



Hierarchy of an Ideal Jewish Society: Prophecy (Part 2)

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LESSON OUTLINE

Section 1

The Idolatrous Prophet (Deuteronomy 13:2-6):

1. The "Prophet" and the "Dreamer"
2. The *Ot* (Sign) and the *Mophet* (Miracle)
3. The Prophetic Message
4. Rejecting the Prophetic Message
5. A Test of Belief/Love

Section 2

Recognizing the True and the False Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15-22):

To be posted later this week



Introduction

When someone claims to be a prophet, how can we determine whether he/she is a true prophet? How much authority does a prophet have, and what limits are imposed upon his authority? Why do we need to rely on a prophet to relay to us Divine communications – why can't everyone be a prophet?

In this lesson we will examine the extent of the influence a prophet can have on Jewish society. Two primary sources will guide us through this topic:

1. **Maimonides** (1135-1204, North Africa – Egypt) – Introduction to the *Mishnah* (ch. 2), and Book One of *Mishnah Torah: Fundamentals & Principles* (chs. 7-10)
2. **Nachmanides** (1195-1270, Spain – Israel) – Torah commentary to Deuteronomy (chs. 13, 18)



Torah Texts

Two Torah portions discuss our responsibility to distinguish between a true and a false prophet.

THE IDOLATROUS PROPHET

Torah Text (**Deuteronomy 13:2-6**):

²⁻³ [This is what you must do] when a prophet or a person who has visions in a dream arises among you: He may present you with an *ot* (sign) or *mophet* (miracle), and on the basis of that sign or miracle, he may tell you, "Let us try out a different god. Let us serve it and have a new spiritual experience."

⁴ Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. G-d your L-rd is testing you to determine whether you are truly able to love G-d your L-rd with all your heart and all your soul.

⁵ Follow G-d your L-rd with all your heart and all your soul; remain in awe of Him, keep His commandments, obey Him and serve Him, and you will be able to have a true spiritual experience through Him.

⁶ That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for having spoken rebelliously against G-d your L-rd,

Who brought you out of Egypt and liberated you from the place of slavery. He was trying to make you leave the path that G-d your L-rd commanded you to walk, and you must destroy such evil from your midst.

Summary: Once he has made a prediction or caused some unnatural event to occur, the false prophet may attempt to persuade you to engage in what he claims to be “religious rights” of his declared “deity”. Your own national experience should outweigh any of his proofs; the miracles that accompanied the Exodus proved conclusively that G-d is the sole Creator and ongoing Manager of Creation. You must recognize that G-d has allowed this false prophet to perform a supra-natural sign as a test of your loyalty to G-d – never as a sign that G-d desires you to change your religion or your manner of religious service. We are obliged to punish this false prophet harshly, to eliminate this dangerous threat to authentic Jewish belief.

RECOGNIZING THE TRUE AND THE FALSE PROPHET

Torah Text (Deuteronomy 18:15-22):

¹⁵ *In your midst [i.e., in the land of Israel], G-d will set up for you a prophet like me [Moses] from among your brethren, and it is to him that you must listen.*

¹⁶ *This is in keeping with the request that you made of G-d your L-rd at Horeb [i.e., Mount Sinai] on the day of the Assembly, [when you] said, “We can no longer listen to the voice of G-d our L-rd! We can no longer look at this great fire! We do not want to die!”*

¹⁷ *G-d then said to me, “They have spoken well.*

¹⁸ *I will set up a prophet for them from among their brethren, one just as you are. I will place My word in his mouth, and he will declare to them all that I command him.*

¹⁹ *If anyone does not listen to the word that he declares in My Name, I will punish [that person].*

²⁰ *And if a prophet presumptuously makes a declaration in My Name when I have not commanded him to do so, or if he speaks in the name of other gods, then that prophet shall die.”*

²¹ *You may ask yourselves, “How shall we recognize a declaration that was not spoken by G-d?”*

²² *If the prophet predicts something in G-d’s Name, and the prediction does not materialize or come to pass, then the message was not spoken by G-d. That prophet has spoken deceitfully, and you must not fear him.*

Summary: The Jewish people reacted to the fearful experience of prophetic vision at Sinai by requesting – and committing themselves to accept – guidance from G-d’s prophets, then and in the future – a commitment for which G-d will hold the Jewish people accountable. You will be able to test the authenticity of a self-declared prophet by testing the accuracy of his predictions. A single failed prediction is sufficient grounds for judging him a false prophet.

