



***Parshat Beha'alotecha***  
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**Piano Concertos and Prophecy**  
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Sergei Rachmaninoff was arguably one of the best pianists ever. He was a virtuoso, with giant hands that could easily grasp complex harmonies and move with lightning speed up and down the keyboard. He was not only a performer but also a compositional genius; he could coax the most nuanced sounds from the piano. Maybe because his own internal landscape was filled with dramatic ups and downs, or maybe just because of his musical brilliance, he had a special ability to write music that creates emotional experience.

His early musical career in many ways reflected his own inner turmoil. He was celebrated as a child and young adult, but when his first symphony premiered, there was such intense public criticism that he fell into a deep depression. For years he couldn't write anything. Fortunately, therapy enabled Rachmaninoff to emerge from this dark cloud, and in 1901 he composed the gorgeous Piano Concerto No. 2, which was received with accolades and brought him out from his depression. From then on, he managed to keep himself in a happier place. He married his beloved Natalia, continued conducting and writing, and achieved such great recognition that he was invited to tour the United States in 1909.

At that moment, Rachmaninoff had a vision. He wanted to compose something magical for his visit, something no one would forget. And he did. He wrote his Piano Concerto No 3—widely considered the most challenging solo piece for piano. It is strikingly beautiful, with a piano part that flutters around spectacular melodies, moving up and down the keyboard with virtuosic speed for nearly 45 minutes. In a recent Boston Symphony Orchestra program, the

piece was described as the Mt Everest of piano solos. These days, it's a piece pianists use to prove their chops.

But when Rachmaninoff first premiered his 3<sup>rd</sup> Piano Concerto, it was not received with such admiration. Contemporary pianists scoffed. Even his friend, Josef Hofman sneered at the idea of playing it, saying it was "more of a fataisie than a concerto." Prokofiev wrote to a friend that he found the Piano Concerto to be "dry, difficult, and unappealing." He continued, "in musical circles it finds little affection, and besides the composer, no one is performing it so far."

Indeed, despite Rachmaninoff's incredible skill, and despite his many tours throughout the United States and the world, whenever he played the piece it was received with skepticism and criticism. His vision of sharing something beautiful with the world was dashed. The piece never took off.

That was, until Vladimir Horowitz began to play Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. Something wild happened then. Audiences that were previously dismissive and disinterested began humming with excitement and awe for the virtuosic passages. Critics who were formerly harsh and condescending began to write about the complexity of the piece, the romantic swells and breath-taking beauty. The piece took off.

How do we understand this? Rachmaninoff, the virtuosic composer and performer, writes an incredible piece which is skewered by critics until it is played by someone else. The same music, radically different receptions. What is the deal here?

Years ago, there was a tv show called the Dinosaurs. In the show, Mama Sinclair would clean the home and take care of Baby Sinclair, and the baby was happy. But, when Mama was away, Daddy would try to take care of Baby Sinclair. Baby Sinclair would sit on his Daddy's

shoulders with a frying pan in his hands. The baby dinosaur would respond to anything the father said or did by hitting his dad over the head with the frying pan and shouting, “not the mama.” Even though the Daddy Dinosaur was doing all the things that the Mommy would do—feeding the baby, ironing clothes, cleaning up, the Baby Dinosaur only wanted “Mama”.

In the case of the Dinosaurs, it was the person and not the action that mattered. In the case of Rachmaninoff, it was the person and not the music that mattered.

And while it’s comical in a tv show, this pattern is a challenging reality in our world. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we walk through the world like this baby dinosaur and like Rachmaninoff’s audiences. We have expectations of the people around us. We are not universally open to receiving wisdom or new ideas. There are people we listen to and people we ignore. There are places where we are open to ideas, and places where we are not.

Imagine the following scenario. You are speaking with your boss about a technical problem as you order food at a fast food restaurant. The cashier, listening to your call, shares an idea for how to solve the technical problem. Do you take their suggestion seriously? Or do you write them off because of their uniform and role, frustrated that they would butt into your business?

Or imagine you are someone who has never loved pets. Whenever someone tried to get you to pet a dog or a cat, you squirmed away from the fur and drool. And yet, you fall in love with someone who loves dogs, and is deeply attached to their pet. You’ve never loved dogs, and yet you love this person and love what they love. Do you re-evaluate your anti-dog position?

What about when you discuss politics or the news with people you disagree with. Do you hear their perspective? Do you think about it? Or, because you know that you have political differences, are you just listening to their points in order to form your own argument?

There are people we listen to and people we ignore. This is a theme in Jewish tradition too.

God throughout history has communicated with people through prophets, rather than by direct revelation. This is well-known, and was certainly well-known in biblical times. And yet, when a historical prophet would receive a message from God, more often than not, the people would ridicule them for having the gall to share a divine message and would proceed to ignore them. Then God would grow angry, punish the people, and pick a new prophet.

For generations our ancestors were unable to listen to wisdom of prophets. We have books and books of failed prophets. You would think that over time, we would re-evaluate. We would start running courses in listening and start a publicity campaign to educate Jews about the potential for holy messages emanating from unlikely sources.

Instead, Jewish tradition capped prophecy. Rather than expanding our capacity to hear God's truth from someone else, we say that there are no more prophets. Problem solved.

Except not. Prophecy is still alive and well in our world. There are moments when people surprise us with brilliance, wisdom, and compassion. There are moments when a total stranger has exactly the words and the message we need to hear.

Today we have the great blessing of celebrating so many beautiful marriages. And so, I wanted to share a story that I learned at home. More than 30 years ago, my mom had decided she was ready to meet her partner. She had been doing all the normal dating things, but it wasn't

working out. So she decided she was just going to say yes. Any time, anywhere, anyone who asked her to do anything, she was just going to say yes. That way, she figured, the universe would know she was ready to meet her partner. So when someone came to her and invited her to go to a meeting. (Which meetings are not exactly my mom's thing), she said yes. It was an Anti-Defamation League meeting—a perfect romantic date.

At the same time, my dad had reached similar conclusions. A patient came in and said that there was this woman he had to meet—she would be perfect. She began describing this woman who, within 15 seconds, my dad was clear was not his partner. But, he said yes. Both of my parents arrived at the Anti-Defamation League meeting for dates with other people, made eye contact across the room, and the rest is history. They've been together happily for more than 30 years.

Turns out prophecy is all about perspective. We can choose to say there is no more prophecy, we can close our ears and eyes, only open ourselves to what we know. Or, we can be open to the wisdom, the blessing, the guidance that is waiting to surprise us. Prophecy is a choice. The question is really, what do you choose?