

Parashat Shoftim



How Can We Know if a Prophecy Comes from God?

- What are the two types of false prophets mentioned in this parasha?
- How does the Torah guide us to differentiate between a true and false prophet?
- What is the problem with this method of differentiation?
- What else helps us to discern if a prophet is true or false?
- How is the Torah's advice about false prophets implemented in the Bible itself?

Introduction

Last week, in parashat Re'eh, we began discussing the issue of false prophecy. We discussed the kind of prophet described in chapter 13, who calls for idol worship; primarily dealing with the question of how it is conceivable that a person of prophetic power will preach for, not against, idolatry; and we saw how different commentators deal with this issue.

Parashat Shoftim also deals with false prophecy. In chapter 18, the Torah forbids the implementation of different kinds of divination and sorcery:

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or oracle who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be straightforward before the Lord your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. (18:9-13)

כי אתה בא אל הארץ אשר ה' אלהיך נתן לך לא תלמד לעשות כתועבת הגוים ההם: לא ימצא בך מעביר בנו ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונו ומנחש ומכשף: ודבר חקר ושאל אוב וידעני ודרש אל המתים: כי תועבת ה' כל עשה אלה ובגלל התועבת האלה ה' אלהיך מוריש אותם מפניך: תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך: כי הגוים האלה אשר אתה יורש אותם אל מעננים ואל קסמים ישמעו ואתה לא יגו נתן לך ה' אלהיך.

In contrast, the Torah offers the preferable alternative – obeying God’s word as received directly from a true prophet:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites...I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put My words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. I Myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to My words that the prophet speaks in My name. (14-19)

נביא מקרבך מאחייך כמוני יקים לך ה' אלהיך אליו תשמעו... נביא אקים להם מקרב אחיהם כמוך ונתתי דברי בפיו ודבר אליהם את כל אשר אצוו: והיה האיש אשר לא ישמע אל דברי אשר ידבר בשמי אנכי אדרש מעמו.

A false prophet and a prophet who speaks in the name of idolatry

The Torah continues, warning against false prophets:

But a prophet who presumes to speak in My name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death. You may say to yourselves, How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord? If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed. (20-22)

אך הנביא אשר יזיד לדבר דבר בשמי את אשר לא צויתיו לדבר ואשר ידבר בשם אלהים אחרים ומת הנביא ההוא: וכי תאמר בלבבך איכה גדע את הדבר אשר לא דברו ה': אשר ידבר הנביא בשם ה' ולא יהיה הדבר ולא יבוא הוא הדבר אשר לא דברו ה' בידון דברו הנביא לא תגור ממונו.

The Torah warns here of two different types of false prophet: one is a prophet who is supposedly speaking in God's name, but he did not in fact hear such words from the mouth of God ("a prophet who presumes to speak in My name anything I have not commanded"); the second is a prophet speaking in the name of another "god" ("who speaks in the name of other gods").

**How will
we know?**

Verses 21-22 raise the obvious question: How can we distinguish between a true and false prophecy?

The answer given here is that **the authenticity of a prophecy is confirmed with its fulfillment** – a prophecy which does not come true is a false prophecy.

While this may seem like a reasonable answer, in reality, this is no simple matter. In the Bible, in *Neviim* in particular, we learn of complex situations involving both true and false prophets pitted against each other, each trying to convince the public of the authenticity of their words – and their listeners were faced with no easy task.

In this lesson we will discuss two stories that focus upon distinguishing between true and false prophets: the story of Michayahu ben Yimleh (1 Kings 22); and the story of Yirmiyahu against Hananiah ben Azur (Jeremiah 28).

Michayahu ben Yimleh Against the False Prophets

Four
hundred
prophets

King Ahav of Israel and Yehoshafat of Yehudah want to go out to war against Ramot Gilad, and Yehoshafat wishes to hear God’s word before they go out to war:

So the king of Israel brought together the prophets—about four hundred men—and asked them, “Shall I go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?” “Go,” they answered, “for the Lord will give it into the king’s hand.” But Yehoshafat asked, “Is there no longer a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?” The king of Israel answered Yehoshafat, “There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Michayahu son of Yimleh.” “The king should not say such a thing,” Yehoshafat replied. So the king of Israel called one of his officials and said, “Bring Michayahu son of Yimleh at once.”

וַיִּקְבְּצוּ מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת
הַנְּבִיאִים בְּאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת
אִישׁ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם הֲאֵלֶיךָ
עַל רָמֹת גִּלְעָד לְמִלְחָמָה
אִם אֶחָדֶיךָ וַיֹּאמְרוּ עָלֶיךָ
וַיְהִי אֲדֹנָי בְּיַד הַמֶּלֶךְ:
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשָׁפָט הֲאֵין פֹּה
נְבִיא לַה' עוֹד וַנְּדַרְשֶׁהָ
מֵאוֹתוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֵל יְהוֹשָׁפָט עוֹד אִישׁ אֶחָד
לְדַרֵּשׁ אֶת ה' מֵאוֹתוֹ וַאֲנִי
שֹׂנְאֵתוֹ כִּי לֹא יִתְּנֵבָא עָלַי
טוֹב כִּי אִם רָע מִיִּכְיָהוּ בֶן
יְמִלָּה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשָׁפָט אֵל
יֹאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ בּוֹ: וַיִּקְרָא
מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל סָרִיס
אֶחָד וַיֹּאמֶר מְהֵרָה מִיִּכְיָהוּ
בֶן יְמִלָּה: ... וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ צְדָקְיָהוּ
בֶן בְּנַעֲנָה בֶרְנִי בֶרְזֵל וַיֹּאמֶר
פֹּה אָמֵר ה' בְּאֵלֶיךָ תִּגַּח
אֶת אָרְסֵךְ עַד גְּלֹתְסֵם: וְכָל
הַנְּבִיאִים נְבִיאִים בֶּן לְאֹמֶר