The Idolatrous Prophet

In this section we explore:

- the two types of idolatrous prophets
- their methods of persuasion – signs (“*ot*”) and miracles (“*mophet*”)
- the Jewish people’s justification for ignoring the prophet’s religious instructions
- the concept of Divine tests

The Prophet and the “Dreamer” (Nachmanides to Deuteronomy 13:2):

Torah Text (ibid. v. 2):

*[This is what you must do] when a prophet or a person who has visions in a dream arises among you: He may present you with an *ot* (sign) or *mophet* (miracle)...*

While the term “dreamer,” which describes the person who claims to have had a divine vision while sleeping, is readily understandable, the Torah’s use of the term “prophet” presents some difficulty. Why would the Torah describe an obvious imposter as a “prophet”? While this term can refer merely to his own false claim to prophecy, Nachmanides suggests a more literal allusion.

Nachmanides:

It is possible that the Torah calls this individual a prophet because he shares with a true prophet an ability to predict future events. Some people do in fact possess a mysterious power to draw upon themselves a spiritual force that informs them of future events. He himself cannot explain the source of this ability, but it is a recognized power, which philosophers referred to as “*Kaheen*.” It is in this sense that the Torah calls such a person a “prophet”.

The *Ot* (Sign) and the *Mophet* (Miracle) (ibid.):

The Torah mentions two ways through which a person attempts to validate his claim of divine prophecy. Nachmanides explains the nature of each:

Nachmanides:

***Ot* (Sign):** *Ot*, from the Hebrew word meaning “to occur in the future” (*atah*), is a prediction of some out-of-the-ordinary future occurrence, which the “prophet” employs to validate a current prophetic message. So, for example, Jack claims that Zeus appeared to him to call people to worship Zeus (this is the current message). As proof of this prophetic message, Jack predicts that tomorrow an earthquake will occur in a specified location (this is the future sign).

***Mophet* (Miracle):** *Mophet*, from the Hebrew word meaning, “a wonderment” (*peleh*), is the “prophet’s” performance of a supra-natural event – not a prediction, but an event that can be witnessed by anyone at that time. So, for example, Jack claims that Zeus appeared to him telling him to call people to worship Zeus (this is the current message), and as a proof of the validity of this prophetic message, Jack turns a stick into a snake.

The Prophetic Message (ibid.):

Torah Text (ibid. v. 3):

...and on the basis of that sign or miracle, he may tell you, “Let us try out a different god. Let us serve it and have a new spiritual experience.”

If, with the successful performance of an *ot* or *mophet*, the “prophet” proclaims the worship of a deity other than G-d, then we know that he is a false, idolatrous prophet, and we must ignore his *ot* or *mophet*. Maimonides and Nachmanides, citing the Oral Law (Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin*), identify two types of idolatrous prophets:

One who represents a “prophet”-proclaimed deity: A person claims that a “deity” appeared to him with a message that it is god,¹ and that it will respond to a specific mode of worship – which may or may not include worshipping an icon or talisman, or prayer.

One who represents a G-d-proclaimed deity: A person claims that G-d appeared to him with a message that some other being, force or created thing is either a partner with G-d in Creation, or has been distinguished by G-d to be worshipped as a deity, and that such worship will prove beneficial – even if only for a limited time.

Rejecting the Prophetic Message (ibid. v. 2-6):

Torah Text (ibid. v. 4-6):

Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. G-d your L-rd is testing you to determine whether you are truly able to love G-d your L-rd with all your heart and all your soul.

¹ Definition of idolatry: Idolatry is the belief that any being other than G-d can independently determine events that occur in heaven and on earth. Prayer or any other form of worship (e.g., sacrifice, religious dances, etc.) to attempt to evoke the protection, salvation, or success that might come from that being is idolatry.

Follow G-d your L-rd with all your heart and all your soul; remain in awe of Him, keep His commandments, obey Him and serve Him, and you will be able to have a true spiritual experience through Him.

