeking out prophetic advice. The prophet informs her: "*ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir*" (Genesis 25:23). Radak states that we could interpret the forecast either as "the elder will serve the younger" or as "the elder will be served by the younger." The absence of the word "*et*" preserves the ambiguity about the sentence's subject and direct object. According to Radak, this allows a multivalent meaning to be retained by the verse: sometimes Esau's descendants will rule over Jacob; at other times, Jacob will have dominion over Esau.¹⁵ If the correct meaning of a prophecy depends upon subsequent human behavior, we can understand why ongoing nervousness continues.

Abravanel raises the possibility that Jacob, early in his career, was unsure how to differentiate between a vivid dream and authentic prophecy. We see this phenomenon when a young Samuel confuses his first prophetic message with the call of Eli (I Samuel 3). In the same way, Jacob is unsure regarding the prophetic status of his dream with angels on a ladder, leading him to make a conditional deal with God. Unlike some of the other solutions, this one clearly has limited applicability since it applies only in the first stages of a prophetic vocation.

All the preceding models rely upon a lack of knowledge from those who received the prophecy: Was it truly the word of God? Will human choices change the prediction's realization? And did the recipients truly understand the prophecy to begin with? Yet, we understand the trepidation, despite absolute clarity about meaning, when the prophetic plan

¹⁵ Radak on 25:23.

involves a good deal of hardship. Imagine hearing the covenant between the pieces foreseeing four centuries of suffering and servitude. This provides plenty of cause for fear even if the eventual redemptive result is a surety. Interestingly, Hizkuni views the looming fate of exile as influential in the family decision making. Why is Jacob afraid before descending to Egypt? Perhaps he is nervous about leaving the Land of Israel (Rashi) or he is concerned about the reunion with his beloved Joseph. Hizkuni explains that Jacob worries that entering Egypt activates the preordained 400 years of exile.¹⁶ Though God reassures him, he is actually correct, and his descent sets the painful exile in motion. Hizkuni also posits that it was the knowledge of the predicted servitude that partially motivated the brothers to sell Joseph as a slave. They were hoping that the lamentable prophecy could be realized on some, but not all, of the family.¹⁷

Finally, the resolution may depend on the difference between abstract information and internalized knowledge. Our ancestors fully knew that salvation awaited but it was nonetheless frightening to see the aggressive hunter Esau arriving with 400 men. Feelings of trepidation are simply the natural reaction. Abravanel utilizes this idea to explain Jacob's trepidation. In fact, if Jacob felt no fear, in what way would it have been a virtue for him to face his potentially violent brother.¹⁸

Living with Uncertainty

Having explored several approaches why even divine promises do not neutralize fears about the future, let us analyze the possible implications for our religious lives. Human beings naturally desire a guarantee that things will work out; who wants to live with uncertainty and the potential for tragic endings? Yet this desire does not cohere with real life and has potentially dangerous manifestations. If the patriarchs, who regularly communicated with God and received His reassurances, lived with uncertainty, we certainly must do so as well. Living history while having all the answers ahead of time would remove all the challenge, drama, and grandeur from human life. Humanity's greatness stems in part from its ability to flourish and accomplish even under uncertain circumstances. Furthermore, the powerful temptation to find a guarantee leads people to bad decisions, questionable actions, and atrophied moral muscles. What drives people to pay magical rabbis for blessings if not the desire to escape doubt and the fear of negative outcomes? Why do charity organizations promise great

¹⁶ Hizkuni on 46:3.

¹⁷ Hizkuni on 37:27.

¹⁸ Abravanel on Genesis, p. 339.

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rewards instead of focusing on the mitzva or the needs of the poor? People would like to feel liberated from harm, yet no such harm-free world exists; the unwillingness to confront these realities leaves them ill-equipped for living a meaningful life. Better to face that truth, and even see the good in it, than to search after false protective amulets.

How does one live with such uncertainty? The answer may arise from a different discussion about prophecy. Moses warns Israel against following necromancers, sorcerers, and soothsayers, the abominations of the local nations. Instead, he offers an alternative: “A prophet will the Lord your God raise up for you, from your midst, of your brethren, like me; to him you shall listen” (Deuteronomy 18:15). Apparently, prophets somehow replace the need for wizards and magicians. Ramban explains that the other fortune tellers bear a mediocre prophetic batting average whereas God’s prophets always get things right.¹⁹ Strikingly, Ramban states that not all the gentile practices listed are abominations; after all, everyone desires privileged information about the future.²⁰ Ramban appreciates humanity’s desperate desire to know what the future holds and to gain hints toward the path of victory. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch reads the contrast between prophets and tarot card readers quite differently. In his view, prophets do not quantitatively outperform soothsayers; they have a qualitatively different job altogether. People turn to the former for information that will ensure material success; the prophets approach us with admonitions about becoming better people. As R. Hirsch notes, the verse says: “to him you shall listen” and not “to him you shall ask.”²¹ This idea also fits with Rashi’s interpretation of the verse, “You shall be wholehearted (*tamim*) with the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 18:13), which reads wholeheartedness as understanding that you do not need to seek knowledge of the future. R. Hirsch offers the following comment:

And in fact the *tamim* is so completely engrossed in God that he lives entirely in the thought of doing his duty all the time and leaves the result with his whole future to God. By fulfilling his duty, his doing and not doing, has for him already reached its highest goal, he has paid his God the tribute of duty faithfully fulfilled, for everything beyond that he is . . . quiet and impervious.²²

¹⁹ Ramban on Deuteronomy 18:13.

²⁰ Ramban on Deuteronomy 18:9–12.

²¹ R. Hirsch on Deuteronomy 18:15.

²² R. Hirsch on Deuteronomy 18:13. R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin offers an identical thesis while adding explanations for the exceptional cases where individuals do turn to the prophets for practical advice (*Ha’amek Davar* on Deuteronomy 18:14).

Internalizing this Hirschian perspective does not entail an absence of fear; after all, like Jacob, a person can feel quite secure in his values and still be concerned for the welfare of his family. Therefore, adopting this strategy does not mean criticizing the patriarchs for their nervousness. On the contrary, this topic reveals the human greatness of our forefathers who carried on with their mission, confident in the Jewish message, even when caught in terrifying circumstances.²³

We can find assurance in values and ideals we firmly believe in. Though we do not know how history will play out, our pursuit of moral and religious goals grounds us and fills us with confidence about our lives. Such a framework enables us to begin each day with enthusiasm even as we live with uncertainty.²⁴

²³ I thank David Shatz for his helpful comments on this essay and for his questioning that led to this particular insight. Admittedly, my application of R. Hirsch's idea may not fully match his articulation of a person "quiet and impervious."

²⁴ The proposed solution does not work for people unsure about their very ideals. Discussion of such scenarios must wait for another time.