... Now Zedekiah son of Kenaanah had made iron horns and he declared, "This is what the Lord says: 'With these you will gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.'" All the other prophets were prophesying the same thing. "Attack Ramoth Gilead and be victorious," they said, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand." The messenger who had gone to summon Michayahu said to him, "Look, the other prophets without exception are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favorably." But Micaiah said, "As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what the Lord tells me." When he arrived, the king asked him, "Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or not?" "Attack and be victorious," he answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand." The king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?" ... And he said, "Therefore hear the word of the

עלה רמות גלעד והצלח ונתן ה' ביד המלך: והמלך אשר הלך לקרא מיכיהו דבר אליו לאמר הנה נא דברי הנביאים פה אחד טוב אל המלך יהי נא דברך בדבר אחד מהם ודברת טוב: ויאמר מיכיהו חי ה' כי את אשר יאמר ה' אלי אתו אדבר: ויבוא אל המלך ויאמר המלך אליו מיכיהו הנלך אל רמות גלעד למלחמה אם נחדל ויאמר אליו עליה והצלח ונתן ה' ביד המלך: ויאמר אליו המלך עד כמה פעמים אני מושבעך אשר לא תדבר אלי רק אמת בשם ה': ... ויאמר לכו שמעו דבר ה' ראייתי את ה' ישב על כסאו וכל צבא השמים עמוד עליו מימינו ומשמאלו: ויאמר ה' מי יפתה את אחאב ויעל ויפל ברמות גלעד ויאמר זה בכה וזה אמר בכה: ויצא הרוח ויעמוד לפני ה' ויאמר אני אפתנו ויאמר ה' אליו במה: ויאמר אצא והייתי רוח שקר בפני כל נביאיו ויאמר תפתה וגם תוכל צא ועשה כן: ועתה הנה נתן ה' רוח שקר בפני כל נביאיך אלה וה' דבר עליך רעה.

Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the multitudes of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?' "One suggested this, and another that. Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the Lord and said, 'I will entice him.' "By what means?' the Lord asked. "I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. "You will succeed in enticing him,' said the Lord. 'Go and do it.' "So now the Lord has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The Lord has decreed disaster for you." (1 Kings 22: 6-22)

Of course, this story is worthy of an extensive discussion in itself, but in this context, we will only raise a few points in regard to the issue of false prophecy:

1. The prophets are not presented as "false prophets," nor even as prophets of the Ba'al,¹ but only as "prophets."
2. It is evident that these prophets (Zedekiah ben Kenaanah in particular) are certain of the

1 As opposed to the story of Eliyahu and the prophets of the Ba'al at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18).

authenticity of their prophecies. From here, we can conclude that false prophets undergo some kind of spiritual experience, and may not be aware that their words are not God's words. And indeed, from the words of the true prophet (Michayahu), it emerges that the words of these prophets is not a "lie" that they themselves invented: they indeed received their prophecy from a God-sent Spirit .

3. Here, the content of the prophecy is not a clear indication of its truth, for it does not necessarily deal with "religious" issues such as the mitzvot, but rather with a political-military matter: whether or not to go out to war.

How, then, can the king and the nation determine who is speaking the truth?

**The test
of the
prophecy's
fulfillment
- too late**

The Torah determines that the authenticity of a prophecy is determined with the prophecy's fulfillment, and indeed, the end of the story proves whose prophecy came true. However, in this case, the Torah's test does not help the figures of the story themselves – they cannot wait to see the results of the war before deciding whether or not to go in the first place. If so, another test is needed in order to determine whether a prophecy is true.²

2 The Abrabanel says that the Torah's words only apply to the first two kinds of prophecy (performing wonders and predicting what is to come). However, when a prophet predicts future good or evil depending on the people's actions (for example, famine or abundance depending on fulfillment of the Torah) – then a prophecy's authenticity cannot be tested because God may revoke His word if the people change their deeds, and this

**Intuitive
determi-
nation**

Indeed, it seems that all those in the presence of the two kings and Michayahu were immediately aware of the discrepancy between true and false prophecy. Yehoshafat hears a prophecy from four hundred (!) prophets, but their words do not suffice, and he asks to hear just **one** prophet of God; and it seems that Ahav was also aware of Michayahu's superiority and was only loathe to summon him because he

is the Abrabanel's language:

שפעולות הנביא ודבריו הנפלאים הם בג' מינים: מין האותות והמופתים שיעשה בשינוי הטבע; ומין הגדת מה שקרה או מה שיקרה מדברים היו או יהיו מבלתי שיהיה בהם טוב או רע, כמו מה שהגיד שמואל לשאול (שמואל א, ט') שנמצאות האתונות; ומן היעודים הרעים או הטובים שיהיו לאומה מן האומות או לאיש מן האישים בעתיד. והנה בחינת הנביא תהיה במין הראשון ובמין הב' הנזכרים בלבד. לא במין השלישי מן היעודים העתידים מהטוב או מהרע. והשכל יגזור בזה, כי הבחינה אין ראוי שתהיה כי אם בדרכי הנעשים לתכלית הבחינה או הנסיון, לא במה שיכלול הגמול והעונש לאחריה. ולכן תהיה הבחינה האמיתית בעשיית האותות והמופתים בזולת המנהג הטבעי, כדי שיכירו וידעו בני אדם כי שם ה' נקרא עליו הוא בנבואתו פועל בחומר העולם ועושה בהיותו כרצונו. וכן בהגדרת מה שקרה או שיקרה, בהיותו דבר נעלם ונסתר מאותם השומעים. כי כל זה יורה על הרוח האלהי אשר בו ידע מה בחשוכא ונהורא עמיה שרא.

