

From Joshua to Malachi

Making the biblical books of Prophets accessible

• RIVKAH LAMBERT ADLER

Most Jews have never read the entire Hebrew Bible. The Steinsaltz Center in Jerusalem would like to change that.

A Hebrew-English edition of *The Steinsaltz Nevi'im*, with commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, recently published in partnership with Koren Publishers, is a companion to *The Steinsaltz Humash* and *The Steinsaltz Ketuvim*.

Rabbi Steinsaltz was born into a secular home in Jerusalem in 1937. In 1988, writing for *Time* magazine, journalist Richard N. Ostling called Steinsaltz a “once-in-a-millennium scholar.” Steinsaltz is best known for opening up Talmud study to people outside the walls of a traditional yeshiva. He’s spent a good part of his life making classic Jewish texts accessible to the non-Hebrew-speaking world.

In late 2016, Steinsaltz suffered a stroke, leaving him unable to speak, but his son and executive director of the Steinsaltz Center, Rabbi Meni Even-Israel, has dedicated himself to finishing his father’s work and getting it published. All content continues to be reviewed and approved by Rabbi Steinsaltz.

With this new volume, Steinsaltz turned his attention to the books of Prophets, which begin where the Five Books of Moses leaves off. Regarding the need for yet another commentary, he wrote in the introduction, “To this day, thank God, there are many scholars and students of the Bible raising unique questions and challenges that require attention, analysis and investigation. All these illuminate the eternal words of the Torah through a range of viewpoints and give rise to ‘plain meanings that are renewed every day.’”

The Steinsaltz Nevi'im focuses on *p'shat*, the plain meaning of the text. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz calls this “the most difficult type of interpretation” because it “requires the interpreter to adhere closely to the literal meaning of the words while paying attention to syntax and context.”

In many translations of classic Jewish texts, the commentary generally appears in footnotes, making reading the text and getting the full understanding from the commentary a disjointed experience, flipping between text and commentary. The distinctiveness of a Steinsaltz commentary is that it integrates the commentary within the text, making for a smooth and pleasurable reading experience.

The translation is in bold type and the commentary appears in a different typeface. To demonstrate, here’s how Steinsaltz handles the translation of Melachim Alef (I Kings) 4:27, the famous story of King Solomon proposing to cut a disputed baby in half.

“The king responded and said: ‘Give her the living baby, to the woman who reacted like a mother immediately upon my suggestion, and do not put him to death; she is his mother. The reactions of the two women prove that the one who has mercy on the child is the true mother, whereas the other one attempted to kidnap him.’”

Each chapter is introduced with a brief English summary, further guiding the reader to important themes. At the bottom of some pages are two kinds of footnotes. Background notes provide additional details such as historical, scientific or geographic facts that enhance the readers’ understanding. Discussion notes draw from a wide range of Jewish commentaries.

If you’re accustomed to thinking of the Bible as a mass of Thou, Thee and Thine, the modern translation and flowing commentary of *The Steinsaltz Nevi'im* will make reading the Books of Prophets a pleasure.

Visual aids are another unique feature. Where were all the cities in relation to one another in the story of the rape of the concubine of Giva? What does a tamarisk tree look like? Where are the important places mentioned in the stories of Elijah the prophet? What does a sheep-shearing look like?



RABBI ADIN STEINSTALTZ. (Marc Israel Sellem)

Questions like these are addressed through the use of small maps and full-color images, placed on the same page as the topic being discussed in the text. There are images of ancient art based on biblical events and of sights, such as a donkey wearing a saddle or a shepherd with his flock, which would have been common in the days of the prophets, but are less so now. There are also photos of less well-known places in Israel like Tel Azeka and Ein Rogel that are mentioned in the text.

The vowelized Hebrew verses are the work of a team of editors at Koren Publishers and appear in the distinctive Koren font on the left side of each two-page spread. The English text is on the right. *The Steinsaltz Nevi'im*, complete in one volume, is printed on very lightweight paper, known in the printing industry as Bible paper.

Rabbi Meni Even-Israel told *The Jerusalem Post* that the Steinsaltz method emphasizes “making Jewish texts available to everybody. It’s not our goal to have people spend all day learning. Our goal is to provide the most amount of accessibility.”

Even though the volume is chock-full of resources for learning *Nevi'im*, he emphasized that the layout was very deliberate. “The design gives you breathing room. We included open spaces on the page, so it doesn’t feel overwhelming.”

Even-Israel has advice for people who have never read the Bible. “It’s too big to read from cover to cover. Start with something you’re interested in, something you can relate to. Try to pick a story you’ve already heard about. Don’t start with allegorical prophecies of Yeshayahu (Isaiah). Ignore the Hebrew for now.

“Just try to connect with the text. If you’re into architecture, read 2 Kings about the construction of the Temple. If you’re into management, read the end of 1 Kings. If you’re interested in territorial disputes, read Joshua.”

Like everything the Steinsaltz Center produces, Even-Israel calls *The Steinsaltz Nevi'im* a study Bible, meant for learning. “It gives you the keys, not the full door and house. We give you the spoon. We don’t feed you,” he noted.

Even-Israel compares *Tanach*, the Hebrew Bible, to a beloved novel. “You always want to go back to it,” he reflected. ■

THE STEINSALTZ NEVI'IM

By Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz
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