

Parshat Shoftim

Many of the mitzvot in this week's Parsha specify the consequences for various wrongdoers. Among these (Devarim: 18: 20-22) is a Navi Sheker, a false prophet, who alleges falsely that he has been sent by Hashem.

The passuk (Devarim: 18:19) states:

וְכִי תֹאמַר בְּלִבְּךָ אֵיכָה יָדַע אֶת־הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־דִבְּרוּ ה':

And if you will say in your heart, "How shall we know that the matter was not spoken by Hashem?"

The passuk (Devarim:18:20) provides a solution to this conundrum:

אֲשֶׁר יִדְבֹר הַנְּבִיא בְּשֵׁם ה' וְלֹא־יְהִי הַדְּבָר וְלֹא יָבוֹא הוּא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־דִבְּרוּ ה' בְּיַדְּוֹן דְּבָרוּ הַנְּבִיא לֹא תִגְדֹר מִמֶּנּוּ:

If the prophet speaks [i.e. predicts something] in the Name of Hashem, and that thing does not come to pass, then that prophecy is considered to be "a matter not spoken by Hashem"; that prophet has spoken wilfully, do not fear [to put him to death (Sifri)].

The Ikar Sifsei Chachamim sets out one of Rashi's questions on passuk 19. Why does this passuk use the word "Ki" and not "Im" to describe "if"? He answers that the word "Ki" has a connotation of inevitably, whereas "Im" has a connotation of potential and possibility. Perhaps a more accurate translation of passuk 19 based on this understanding would be "And when you will say in your heart..."

Indeed, Rashi based on the Sifri directs us to a situation where such a case of a Navi Sheker did arise, in the time of Yirmiyahu (around the time of Churban Bayis Rishon). Yirmiyahu received a prophecy from Hashem that the remaining vessels of the Beis Hamikdash, and those of the King's palace, would remain in captivity in Bavel until Hashem would decide that they should be brought back (Yirmiyahu:27:21-22).

However, subsequently (Yirmiyahu:28), a prophet called Chananyah ben Azur got up and began to prophesy future freedom from under the reign of Bavel, that the vessels of the Beis Hamikdash would be returned in two years' time in the future and that all those who had been exiled would be brought back.

Here we see two conflicting prophecies. How would Bnei Yisrael determine which was true and which not? The answer is in passuk 20 above, and in fact Yirmiyahu warned the people that Chananyah would only be deemed a true prophet if his positive prophecies actually came about.

The Rambam, in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah (7:7) explains that there are several prerequisites to allow a prophet to be trusted. In order to be worthy to receive prophecy, such a person must have a certain level of wisdom and have very righteous conduct. Once these have been established, the purported prophet will need to perform some sort of sign to prove that he has been sent by Hashem. If all of these conditions are fulfilled, then he is a true Navi, and we are required to trust him and pay heed to what he says (see Devarim:18:15).

The sign which the Navi is required to perform need not be a supernatural event. The Rambam in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah (10:1) explains that it should be a prediction of a future event, which should then come true. Every detail must come true as the prophet predicted; if even one detail of his prophecy failed to occur, then he is considered a Navi Sheker.

On the other hand, the extent of trust required in an established Navi is so great that even if he commands that a mitzvah be violated for the needs of an exceptional circumstance, we must do so. An example is when Eliyahu HaNavi, at Har HaCarmel, offered up Korbanos to Hashem on a mizbeach outside of the Beis Hamikdash, which was forbidden once the Beis Hamikdash was established (Tur Ha'Aroch). In this case, the reasoning behind this action was to safeguard Bnei Yisrael from the widespread idolatry (Rashi).

Interestingly, the Sforno reads these pesukim (Devarim:18:20-22) in a very different manner. He explains that these refer to a Hora'as Sha'ah – a temporary ruling which goes against the normal halacha. According to Sforno, the passuk describes the people asking "how will we know that such a ruling is from Hashem?" The answer given in the next passuk is that such a temporary ruling must be accompanied by a special sign, unless the person giving the ruling is a prophet and knows that what is being ordered is in fact the word of Hashem. Examples of Hora'as Sha'ah include Eliyahu HaNavi on Har HaCarmel, and when Yehoshua surround Yericho on Shabbos, and commanded the Kohanim to carry the Aron into the Yarden and stand there until all of the people had crossed the river.

Rashbam teaches that a negative decree by an established prophet can be postponed or even rescinded completely through the power of Teshuvah. He brings the example of King Chizkiyahu, who was supposed to die but davened and did Teshuvah and merited to live a further 15 years. Another example brought is the events of Yonah, where the Teshuvah of the people of Ninveh completely revoked the negative decree.

Now we have entered the month of Elul, a time for introspection, in the lead-up to Rosh Hashanah. We can learn from this that Hashem has provided us with Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah, to make us meritorious before Hashem to delay or rescind any (Chas VeShalom) negative decrees against us.