*That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for having spoken rebelliously against **G-d your L-rd, Who brought you out of Egypt and liberated you from the place of slavery.** He was trying to make you leave the path that G-d your L-rd commanded you to walk, and you must destroy such evil from your midst.*

The Torah instructs us to reject any such prophetic message unconditionally. Other than the one G-d, there is no Creator or independent being that directs and oversees the universe. How do we know this?

By citing the unique events of our Exodus and the Sinai Revelation, the Torah reminds us that we have the strongest reasons to reject the false prophet's messages. Nachmanides explains the significance of these two historical events:

Nachmanides (*ibid.*):

The Torah instructs us to reject a false prophet's attempts to convince us to believe in or worship any being or force other than G-d alone, by reminding us of those experiences when we were eyewitness to irrefutable evidence of G-d's existence and of his absolute control over all forces in Creation. The Ten Plagues that G-d brought upon Egypt prior to our Exodus proved to all who witnessed them that G-d is the sole Creator, Who directs and oversees every detail of the universe.

The miracles that G-d performed on behalf of the Jewish people in Egypt and in the wilderness publicized to all the world that G-d exists; that G-d plays an active role in the affairs of humankind; and that G-d communicates with righteous people when he so chooses. At Sinai, G-d elevated the Jewish people to the highest level a human being can attain: "*face to face*" communication with G-d (Deuteronomy 5:4), so that – beyond *believing* – they would *know* that G-d alone is to be served (*Do not have any other gods before Me ... Do not bow down to [such gods] and do not worship them.* [Exodus 20:3,5])

See the Appendix for: Knowing G-d from the Exodus and Knowing G-d from the Sinai Revelation

We can reject the prophet's call to alternative religious beliefs and practices, because his claim of Divine revelation is inherently weak: A private prophetic vision that contradicts what the entire Jewish nation saw, a miraculous sign, or a prediction of some future event, cannot be considered valid in the face of public verification of G-d's existence and of his relationship to man, to which the Jewish people were eye-witness during the Exodus and at Sinai.

A Test of Belief/Love

Torah Text (*ibid.* v. 4):

Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. G-d your L-rd is testing you to determine whether you are truly able to love G-d your L-rd with all your heart and all your soul.

The Torah explains the dreamer's or false prophet's attempts to influence our religious beliefs within a larger context of Divine tests which G-d sends to us. We must view the "prophet's" success in performing a miracle or in accurately predicting an event as a test of our steadfast belief in G-d. Nachmanides and Rabbi Abarbanel describe the nature of this test of faith:

Nachmanides (to Genesis 22:1 and Deuteronomy 13:4) and Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (to Deuteronomy ch. 13):

The "prophet's" or dreamer's successful performance of a supra-natural event, or his accurate prediction, is a Divine test of our loyalty to G-d.

To appreciate the benefits of undergoing such a Divine test, we need to recognize the objectives of conducting tests of moral character, and how they apply to G-d's purposes in testing man.

In general, tests are conducted for the benefit of the one testing, for the benefit of the one being tested, or for the benefit of other people.

1. **Benefiting the Tester:** An example: David and Isaac do not know one another, but are considering working as a team. Before deciding to enter into a business venture together, David

may test Isaac to determine Isaac's honesty and trustworthiness.

Inapplicability to Divine Tests: G-d already knows the moral character of every person. *I am G-d, who examines the heart [of man], and inspects the recesses of the mind* (Jeremiah 17:10). Tests do not add to G-d's knowledge of a person's character.

2. **Benefiting the One Being Tested:** A test can be designed to evoke some latent strength in character of the person being tested. Though the person who tests may already know that the one whom he is testing possesses a particular character trait, his aim is for the person being tested to realize his full potential.

Applicability to Divine Tests: G-d tests man in order to create opportunities for man to actualize his potential to act righteously and thereby to earn the greater reward for righteous actions, in addition to the lesser reward for righteous thoughts alone. The verse that states: *G-d tests the righteous...* (Psalms 11:5), describes G-d's desire to develop the moral potential of those people who have shown themselves committed to Him.

3. **Benefiting Other People:** A test can be designed to publicize someone's moral character traits so that other people will be able to emulate him, or so that they will come to know the individual and be influenced by him in other positive ways.