The actions of a prophet and his wonders are of three kinds: performing wonders through changing nature; predicting things which are neither good or bad, such as what Shmuel told Shaul (1 Samuel 9) that the donkeys have been found; and predicting the good and bad that will befall a nation or an individual in the future. The prophet's words can only be tested for authenticity in the first two kinds of prophecy. Not in the third kind of prediction of good or evil. And logic dictates this, for it is not fitting that a prophet's authenticity be tested through matters of reward and punishment. And therefore the real test lies in the performance of wonders in nature, so that humankind will recognize God's name and that He does as He wishes. And similarly, [authenticity can be tested through] predicting what did or will happen, as it is a hidden thing from [the prophet's] listeners. For these things will show that the spirit of God within [the prophet] will know what darkness and light will come to pass.

And see a more extensive discussion in the Ralbag (*Milchamot Hashem* 6:13); R' Hasdei Crescas (*Or Hashem*, 2; 4:2).

prophesied evil. Similarly, when Michayahu lies and tells them they will be successful in battle, the king notes the hollow tone of his words and binds him to tell the truth. From here, it is clear that it is possible to recognize which prophecy reflects God's word, and which rings with "deceiving spirit."

At the same time, we see that the four hundred prophets who were filled with a deceiving spirit did not make their prophecies up, but actually received a prophetic vision that convinced them of the truth of their own words, which were therefore not uttered in actual deception.

If so, the question still stands: how can one distinguish between true and false prophecy?

In order to answer this question, let us delve into another story that deals with false prophecy – Yirmiyahu's struggle with Hananiah ben Azur.

Yirmiyahu against Hananiah ben Azur

Breaking
the yoke
of Babylon

Yirmiyahu often faced false prophets.³ We will now discuss one such event, which is described in great detail and length in the text:

In the fifth month of that same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, the prophet Hananiah son of Azur, who was from Gibeon, said to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and all the people: “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord’s house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Yehoyachin son of Yehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.’” (Jeremiah 28:1-4)

וְהָיָה בַּשָּׁנָה הַזֹּאת בְּרֵאשִׁית
מִמְלַכְתּוֹ צִדְקִיָּה מֶלֶךְ
יְהוּדָה בַּשָּׁנָה הַרְבֵּעִית
בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי אָמַר אֵלַי
חֲנַנְיָה בֶן עֲזוּר הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר
מִגִּבְעוֹן בְּבֵית ה' לְעֵינַי
הַכֹּהֲנִים וְכָל הָעָם לֵאמֹר:
כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר שְׁבַרְתִּי
אֶת עַל מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל: בְּעוֹד
שְׁנַתַּיִם יָמִים אָנִי מוֹשִׁיב
אֶל הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֶת כָּל
כְּלֵי בֵית ה' אֲשֶׁר לָקַח
נְבוּצַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל מִן
הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיְבִיאֵם בָּבֶל:
וְאֶת יְכִנְיָה בֶן יְהוֹיָקִים
מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה וְאֶת כָּל גְּלוּת
יְהוּדָה הַבָּאִים בָּבֶלָה אָנִי
מוֹשִׁיב אֶל הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה
נָאִם ה' כִּי אֲשַׁבֵּר אֶת עַל
מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל.

3 For Yirmiyahu's struggles with false prophets, and accusations against Yirmiyahu himself, see Jeremiah 4:10; 6:13-14; 14:13-15; 17:15-16; 20:7-8; chapter 23; 26:11-18; 27:16-18; chapter 28; 29; 37:19; 43:2.

Hananiah's words come after the exile of Yehoyachin, when the upper classes of the people and the treasures of the Mikdash were led away to Babylon. Yirmiyahu continues to warn the people that if they do not mend their ways, they will suffer complete destruction, and also be led to exile.⁴ In contrast to Yirmiyahu's prophecies of doom, Hananiah ben Azur is offering prophecies of consolation, promising the people that the exiled will soon return from Babylon, together with the treasures of the Mikdash.

If only...

When Yirmiyahu hears his words, he does not immediately “return fire” and argue with Hananiah ben Azur, but rather, he expresses his hopes that his own prophecies will be proven wrong, and that Hananiah's words will come true:

Then the prophet Yirmiyahu replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord. He said, “Amen! May the Lord do so! May the Lord fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the Lord's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. (6-8)

וַיֹּאמֶר יִרְמְיָהוּ הַנְּבִיא אֶל
הַנְּבִיא הַנְּבִיא לְעֵינֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים
וְלְעֵינֵי כָּל הָעָם הָעֹמְדִים
בְּבַיִת ה': וַיֹּאמֶר יִרְמְיָהוּ
הַנְּבִיא אָמֵן כִּן יַעֲשֶׂה ה'
יְקֻם ה' אֶת דְּבָרָיו אֲשֶׁר
נְבִיאָתָה לְהָשִׁיב כְּלֵי בַיִת ה'
וְכָל הַגּוֹלָה מִבָּבֶל אֶל הַמָּקוֹם
הַזֶּה.

