



## SERMON YOM KIPPUR AFTERNOON: THE BURDEN OF PROPHECY

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Thursday 3 October 2025  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

*The sun puts on a bridegroom's suit of light,  
a never-failing light that shines from You.  
Each evening he turns to face the west,  
and bows toward Your throne, O Mighty One.  
Serving You has made him powerful,  
as courtiers gain honour honouring their lords.  
Each day, he bows before You when he sets,  
and You in turn enwrap him  
in a robe of splendour.*

**[1]** Another poem<sup>i</sup> by the 11th-century Spanish poet Solomon ibn-Gabirol.

**[2]** For all that he extols the splendour of the sun, being the sun must be a terrible job. Unspeakably hot; painfully bright; utterly solitary; unending and forever; bound eternally to a timetable beyond its own control.

**[3]** In fact, the sun must be somewhat jealous of a character like Jonah, who, threatened with being similarly tethered, was able at least to have a crack at fleeing instead.

**[4]** Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously described the prophetic character as “*luminous and explosive*”.<sup>ii</sup> Such a person, Heschel says, is:<sup>iii</sup>

[L]iving in a state of disgust day and night ... To be a prophet is ... an affliction. The mission he performs is distasteful to him and repugnant to others; no reward is promised him and no reward could temper its bitterness. The prophet bears scorn and reproach. He is stigmatised as a

<sup>i</sup> Translation from Raymond P Scheindlin, *Vulture in a Cage: poems by Solomon ibn-Gabirol* (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2016), 342-343.

<sup>ii</sup> Abraham J Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962; repr New York: Harper-Collins, 2001): 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid: 10, 21-22.

madman by his contemporaries, and, by some modern scholars, as abnormal. The prophet is a lonely man.

It's easy to understand why Jonah was so keen to avoid such a fate.

**[5]** Yet while we may be able to understand Jonah's attempted flight from the prophetic life, we must also concede that he did the wrong thing.

**[6]** Partly, it was wrong on a moral level: his mission was to save the Ninevites from destruction, and by rejecting it, Jonah was willing to see the Ninevites destroyed in the interests of his own comfort and wellbeing.

**[7]** But partly also, Jonah was impoverishing himself by trying to back out of what would have been an extraordinary experience of self-improvement and adventure. Granted, being eaten by a giant fish was an adventure of sorts, but being a prophet would be the privilege of a lifetime.

**[8]** A lamp, when switched on, has a terrifyingly strong electric current passing through it. But how much more splendid the lamp is than when its bulb is switched off, dull, milky-white. Jonah wanted to retain his calm, comfortable, uneventful life, and in doing so, he was willing to pass up the opportunity to glow, to shine.

**[9]** As ibn-Gabirol said of the sun, *"serving [God] has made him powerful."* And serving God, prophesying justice, saving lives, makes a human being powerful likewise.

**[10]** Jonah passed up the opportunity to be a prophet. Any of us might do the same, but, I think, we would be mistaken for the same reason. Attuning one's life to prophetic values is a challenge and requires sacrifice. But it's better than animal sacrifice – far better – and, as a collateral benefit, one ends up a better person who does much good in the world.

**[11]** Five years ago this High Holy Days, the world lost Ruth Bader Ginsburg z"l. At her memorial service, Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt said:<sup>iv</sup>

To be born into a world that does not see you, that does not believe in your potential, that does not give you a path for opportunity or a clear path for education, and despite this, to be able to see beyond the world you are in, to

<sup>iv</sup> "Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to be honored at the Supreme Court", NPR (23 September 2020): <<https://perma.cc/3ZQC-X7CH>>



imagine that something can be different – that is the job of a prophet. And it is the rare prophet who not only imagines a new world but also makes that new world a reality in her lifetime.

**[12]** Of course, Justice Ginsburg's choice to stand up and be counted in this world that was often unwilling to hear her, came at a cost. Over her professional life she encountered disappointments and setbacks, disdain and death threats.<sup>v</sup>

**[13]** And she died knowing, and deeply saddened by, the reality that her seat on the US Supreme Court would be filled by an appointee of a President other than the one to whom she owed loyalty.<sup>vi</sup>

**[14]** Such a disappointment would have prompted a Jonah-ite judge, on their deathbed, to bewail: הֲלוֹא-זֶה דְּבָרִי, *Isn't this just what I said would happen?*<sup>vii</sup> He would have wished he'd never been nominated to the judiciary in the first place.

**[15]** Yet we know that the world is a far better place because of those who do step up, because of those who are willing to take on the prophetic burden. Serving God, doing right, makes one powerful. Let us all grow in power over the coming year, seizing the moment and bravely accepting the opportunities life gives us. כֵּן יִהְיֶה רָצוֹן, may this be God's will.

<sup>v</sup> See eg Bill Mears, "Justice Ginsburg details death threat", CNN (15 March 2006): <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160218034253/https://edition.cnn.com/2006/LAW/03/15/sotus.threat/>>

<sup>vi</sup> Nina Totenberg, "Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Champion Of Gender Equality, Dies At 87", NPR (18 September 2020): <<https://archive.ph/mDMmm>>

<sup>vii</sup> Jonah 4:2

