

Rabbi Berel Wein

**Who
Knows
Twelve?**

**Themes and Values in
Trei Asar**

Maggid Books

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Preface

This is not a book of biblical scholarship. I am not a biblical scholar, neither of the classical variety nor of the more modern version of the discipline. Nevertheless, I have studied the books of Trei Asar (the Twelve Prophets) and have taught them in synagogues and yeshivas many times over the years. Every time I study and teach Trei Asar, I am amazed and humbled by the new insights that somehow escaped my attention or understanding previously. I am taking the liberty of sharing my thoughts with you because the study of our prophets is unfortunately limited, if not totally non-existent, in much of Jewish education today. Some of the reasons for this strange and sad situation will be discussed in the Introduction.

I have an emotional attachment to these books. They speak to me and have helped shape my worldview and personal attitudes. The rabbis of the Talmud taught that there were numerous prophets in Israel during First Temple times but that only a few of them merited to have their words recorded and preserved for later generations. Only those prophecies whose messages continue to be relevant to future generations were transmitted to us, while those that were relevant only to the generation present when the prophet was alive were not recorded for posterity. As such, this book is a very personal one. It reflects how the words of the

prophets speak to me about contemporary issues that face the Jewish and general world of the twenty-first century of the Common Era. The words of the prophets of Trei Asar should therefore not be viewed as only ancient history or moral preaching, but rather as a commentary on current events and present-day issues.

The books of Trei Asar span hundreds of years, from the waning days of the Kingdom of Israel until the dawn of Second Temple times. The twelve prophets represented in these books were of different walks of life, from noblemen to humble shepherds, and from various localities. Many of their words were directed at the non-Jewish nations that surrounded the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The Jewish people have never lived in a bubble or a vacuum. The fate of the Jews has always been tied to and dependent upon the fate and course of humanity generally. This is one of the great lessons of the prophets whose words comprise the books of Trei Asar.

Although Jewish separatism, insularity, and isolation are prominent features of Jewish history, the people who “dwell alone” have always been part of the general story of humanity. The books of Trei Asar abound with comparisons, not always favorable, between Jewish society and the society of the world at large. Judaism demands a higher standard of morality and behavior of Jews than it does of non-Jews, and the prophets deemed it most shameful when Jewish society fell far short of the standards of behavior and loyalty set by the non-Jewish world. This theme will recur regularly in the words of almost all of the twelve prophets represented in Trei Asar. While we are graded on an absolute scale in heaven, there also exists a minimal curve, so to speak, that operates in judging ourselves, our attitudes, and our behavior. The books of Trei Asar remind us of this fact.

The presentation of my thoughts in this book is thematic rather than chronological, historical, or a running commentary on the words of the prophets. I explore the basic themes of Jewish life and the human condition – and these themes have never really changed throughout Jewish and human history. That is why the books of Trei Asar are so contemporary and fresh. The words are ancient, but the guidance and vision are current and cogent. Each of the prophets speaks in his own voice and literary style, but the topics and themes discussed by all of

them are common to the books that comprise Trei Asar. Faith and doubt, family and community, national entity and the Land of Israel, Jewish survival, sin and repentance, personal and national redemption, assimilation, intermarriage, international disputes, betrayals and scandals, disappointments, and heroic behavior are all part of the makeup of the books. And who can deny that all of these issues are at the forefront of current Jewish living?

Within Trei Asar, like all of the other works of the prophets of Israel, constantly conflicting emotions are combined. Harsh criticism accompanies blissful optimism, and scathing denunciations combine with heartfelt praise and blessings. It is one of the identifying features of Jewish prophecy that it is always a mixed message – for is that not a definition of human life itself? It seems almost purposely confusing. Learning how to deal with this ambivalence in tone and message has been the goal of the commentators on these works over the ages.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that the prophets of Israel, without exception, all loved the Jewish people. As King Solomon wrote in Proverbs, “All transgressions are covered over by love!” (10:12). Even the sternest of prophets is an avowed and unabashed lover of his people, albeit many times a practitioner of “tough love.” As such, the prophet is the true representative of God, who is always described as loving the People of Israel. The striking story of the marriage of the prophet Hosea to a prostitute that begins the first book of Trei Asar (however this astonishing incident is to be understood) is a prime example of how love overcomes rationality and allows for all sorts of conflicting, and even contradictory, emotions to exist within the psyche and behavior of a person.