Yirmiyahu says “if only your words will come true,” because he himself has no interest in Jerusalem's


4 See Jeremiah 27.

destruction. He only chastises the people in the hope that they will change their ways and thus prevent the destruction.

**Who is
right - he
whose
words
come true**

However, at the same time, Yirmiyahu warns Hananiah that the authenticity of his prophecy will only be confirmed when his words pass the test that has long since been presented in the Torah - the test of fulfillment:

Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.”

אֲךְ שָׁמַע נָא הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה
אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי דֹבֵר בְּאַזְנוֹתֶיךָ
וּבְאַזְנוֹי כָּל הָעָם: הַנְּבִיאִים
אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לִפְנֵי וּלְפָנֶיךָ מִן
הָעוֹלָם וַיִּנְבְּאוּ אֵל אֶרְצוֹת
רַבּוֹת וְעַל מַמְלָכוֹת גְּדוֹלוֹת
לְמַלְחָמָה וּלְרָעָה וּלְדָבָר:
הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר יִנְבֵּא לְשָׁלוֹם
כִּבְּא דָבָר הַנְּבִיא יִנְדַע
הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר שִׁלְחוּ ה'
בְּאַמֹּת.

**The sym-
bolic
breaking
of the
yoke**

In reaction to Yirmiyahu's warning, Hananiah illustrates his words with a symbolic act⁵ in order

5 According to the Malbim's commentary on this chapter, as well as the Ramban's opinion (in his commentary on Bereshit – regarding the issue of “מעשה אבות סימן לבנים” – what fathers do is a sign for their children), the acts performed by the prophets are not only symbolic, illustrative, but they also give grant practical validation to a prophecy, as if beginning its actual fulfillment. Indeed, at the end of the chapter, Yirmiyahu responds to Hananiah that there is actual significance to the symbolic acts he has performed: “Thus says the Lord, You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron.”

to demonstrate the authenticity of his prophecy. He breaks the wooden “yoke” Yirmiyahu wears around his neck, which God instructed him to make in chapter 27 as an expression of the punishment that is about to come. Following Hananiah’s deed, God commands Yirmiyahu to prepare a replacement yoke, this time made of iron, in order to illustrate that Yirmiyahu’s prophecy will triumph over that of Hananiah:

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke off the neck of the prophet Yirmiyahu and broke it, and he said before all the people, “This is what the Lord says: ‘In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.’”

At this, the prophet Yirmiyahu went on his way.

After the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke off the neck of the prophet Yirmiyahu, the word of the Lord came to Yirmiyahu: “Go and tell Hananiah, ‘This is what the Lord says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all these nations to make them

ויקח חֲנַנְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא אֶת הַמוֹטָה מֵעַל צִנּוֹר יִרְמְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא וַיִּשְׁבְּרָהּ׃ וַיֹּאמֶר חֲנַנְיָהּ לְעֵינֵי כָל הָעָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר ה' כִּכָּה אֲשַׁבֵּר אֶת עַל נְבֻכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל בְּעוֹד שְׁנַתִּים יָמִים מֵעַל צִנּוֹר כָּל הַגּוֹיִם וַיִּלְךְ יִרְמְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא לְדַרְכּוֹ׃

וַיְהִי דְבַר ה' אֶל יִרְמְיָהוּ אַחֲרָי שְׁבוֹר חֲנַנְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא אֶת הַמוֹטָה מֵעַל צִנּוֹר יִרְמְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא לֵאמֹר׃ הַלֹּךְ וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל חֲנַנְיָהּ לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר ה' מוֹטוֹת עֵץ שִׁבַרְתָּ וְעָשִׂיתָ תַחְתֵּיהֶן מוֹטוֹת בְּרֹזֶל׃ כִּי כֹה אָמַר ה' צָבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל בְּרֹזֶל נִתְּתִי עַל צִנּוֹר כָּל הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה לְעַבְדָּ אֶת נְבֻכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל וְעַבְדְּהוּ וְגַם אֶת חֵיט הַשָּׂדֶה נִתְּתִי לוֹ׃ וַיֹּאמֶר יִרְמְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא אֶל חֲנַנְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא שְׁמַע נָא

serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they will serve him. I will even give him control over the wild animals.” Then the prophet Yirmiyahu said to Hananiah the prophet, “Listen, Hananiah! The Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you will die, because you have preached rebellion against the Lord.’” In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died.

תַּנְנִיָּה לֹא שְׁלַחְךָ ה' וְאַתָּה
הַבְּטַחְתָּ אֶת הָעַם הַזֶּה עַל
שָׁקֶר: לָכֵן כֹּה אָמַר ה' הַנְּנִי
מִשְׁלַחְךָ מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה
הַשְּׁנִיָּה אֶתָּה מֵת בִּי סָרָה
דְּבַרְתָּ אֵל ה': וַיָּמָת תַּנְנִיָּה
הַנְּבִיא בַשָּׁנָה הַהִיא בַּחֹדֶשׁ
הַשְּׁבִיעִי.