Applicability to Divine Tests: Divine tests often serve to publicize the moral achievements of the person being tested. So, for example, the tests G-d gave to the Patriarchs led to public recognition of their moral achievements, which served as an example of unfailing commitment to G-d under adverse conditions.

With this introduction, Nachmanides and Rabbi Abarbanel explain how such tests apply to the appearance of the false prophet:

G-d your L-rd is testing you to determine whether you are truly able to love G-d your L-rd with all your heart and all your soul. By allowing the dreamer or prophet to perform a supra-natural event, G-d wants to achieve the two objectives of benefiting you – the Jewish people, and of benefiting other people. G-d is not trying to benefit Himself, since He already knows your potential for moral righteousness.

G-d allows you to undergo this test of faith – whether to follow the false prophet, or to abide by your knowledge of and faith in G-d – *because G-d already knows* that you possess a profound love for Him, a love that harbors no doubts that G-d is the Creator and that He directs and oversees every detail of the universe. Through ignoring the “prophet's” or the dreamer's miraculous sign, and rejecting his message of alternative religious beliefs and practices, we realize our latent love for and devotion to G-d. In a truly loving relationship – as that which exists between G-d and the Jewish people (e.g., see Deuteronomy 26:16-19) – we have no fear of losing G-d's love, nor would we consider abandoning our relationship with G-d in favor of some alternative religious system.

The knowledge of our history, and the moral stamina which is part of the Jewish mentality, enables us to resist all attempts to misdirect us to alternative religious beliefs, and in resisting them, we become stronger in our moral character. The appearance of a false prophet is one of many opportunities in life that allows us to realize our true love for and devotion to G-d.

In the upcoming section of this lesson (*to be posted later this week*), we discuss limits of prophetic communications within Jewish belief and practice.

Appendix – 1: Knowing G-d from the Exodus

Torah Text (Exodus 20:2)

I am your G-d, Who brought you out of Egypt, from a house of bondage.

Nachmanides (ibid.)

"*I am your G-d...*" – with these words G-d enjoined the Jewish People to *know* with certainty that G-d exists; this knowledge involves accepting that: {1} G-d's existence is timeless; {2} G-d created the Universe by His Own choice; {3} G-d is omnipotent; {4} G-d is aware of and acts upon His knowledge of all human affairs (Divine Providence); {5} we are obligated to serve Him.

How can we *know* and accept these *facts* about G-d – does not faith imply some level of reliance on unsubstantiated belief? In Judaism, the answer is no; faith is based on logic, reason and *knowledge*. This is the subject of the second half of the verse:

Nachmanides

"...*Who brought you out of Egypt...*" – it was your exodus from Egypt that confirmed your knowledge of G-d. The miracles of the Ten Plagues and of the splitting of the Red Sea (G-d split the sea for the Jews and then drowned the Egyptians in it) proved beyond any doubt the existence of:

- a Creator, Who created the world by His Own choice, and maintains complete control over the world (in a world which always existed without a Creator, no Power would have been able to alter natural law);
- Divine Providence – for G-d intervened on your behalf to punish the Egyptians who wished to destroy you.

"...*from a house of bondage.*" – the term "house of bondage" expresses the absolute hopelessness of your situation in Egypt; how complete was your subjugation to Pharaoh, who had you imprisoned in his land – you had no opportunity whatsoever for escape through any natural means.

G-d made mention of this fact when he began to speak with the Jewish people, so that they would understand that they owed their allegiance to G-d. The chances of salvation had been beyond the realm of worldly possibility, yet G-d redeemed them from there.

The following three examples – taken from the Ten Plagues that G-d brought upon the Egyptians - briefly discuss various Torah verses that reinforce the lessons to be gleaned from the Exodus, as outlined above:

Plague 2: Frogs – G-d controls the stellar influence upon the earth

In desperation over the intolerable conditions caused by the swarming plague of frogs, Pharaoh summoned Moses and asked him to pray to G-d to remove the frogs from Egypt. Moses responded to Pharaoh's request:

Torah Text (Exodus 8:5-6):

"Give me the order," replied Moses. "Exactly when shall I pray for you... ? The frogs will [immediately] depart from you and your homes, remaining only in the Nile."

"Tomorrow!" said [Pharaoh].