In addition to the prophetic works found in the Bible, the holy traditions of the Oral Law as recorded for us in the Mishnah and Talmud were transmitted to the rabbis via the prophets of Trei Asar. In his introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides lists ten of the twelve prophets of Trei Asar – Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi – as being bearers and teachers of the Oral Law to their respective generations. Thus the gift of prophecy is somehow intimately intertwined with the rationality of Torah study and halachic decision-making. The prophet, however, is not

necessarily a halachic decisor by virtue of his being a prophet, and not every prophet was included in the chain of halachic decisors and transmitters. Prophecy need not always demand the prerequisite of public halachic scholarship. Therefore, someone who is a prophet is a halachic authority only by virtue of his knowledge and greatness in Torah study – a purely human endeavor, for the Torah is no longer in heaven. We today are beneficiaries of these prophets' dual roles as both transmitters of the divine tradition originally revealed at Sinai and as transmitters of the messages that they received directly from God. We should therefore regard these prophets and their words with awe and delicacy, for they are filled with nuance and layers of meaning and insight. *Trei Asar* is not a book of essays and opinions. Rather, it is a work of divinity and eternity.

In finalizing the canon of the Bible, the Men of the Great Assembly bundled these twelve prophetic works into a single volume in order to guarantee that the words of each of these prophets would not be lost, despite their brevity. Often, bulk is necessary to preserve greatness that would otherwise be lost or deemed insignificant. That too is one of the lessons of *Trei Asar*.

My revered teachers in the yeshiva that I attended long ago in Chicago always based their lectures, in which they presented their worldviews and ethic insights, on the words of the prophets. I always loved these lectures and even today treasure my memories of them. They drew from the words of the prophets the constant inspiration and dedication needed to direct their students towards achieving a productive and noble life. And they had the blessed ability to draw forth from the old books the ideas and vision that would guide the young and supposedly modern mind. I am not their equal in this or in any other way, but I hope that this book will somehow accomplish their goal in my generation and all of the generations of Israel who read this work.

As this is not a book of biblical scholarship, I have not burdened the reader with notes or references. Also, please note that the translations of the biblical verses in this book are the author's own rendition of the text. I am solely responsible for what is written here. It expresses my insights and interpretations. Nevertheless, the mindset of this book is traditional and not critical, with due reverence to the holiness of the text and the exalted greatness of the twelve authors of *Trei Asar*. I hope

that this book will inspire the reader to study Trei Asar directly and gain firsthand from its riches.

On a very personal note, this book was written in the year of my eightieth birthday. I have written sixteen books before this one, eleven in English and five in Hebrew. Truth be told, after completing my last books in 2011, I went through a long period of literary inactivity. I continued with my weekly *parasha* sheets and opinion articles, but I pretty much abandoned the idea of undertaking a major new writing project. But in studying Trei Asar again at a weekly study session with friends at my home, the fire of writing was once again rekindled within me.

It is never easy to write a book at any age. But in later years, the eyes are dimmer, the letters on the keyboard are smaller, the fingers are stiffer, and the powers of concentration are slower. On the other hand, age confers perspective and understanding that are usually lacking in the young. I was fourteen years old when I first encountered Trei Asar as a subject of study while a student at my beloved yeshiva in Chicago. Sixty-five years later in Jerusalem, as I study Trei Asar once more, the words are the same but their meaning is far different than what it was when I was an adolescent. Much has happened to me and to the Jewish people over the past sixty-five years. This book was completed and edited in the shadows of the pain and costs of war against Hamas in Gaza. I never imagined that I would experience such a conflict in my lifetime or live in such an openly anti-Semitic world as I do in 2015. The words of the prophets of Trei Asar have been a personal comfort to me in these difficult days.