**The
content
of the
prophecy
does not
testify
to its
falseness**

In this story as well, the false prophet is not explicitly referred to as such. Similarly, the content of Hananiah’s prophecy is not problematic from a religious or moral perspective, and its implications are mainly political – should the people give in to the Babylonian Empire, or fight against them? In such a situation, it is very difficult for listeners to determine which of the prophecies is true and which one is false. Both sides accompany their prophecies with a symbolic act, and each prophet seems to be convinced of his own words.

Yirmiyahu
and the
people in
doubt

Yirmiyahu's reactions, however, show that he is not completely sure that Hananiah's words are not true:⁶ he opens his words by saying: "if only your words will come true," then warns him that his prophecy will only be confirmed with the test of fulfillment, and finally, leaves without any decisive statement (as opposed to Michaya ben Yimleh, who is convinced that he is correct). Only after Yirmiyahu receives a prophecy to prepare a yoke of iron to contradict Hananiah's prophecy does he understand that Hananiah is a false prophet, and then he confronts him directly and predicts that he will die within the year.

Hananiah's death that same year confirmed that his words were false, but his death was not immediate, and therefore, it does not say that the people were convinced of Yirmiyahu's prophecy. In order to differentiate between a true and false prophet, we need immediate proof, so that the word of God will not lose its momentum.⁷ How can this be achieved?

6 In other instances in the book, it also seems that Yirmiyahu is faced with this problem. In an early prophecy, he says (14:13): But I said, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! The prophets keep telling them, 'You will not see the sword or suffer famine. Indeed, I will give you lasting peace in this place.'" God replies thus: "Then the Lord said to me, 'The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds...'" It seems that when Jeremiah heard the prophecies of these other prophets, he was not entirely sure if they were correct or not, and needed to receive a special prophecy that will reveal their falsehood to him.

7 The problem is only exacerbated if we accept Rabbi Akiva's opinion in the *Sifri* (84) that Hananiah was a true prophet at first: "Rabbi Akiva said: Heaven forbid that an idol worshiper make the sun and moon, stars or constellations be still! [The

Different Degrees of Prophecy

Different degrees of spiritual power

The two stories we have seen illustrate the problematic aspects of the phenomenon of false prophecy. Just as the Torah does not use the term “false prophet,” it is also not used in *Neviim*, and this teaches us about the complexity of the concept of prophecy.

As we discussed in the previous parasha, there are people bestowed with special spiritual powers who are able to reach certain spiritual states that most people are unable to reach. The Torah refers to these people as “prophets,” but not all prophets have been granted God’s actual words. In his commentary to chapter 18 of Devarim, the Ramban discusses the power to predict the future in different ways, explaining that this is not false, but rather an actual form of power.⁸

Torah] is only referring to one who was a true prophet at first, but then became a false prophet like Hananiah the son of Azur.”

8 These are his words on Devarim 18:9:

עתה דע והבן בעיניי הכשפים, כי הבורא יתברך כאשר ברא הכל מאין עשה העליונים מנהיגי התחתונים אשר למוטה מהן, ונתן כח הארץ וכל אשר עליה בכוכבים ובמזלות לפי הנהגתם ומבטם בהם כאשר הוא מנוסה בחכמת האיצימגנינות...

ורבים יתחסדו בנחשים לומר שאין בהם אמת כלל, כי מוי יגיד לעורב ולעגור מה יהיה. ואנחנו לא נוכל להכחיש דברים יתפרסמו לעיני רואים. ורבותינו גם כן יודו בהם...

ואסר לך הנחשים והקסמים בעבור שעשה לך מעלה גדולה לתתך עליון על כל גויי הארץ שיקים בקרבך נביא ויתן דבריו בפיו, ואתה תשמע ממנו מה יפעל אל ולא תצטרך אתה בעתידות אל קוסם ומנחש, שיקבלו אותם מן הכוכבים או מן השפלים בשרי מעלה שאין כל דבריהם אמת ולא יודיעו בכל הצריך, אבל הנבואה תודיע הפץ השם ולא יפול דבר מכל דבריה, והוא שיפרש (בפסוק כב) "הוא הדבר אשר לא דברו ה'" – והנה אתה חלקו וסגולתו שומע עצתו מפיו...

Now, know and understand about matters of sorcery, that when the Creator, blessed be He, created everything, he made the heavenly entities rulers over the earthly entities beneath them, and granted the stars and the fortunes power over

Am Yisrael merited the greatest of prophets, Moshe Rabbeinu, who received God's word directly; prophets of a lower prophetic status who were unable to receive His words directly followed in his wake, but they were still granted the knowledge of God's true words.⁹ At the same time, there was a widespread phenomenon of people of certain spiritual powers who "prophesied" different prophecies on a lower spiritual level, prophecies that did not reflect God's word, but was rather attuned to lower spiritual entities.

Israel was faced with the challenge of differentiating between them, and as illustrated through the two

the earth and everything upon it according to their guidance and their gaze, just as the astrologers have experienced...And many have denied such divination to say that there is no truth in them at all, for who could tell raven or a crane what is to be. But how can we deny things that have been publicly witnessed? And our Sages will also admit to them... and He forbade divination and sorcery to you, because He set you above all other nations of the land, setting a prophet among you and placing His words in his mouth, and you shall hear what God is setting in motion from him and you will not need to go to diviners and sorcerers to know the future, to those who looked at the stars or from the lower ministering angels, who are not entirely reliable and do not provide all necessary information, but prophecy will inform of all that God desires and all its words are true, and this is the meaning of "this is a message that the Lord has not spoken" (22) - for you, His portion, His chosen ones, hear His own word from the mouth [of the prophet]...