"As you say," replied [Moses]. "You will then know that there is none like G-d our L-rd."

Nachmanides (to Exodus 8:6, citing the interpretation of Rabbi Shmuel Gaon [d. 1013, Persia]):

[If the plague was so intolerable, why did not Pharaoh request that the frogs be removed immediately? Why did he call for a delay in their removal – until the next day?]

Pharaoh suspected that Moses had used his knowledge of the stars' influence upon the earth to bring the plague of frogs. Pharaoh felt certain that Moses had calculated that the frogs were to disappear on that day, by the "natural" order of stellar effects. In order to refute Moses' claim that he had come representing the G-d of the Patriarchs [ancestors of the enslaved Jewish people], Pharaoh deliberately requested a one-day

delay in the removal of the frogs, expecting to discredit both G-d and Moses. By fulfilling Pharaoh's request of a specific time for the plague to end, Moses demonstrated that G-d – not the heavenly constellations – was in complete control of the plagues.

Plague 4: Wild Animals – Verification of Divine Providence

In this plague, G-d distinguished the Jewish people, showing them special Divine protection:

Torah Text (Exodus 8:18-19):

On that day, I will miraculously set apart the area of Goshen, where My people remain, so that there will be no harmful creatures there. You will then realize that I am G-d, right here on earth. I will thus make a distinction between My people and your (Egyptian) people.

Nachmanides (to Exodus 8:18):

The wonder that distinguished this plague from other plagues is the fact that it is the nature of wild animals to roam freely, yet they limited themselves to roaming anywhere *but* in the Jewish district of the country. In contrast to the three plagues that preceded it (the Nile River turning to blood, frogs, and lice), which were localized, the wild animals traversed the entire land of Egypt, which should have included the Jewish province of Goshen. G-d performed two miraculous deeds:

1. *"I will miraculously set apart the area of Goshen"* – the animals did not enter Goshen, where the Jews resided;
2. *"I will therefore make a distinction between My people and your (the Egyptian) people"* – a Jew who ventured out of Goshen and circulated among the Egyptian people would not be harmed by the animals, whereas any Egyptian who happened to have been nearby would be harmed.

Through these miracles, G-d revealed His control over nature (in restraining the wild animals, both from entering Goshen and from harming a Jewish person who had left the safe area of Goshen) as well as His Divine Providence as it affects each individual (i.e., in protecting a Jewish person from the wild animals, while punishing an Egyptian through those very wild animals).

Plague 7: Hail - Verification of G-d's role as the Omnipotent Creator

G-d brought a curious combination of hail (formed of water) mixed with fire, to rain down upon the Egyptians.

Torah Text (ibid. 9:14,29):

This time I am sending all My catastrophes into your midst... so that you will know that there is none like Me in the entire world... then You will know that the entire world belongs to G-d.

Midrash (Shir Hashirim Rabbah [Midrashic exegesis on the Book of "Song of Songs"]):

The icy hail felled trees, and the fire burned the roots, and the frozen hail did not douse the hot fire, nor did the fire melt the ice.

What more compelling proof could there be of the absolute omnipotence of the Creator, than the illogical fusing and effective functioning in tandem of two such incongruous elements, which could not possibly endure together in nature? The midrash goes on to point out how very miraculous was this combination of fire and ice. It was something that could be attributed only to G-d.

Appendix – 2: Knowing G-d from the Sinai Revelation

Torah Text (Deuteronomy 4:32-36):

You might inquire about times long past, going back to the time that G-d created man on earth, [exploring] from one end of the heavens to the other. See if anything as great as this has ever happened, or if the like has ever been heard.

Has any nation ever heard G-d speaking out of fire, as you have, and still survived? Has G-d ever done miracles bringing one nation out of another nation with such tremendous miracles, signs, wonders, war, a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and terrifying phenomena, as G-d did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

You are the ones who have been shown, so that you will know that G-d is the Supreme Being, and there is none besides Him.

From the heavens, He let you hear His voice admonishing you, and on earth He showed you His great fire, so that you heard His words from the fire.

Nachmanides (to Deuteronomy 4:32):

Moses told the people: “At the Exodus and Sinai, you saw with your own eyes that G-d is One – there is no other god, in heaven or on earth.”