The words of the prophets of Trei Asar bring deeper meaning to bear on a great deal of what has happened to the Jewish people generally, as well as to me personally, over these many years. This is what gives this holy book its relevance. So, I have taken on the challenge of writing and publishing a book again. I hope and pray that it will prove of value to the many others who hopefully will read it. It certainly has been a boon to me in what otherwise might have been my dotage.

I must express my appreciation to Charlotte Friedland for her skill in editing this work, as she has done for a number of previous other books of mine. She has a sharp eye, a deft pen, and a most professional spirit. I owe a debt of gratitude to Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler,

and Tomi Mager of Maggid Books for their willingness to publish and distribute this book, as well as many of my previous books, and for their editorial and publishing skills. Dr. Moshe Simon-Shoshan skillfully copy-edited the book and Allison Ofanansky and Tali Simon carefully proof-read it. They are all special people and an author's best friend.

My children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren are my inspiration in life, my source of contentment and pride, and my vision of my family's future. My wife Mira has blessed me with loving care and wise understanding, necessary critique, and unstinting devotion. This book therefore, among other previous ones, belongs to her as well. Finally, I am naturally and above all grateful to the God of Israel who has preserved me until this day and allowed me to dwell in His holy premises of Jerusalem and to witness the fulfillment of many of the prophecies of Trei Asar before my very eyes.

Berel Wein
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Introduction

The study of the works of the prophets of Israel unfortunately has been in steep decline over the last decades of Jewish education. My father told me that when he was a yeshiva student in Lithuania, and later in Jerusalem, it was assumed that the student would be well-versed in the works of the prophets and biblical scribes that comprise the bulk of the Hebrew canon of the Bible. My father, who possessed a fabulous memory, knew most, if not all, of the holy books of the Bible by heart. Though he undoubtedly realized that I was not nearly as gifted in that respect as he was, he nevertheless taught me many of the works of the prophets when I was not yet ten years old. During my years in yeshiva, the overwhelming majority of my study time was spent on Talmud, halachah, and attempting to understand and internalize the values and ethics of Torah. Yet my high school Talmud teachers in ninth and tenth grade also managed to teach my class the complete books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even when I reached the level of studying for rabbinic ordination, our class had the benefit of special teachers who taught us the works of the later prophets and other books of the Bible, including Proverbs and Job, as well as Midrash, Jewish history, and even a smattering of Jewish philosophy. But in most of today's yeshiva world all of these topics practically no longer exist, or certainly are not emphasized

in the curriculum: the exclusive study of Talmud rules the day and night of the student.

There are many reasons that can be advanced for why today the People of the Book don't know what book you are talking about. Part of this attitude can be traced to the struggle of traditional Jewry against the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Reform and Haskalah (Enlightenment) movements. These groups, however well-intentioned they might originally have been, eventually embarked on negating the importance of traditional observances, customs, and rabbinic authority to Jewish survival, and made the knowledge and study of the prophets of Israel the centerpiece of their new, improved Judaism. To further their anti-traditional agenda they encouraged biblical scholarship, and soon became enamored of all types of theories advanced by the popular non-Jewish (as well as Jewish) schools of biblical criticism. This pseudo-scientific study of the Bible, shorn of any holiness and subtly demeaning Judaism and the Jewish people, soon gained popularity in the growing Reform, Haskalah, and secular segments of the Jewish world. The Orthodox world of Eastern Europe recoiled in horror at this development. In reaction to these excesses, they began a slow but steady abandonment of the study of the Hebrew Bible, concentrating their educational efforts almost exclusively on the study of Talmud and halachah.

This trend has reached its apex in our time. And paradoxically, the study of the Bible has also been pretty much abandoned by the secular and non-traditional Jewish educational systems. David Ben-Gurion, the secular, socialist first prime minister of Israel, campaigned mightily on behalf of the study of the Bible and prophets in the Israeli secular school system. However, later secular ministers of education in Israel have been willing to make such studies optional, or even eliminated them completely from school curricula. The secular Jewish world today has abandoned the study of biblical Judaism in favor of humanist progressive liberalism and faddish current political correctness.