9 The difference between Moshe's prophecy and other prophets is expressed in the clarity of the transmission of God's word: God spoke to Moshe "mouth to mouth" while other prophets received God's word in "a dream," and see Bamidbar 12:6-8: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moshe; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord."

above stories, this was no easy task. Nonetheless, on many different occasions, Yirmiyahu cries out that it is possible to distinguish between truth and falsehood, as we will shortly see.

Differentiating Between True and False Prophecy

The Prophet's recognition of his degree of prophecy

Firstly, Yirmiyahu claims, the prophet himself must become aware of his own degree of prophecy, recognizing if he speaks from God's word or from a different source. Yirmiyahu repeats his description of the prophetic experience, claiming it should not be compared to a "dream" or any other vision:

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal. "The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream. And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?

שְׁמַעְתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ
הַנְּבִיאִים הַנְּבִיאִים בְּשֵׁמִי
שָׁקֵר לֵאמֹר חֲלֻמֹתַי חֲלֻמֹתַי:
עַד מָתַי הֲיֵשׁ בְּלִבְ הַנְּבִיאִים
נְבִיאֵי הַשָּׁקֵר וְנְבִיאֵי תַרְמִת
לְבָבָם: הַנְּבִיאֵי אֲשֶׁר אֶתּוֹ
חֲלוּם וְסִפֵּר חֲלוּם וְאֲשֶׁר
דִּבְרֵי אֶתּוֹ יִדְבֵר דְּבַרֵי אֱמוּנָה
מִה לְתַבְּנֹן אֶת הַבֵּר נְאֻם ה':
הֲלוֹא כֹה דִבְרֵי כָּאֵשׁ נְאֻם ה'
וּכְפֹטֵיִשׁ יַפְצִיץ סֵלַע: לָכֵן הִנְנִי
עַל הַנְּבִיאִים נְאֻם ה' כְּגֹנְבֵי
דְּבַרֵי אִישׁ מֵאֵת רַעְהוּ: הִנְנִי
עַל הַנְּבִיאִים נְאֻם ה' הַלֹּקְחִים
לְשׁוֹנָם וְיִנְאָמוּ נְאֻם ה' הִנְנִי עַל
נְבִיאֵי חֲלֻמוֹת שָׁקֵר נְאֻם ה'
וְסִפְרוּם וַיִּתְּעוּ אֶת עַמִּי

” says the Lord. “Is not My word like a fire?” says the Lord, “And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? “Therefore behold, I am against the prophets,” says the Lord, “who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets,” says the Lord, “who use their tongues and say, ‘He says.’ Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” says the Lord, “and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,” says the Lord. (23: 28-32)

בְּשִׁקְרֵיהֶם וּבַפְתוּזוֹתָם וְאֲנֹכִי
 לֹא שְׁלַחְתִּים וְלֹא צִוִּיתִים
 וְהוֹעִיל לֹא יוֹעִילוּ לְעַם הַזֶּה
 נְאֻם ה'.

Yirmiyahu himself, who was often forced to deal with false prophets, admits that such prophets did not make up their prophecies with the intention of lying, but rather drew them from dreams they had - although he does refer to such dreams as “false dreams.” However, at the same time he shoots accusations at these prophets, saying that they are speakers of lies, for a true prophet must know how to discern between a false vision and a prophecy; between a dream and the word of God, between “the chaff” and “the wheat.”¹⁰ The word of God is powerful, like a

 10 Similarly to the Abrabanel’s interpretation of Hananiah ben

hammer shattering a rock, unlike the brittle dreams derived from the human imagination. Similarly, a prophet is able to recognize if his visions come out of a process of sanctification worthy of those who receive God's word.

The content of a prophecy

Note that this argument is congruent with a situation in which a false prophet prophesies false words out of the mistaken assumption that he is speaking God's word, because he has never experienced a higher degree of prophecy.¹¹

Yirmiyahu adds that in certain instances, the authenticity of a prophecy can be determined by its content; prophecy that supports the wicked, or that claims that all will be well even if God's word is not heeded, is a false prophecy.¹²

Azur's sin:

ולפי דעתי שחלם חנניה את הדבר הזה (מפלת בבל) וחשב שהיה חלומו נבואי והנה היה חלום פשוט מהרכבות הדמיון ובוהו ... לכן נענש כי היה לו להבחין ענין חלומו.

In my opinion, Hananiah dreamed of this matter (the fall of Babylon) and thought that his dream was a prophecy, while it was really a simple dream derived from his imagination, and it was in this that he was mistaken...he was punished because he should have discerned that it was a dream.

- 11 Sometimes, even a true prophet cannot be sure that his visions are from God, although they are true prophecies, as we see in Jeremiah 32: 6-8:

ויאמר ירמיהו הנה דבר ה' אלי לאמר: הנה הנמאץ בן שלום דרך בא אליך לאמר קנה לך את שדי אשר בענתות כי לך משפט הנאולה לקנות: ויבא אלי הנמאץ בן דני כדבר ה' אל חצר המטרה ויאמר אלי קנה נא את שדי אשר בענתות אשר בארץ בגמיון כי לך משפט הירשה ולך הנאולה קנה לך, ואדע כי דבר ה' הוא.

