

Parashat Re-eh 5779

The word “sarah” – סרה – in Devarim 13:6

The purpose of this Dvar Torah is to illustrate how much breadth there is in how our classical commentators understood the derivation of even one word in Torah. If there is so much to learn from one word, how much more is there to learn from phrases, sentences and whole sections of Torah.

The word I have chosen is “sarah” – סרה – in Devarim 13:6.

Devarim 13:2-6 provides instruction on how to recognise and handle a false prophet.

Something new that never existed

Rashi writes that “sarah” relates to “דבר המוסר מן העולם” – something “removed” from the world, that did not exist, was not created, and was not commanded, in other words something that is new. Rashi then goes on to say that the word is *destolude* in old French – a form of *destolir* meaning to remove or to prevent, being used as a noun: “removal” or prevention”. The English word “removal” usually has the connotation of something that once was, and then was removed. However, Rashi’s words clearly indicate that he is taking the word to refer to something that never existed. The ArtScroll Saperstein Edition with Rashi’s commentary thus translates “sarah” as “fabrication”, and thus its translation of the first part of that verse reads: “And that prophet and that dreamer of a dream shall be put to death, for he had spoken fabrication against Hashem, your G-d”.

Something that has changed

Something that never was could be entirely new, or could be a twisted or perverted form of something that is already.

The ArtScroll Stone edition translates “sarah” as “perversion”.

Targum Onkelus translates “sarah” as “סָרָא” – meaning deviation or revolt, and allowing the verse to be rendered “... for he urged disloyalty to Hashem, your G-d”. A Hebrew derivation for this translation could be from the same root as “סָרָתָם” which appears in the second paragraph of the Shema and elsewhere in Torah, and means to turn aside or turn astray.

The Sifrei (Midrash) on our words uses them to mean “המזייף דבריו של מקום” – someone who fakes or forges G-d’s words.

The Rambam in Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 9:5 interprets “כי דבר סרה על ה' אלקיכם” as meaning “בא משה להכחיש נבואתו של משה” – he came to deny Moshe’s prophecy.

Looking at the word from the point of view of the people

The explanations we have looked at so far considered the word “sarah” from the point of view of precisely what actions the false prophet does: he fabricates / perverts / deviates from or denies G-d’s words of Torah.

Other commentators subtly differently consider the word based on the point of view of the people who might be influenced by the false prophet, and the intent of the false prophet rather than what he actually does.

Ibn Ezra states: “טעם סרה – שהשם צוה לסור מעבודה זרה”. The Torah uses the word “sarah” in order that we get the message that we must “turn away” from false worship. Ibn Ezra also connects “sarah” to the סורר ומורה – the wayward and rebellious son.

Chizkuni connects “sarah” to “lehasir” – to remove. “כי דבר סרה – דברים כדי להסיר אתכם מיראתו” – he seeks to remove you from fear of G-d.

HaAmek Davar allows the letters samech and tsadei to be interchanged in his commentary:

“כי דבר סרה על ה' – שעשה עת צרה כדי שיבואו לידי עבודה זרה” – he caused trouble so that the people would come to foreign worship.

R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch’s commentary

In his commentary, the expert grammarian R’ S. R. Hirsch brings many examples of words with the same root from across the books of Torah and Neviim to show that the word סור denotes both departure from the right path and departure from existence. The noun סרה accordingly expresses moral defection, ceasing following the right path in life, as well as ceasing an activity. In our context it designates something completely away from actuality, without any foundation.

R’ Hirsch draws direct correlation between the false prophet and false witnesses. The false witnesses misuse evidence to pronounce untruths, as if they were witnesses, when in fact they were not at the place where the alleged occurrence was claimed to have happened. The false prophet misuses prophecy to pronounce untruths, as if he was a prophet, when in fact no prophecy occurred.

R’ Hirsch concludes by proving grammatically that the false prophet is not advocating for defection from G-d. He is not promoting atheism. Rather he claims to be speaking in the name of G-d, proclaiming something as a message from G-d, which he has no right to do, as he has not been charged by G-d with that message. Like the false witnesses, the false prophet is also proclaiming false testimony.