And so, the study of the biblical texts is pretty much ignored by both these large sections of the Jewish world. This is a situation beyond irony. That said, the study of biblical texts and books is currently encountering a great revival in the Religious Zionist sector of the Israeli population. Perhaps this trend will spread to the other sectors of the Jewish world as well.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, under the influence of the great Gaon of Vilna, there began a rebirth of Orthodox Torah commentary on the Bible, especially the Five Books of Moses. Such seminal works of commentary as *Meshch Chochmah* (Rabbi Meir Simcha Cohen of Dvinsk), *Haamek Davar* (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin), the commentaries of Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim of Bucharest, *HaKtav VeHaKabbalah* (Rabbi Yaakov Zvi of Mecklenburg, Prussia), *HaMidrash VeHaMaaseh* (Rabbi Yechezkel Lifshitz of Kalish, Poland), the works of Rabbi Dovid Zvi Hoffmann of Berlin, and the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt am Main, became mainstays of modern Torah commentary. These works were dedicated to restoring a sense of holiness to the biblical text and counteracting the claims of Reform, Haskalah, and biblical criticism. Also, they all showed the connection between the Oral Law and the talmudic interpretations of the texts of the Torah. Eventually, their interpretations and concentration on biblical study spilled over into the works of the prophets of Israel as well.

There were others in the Jewish world who wrote about the words of the Bible and the prophets. These include Moses Mendelsohn, Naftali Hertz Weisel, Leopold Zunz, Benno Jacob, Franz Rosenzweig, Samuel David Luzzatto, Moshe David Cassuto, and Martin Buber. All of their works were heavily influenced by biblical criticism and were therefore suspect. They were shunned, ignored, or even banned in the Orthodox educational world. Nevertheless, their writings did spark a renewed interest in certain circles in the study of the Bible, especially of the prophets. Some of their works, insights, and interpretations have been quoted by such modern Orthodox biblical teachers as Professor Nehama Leibowitz and my teacher of Bible at the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago, Professor Meyer Waxman, among others. However, all current Orthodox scholars, including Leibowitz and Waxman, have categorically rejected any connection to or approval of any of the conclusions of the various schools and theories of biblical criticism that deny the divinity of the Bible. The holiness and unity of the Bible remains one of the cardinal points of Judaism.

Over the past few decades in Israel, there have arisen large and diverse gatherings, under both Orthodox and secular auspices, devoted completely to the study and exploration of the works of the prophets.

Many books and commentaries have come forth, so even though the secular and religious school curricula do not always reflect interest in the later prophets, there is now a strong undercurrent of public fascination with their messages. Much of this is directly attributable to the events that surrounded the establishment of the State of Israel and continue to surround the Land of Israel. Living in Israel, one cannot help but feel that the words of the prophets of Israel speak to us regarding current events and the challenges that face us.

We have lived to see many of the words of the prophets of Israel come alive before our very eyes. The bounty of the land and its enormous agricultural variety and productivity was forecast by many of the prophets who appear in the books of Trei Asar. We are witnesses to the return of millions of Jews to the Land of Israel from all corners of the world – something promised to us by these prophets, and yet for millennia seemed to be an impossible dream, incapable of fulfillment. The prophets of Trei Asar warn us of the difficulties inherent in recreating the Jewish state and rebuilding the Jewish people after such a long and bitter exile. But they also outline for us the eventual success that the Jewish people would achieve in rebuilding their state, and the spiritual and physical blessings that would eventually accompany and flow from these events. Studying the words of the prophets of Trei Asar is like reading an analysis of current events.

It is exactly for this reason that attention should be given to Trei Asar and to all of the other works of the prophets and scribes of the Bible. Otherwise, we doom ourselves to being constantly blindsided by unexpected events, overly frightened by impending difficulties, and hopelessly confused by what currently befalls us. The book of books has accompanied us for thousands of years on our journey through the world and its civilizations. It continues to do so today – and we would be very wise to study it, consult it, and live by its values and holy messages.

Not all of the ideas and conclusions stated in this book are explicit in the words of the prophets of Trei Asar. I was, however, inspired by their words to think more broadly about many of the issues of Jewish life, past and present. I feel that the general tone of the books of prophecy speaks to us, even if explicit references in the texts may be wanting.