However, see the Malbim ibid., as well as Yair Hoffman's article (in Hebrew):

ואדע כי דבר ה' הוא, בית מקרא, אפריל יוני 1997.

- 12 Note that false prophets in the Bible always predict good.

They continually say to those who despise Me, ‘The Lord has said, “You shall have peace”’; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, ‘No evil shall come upon you.’ ...‘I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings. (ibid. 17-22)

אֲמָרִים אָמֹר לְמַנְאֲצֵי דְבָר
ה' שְׁלוֹם יִהְיֶה לְכֶם וְכָל
הַלֵּךְ בְּשִׁרְרוֹת לְבוֹ אָמְרוּ
לֹא תָבוֹא עֲלֵיכֶם רָעָה...
לֹא שָׁלַחְתִּי אֶת הַנְּבִאִים
וְהֵם רָצוּ לֹא דְבַרְתִּי אֲלֵיהֶם
וְהֵם נִבְאוּ: וְאִם עָמְדוּ
בְּסוּדֵי וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ דְבַרִּי אֶת
עַמּוֹ וַיִּשְׁבוּ מִדַּרְכֵּם הָרַע
וּמִרַע מַעֲלָלֵיהֶם.

Yirmiyahu claims that a true prophecy is supposed to move the people to repent, to guide them to the right path, and if the prophecy does not do this – it is a needless prophecy, and thus presumably false.¹³

Positive prophecies are tested through their fulfillment

Another point related to the content of a prophecy is its fulfillment. Yirmiyahu says to Hananiah ben Azur (28:9): As for the prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet comes to pass, the prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent.” From here the Rambam learned (Laws

13 Of course there have also been true, God-sent encouraging prophecies of redemption. Yirmiyahu is referring to prophets whose words are only ever calculated to pacify and pander to the people, even if they are in a state of sin.

of *Yesodei HaTorah* 10:4) that every prophet must be tested through a sign or wonder, and only once his words have come true can he be considered a true prophet. From here we learn that even if a prophet is sure that his prophecy is true, those who hear it cannot be certain of its truth until his words come to pass, and only then does he attain the status of a true prophet.

Only a
positive
prophecy
is certain

Yirmiyahu also emphasizes that only prophecies of “peace” can serve as a test of a prophet’s authenticity, as prophecies that predict punishment may be overturned.¹⁴ In contrast, a prophecy that

14 Tanchuma (*Vayera* 13) explains this verse thus. However, the Abrabanel (on *Devarim* 18) disagrees with the Rambam, claiming that the Torah does not require the validation of a prophet’s words before he can be considered a true prophet (only that false prophets must be checked because they require the death penalty). Yirmiyahu’s words to Hananiah are not interpreted as a sign of validating his prophecy, but rather as a rejection of Hananiah’s words “let us wait and see whose prophecy is fulfilled and whose is not.” He phrases it thus:

לא תחשוב שבעבור שאני מנבא רעות ואתה מנבא טובות יאמנו דבריך ולא יאמנו דברי, אין האמונה נתלית בדברים כי אם במציאות כי מזה שיצא לפועל יודע שהוא אמת ומזה שלא יהיה במציאות יודע שיהיה שקר אבל בבוא דבר הנביא ובהתקומו אז יודע ששלחו ד' באמת ולא כמו שפירשו הרב המורה בפתחתו לפי' המשנה וממדרש תנחומא הוא ונמשכו אחריו המפרשים כולם אבל הפירוש האמיתי הוא כמו שאמרתי.

Do not think that because I prophesy evil and you prophesy good that your words will be believed and mine will not be, for faith does not depend on this, but on reality, for what will come to pass will be recognized as the truth, and what does not come to pass will be recognized as falsehood, but when the prophet’s words are fulfilled then he knows that God truly sent him, unlike what [the Rambam] explained in his introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah, and in the Midrash Tanchuma, and all the commentators have followed him, but the real explanation is as I said.

predicts evil may change following repentance; and therefore its un-fulfillment does not prove that it is a false prophecy.¹⁵ Moreover, a prophet who predicts punishment is placing himself in an undesirable position in relation to his audience (the people or the king) and it is therefore more likely that he was sent by God.¹⁶ In contrast is the phenomenon of “prophet panderers” who merely said what the people wanted to hear, predicting good even when the people needed to repent.

**The
personality of
the prophet**

Yirmiyahu adds that a prophet’s personality testifies to the degree of his prophecy; A prophet of God must be worthy of being God’s messenger. An immoral or irreverent person cannot be a prophet of God:

15 The basis for his words are in the Midrash brought in comment 13, above, brought by Rashi on Yirmiyahu, ad loc. The Ramban (*Sefer HaGeula* 278) writes thus. And the Ran writes thus at the end of his commentary:

וזה אמנם צריך תנאי שיהיה מה שהתנבא הנביא לטובה, כי אם ינבא לרעה אפשר שיבטל כענין נינוה, אבל מה שינבא לטובה א”א שיבטל. וזה קיום גאולתנו. וזה מ”ש ירמיה לחנניה בן עוזר הנביא: “אשר ינבא לשלום בבוא דבר הנביא יודע הנביא אשר שלחו ד’ באמת.”

Indeed, this is on the condition that the prophet prophesied for good, for if he prophesies bad it may not come to pass like in the case of Nineveh, but what he prophesies for good cannot be cancelled. And this is the fulfillment of our redemption. And this is what Yirmiyahu said to Hananiah ben Azur: “But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.”

16 Likewise, a prophecy of reproach cannot cause harm (as opposed to a prediction of peace, which will not move the people to repentance if they are in need of repentance).

“For both prophet and priest are profane; yes, in My house I have found their wickedness,” says the Lord... Also I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: They commit adultery and walk in lies; They also strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one turns back from his wickedness. All of them are like Sodom to Me, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah. (23: 11-14)

כִּי גַם נְבִיא גַם כֹּהֵן
 חֲנֹפוּ גַם בְּבֵיתִי
 מֵצֵאתִי רָעַתֶּם נְאֻם
 ה'...
 וּבְנָבְאֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם
 רָאִיתִי שְׁעִרוּכָה נְאוּף
 וְהִלֵךְ בְּשֶׁקֶר וְחִזְקוּ
 יָדֵי מְרַעִים לְבִלְתִּי
 שָׁבוּ אִישׁ מִרַעְתּוֹ
 הָיוּ לִי כְּסֹדֶם
 וַיִּשְׁבְּיָהּ כְּעֹמֹרָה.

The Rambam writes about a prophet’s characteristics:

When a prophet is sent [by God] on such a mission, he is given a sign and proof [to present], so that people will know that God [really] sent him in truth. not everyone who presents a sign and proof is believed as a prophet, **but only those people who are known to be suitable to receive prophecies on account of their wisdom and actions, and that they went in the ways of prophecy in its holiness and exegeses.** When such people present a sign and proof and say that God sent them, it is a commandment to listen to them, for it is written, “...to him you shall listen”. (Laws of *Yesodot HaTorah*, 7:7)

וכשמשלחים אותו נותנין לו אות ומופת כדי שידעו העם שהאל שלחו באמת, ולא כל העושה אות ומופת מאמינים לו שהוא נביא, אלא אדם שהיינו יודעים בו מתחלתו שהוא ראוי לנבואה בחכמתו ובמעשיו שנתעלה בהן על כל בני גילו והיה מהלך בדרכי הנבואה בקדושתה ובפרישותה ואח"כ בא ועשה אות ומופת ואמר שהאל שלחו מצוה לשמוע ממנו שנאמר אליו תשמעון.

Eventually, however, it is up to the audience to judge whether a prophecy is authentic. This was true in regard to the prophecies of Yirmiyahu vs. the prophecy of Hananiah – deciding who was correct was no easy decision, and even Yirmiyahu himself did not immediately recognize that Hananiah’s prophecy was false. In the end, prophecy is no substitute for integrity or judgment, and one must distinguish between the grain and the “chaff.”

Until a prophecy is fulfilled, we must rely on חזקתה, considering the prophet’s qualities and the content of the prophecy in order to reach a conclusion. As the Rambam continues:

It is possible that although a person presents a sign and proof he is not a prophet, and the sign could be achieved by other means; even so, we are commanded to listen to him; because he is a great and wise man who is suitable to receive prophecy, we assume that his prophecy is true. In this we have commanded, just as we have been commanded to decide a verdict according to the testimony of two people who are eligible to bear testimony [together], even though they may be lying; since they have always been honest

ואפשר שיעשה אות ומופת ואינו נביא וזה האות יש לו דברים בגו, ואעפ"כ מצוה לשמוע לו הואיל ואדם גדול וחכם וראוי לנבואה [הוא] מעמידים אותו על חזקתו, שבכך נצטוינו כמו שנצטוינו לחתוך את הדין ע"פ שני עדים כשרים ואע"פ שאפשר שהעידו בשקר הואיל וכשרים הם אצלינו מעמידין אותן על כשרותן, ובדברים האלו וכיוצא בהן נאמר הנסתרות לה' אלהינו והנגלות לנו ולבנינו, ונאמר כי האדם יראה לעינים וה' יראה ללבב.

in the past, we assume that they being honest now as well. About this and similar matters it is written, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to use and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of the Torah”, and it is also written, “...**for a man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart**”.

Conclusion

In parashat Re’eh and parashat Shoftim the Torah warns us of the phenomenon of false prophecy, which does not convey the true word of God. The Torah does not refer to this as “false prophecy,” presumably because these prophecies were not entirely false: they stemmed from certain spiritual powers. Because of this, dealing with such prophecies was a complex, difficult matter, much more so than with an entirely “false” prophecy. The Torah expects us to distinguish between the highest form of prophecy, which conveys God’s true word, and a much lower form of prophecy, which is derived from higher worlds, but is not a derivation of God’s actual word, and is therefore misleading.

This differentiation is no easy task, but the Torah makes it clear (Devarim 13) that love of God and

belief in He who took us out of Egypt will guide us to make the right decision. Moreover, a true prophecy may be determined by its fulfillment (as written in Devarim 18). From the words of prophets who were forced to deal with false prophets, it seems that this was not a simple matter, but they have taught us that the prophet himself must take care to determine the degree and source of his prophecy; while the people must try to do so according to the content of the prophecy (whether it moves the people to follow the right path, or whether it supports the wicked) and the character of the prophet – if he is a person worthy of bearing God’s word.

Every person must take it upon him or herself to seek out God’s word; through inner integrity, faith, and love of God.