

CHAPTER 3, LAW 8(B) - THE LEGACY OF MOSES, PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

There are three types of heretics ('apikorsim').

(1) One who says there is no prophecy at all and there is no knowledge which comes from the Creator to the hearts of man.

(2) One who denies the prophecy of our teacher Moses.

(3) One who says that the Creator does not know the deeds of man.

Each of these three is considered a heretic.

As a general introduction, much of Chapter 3 of the Rambam discusses the very few exceptions to the almost universal principle, "All of Israel is granted a share in the World to Come" (Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1). As the Rambam discusses, the only exceptions are people so sinful or heretical as to make it evidently clear they want nothing of G-d and spirituality. In this law, the Rambam discusses the category known as apikorsim -- people who deny G-d's knowledge of or direction of the affairs of man.

As we discussed last week, examples 1 and 3 are relatively straightforward. Claiming G-d does not even know what man does is certainly antithetical to Judaism, which teaches us that G-d weighs and judges our every deed. Likewise, denying prophecy is a statement that G-d never even told man what He wants of us and the purpose of existence. It would be a rejection of the entire text of the Torah. Scripture would not be the sacred word of G-d but the invention of finite and deficient man, no more relevant to us today than any other classical work of literature.

The one example which we found tricky was the Rambam's second -- the acceptance of Moses' prophecy. Why was Moses singled out from all the other prophets of Israel? Once a person accepts that G-d speaks to man via prophecy, the entire Torah is validated, the later writings -- of Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Daniel, etc. -- as well as the Five Books of Moses. (Later in this law -- as we'll discuss next week -- the Rambam adds that one must not only accept the validity of prophecy, but that the entire Torah is the word of G-d, transmitted to us via His prophets.) If so, why must we accept Moses's prophecy as a principle in its own right? Wasn't he merely an example of one of the prophets of Israel, a great one to be sure, but merely a prophet as all the rest?

We did not get as far as answering last week, but we established one basic principle, based on the writings of the Rambam elsewhere. Moses's prophecy was unlike that of any other prophet. All other

prophets experienced murky and indirect visions, via an angel. It only occurred when they were in a deep trance, in dreams of the night, and they would lose their senses and physical abilities in the process.

Moses was different in every respect. "Mouth to mouth I will speak to him, in a vision without riddles, and the image of G-d he will behold" (Numbers 12:8). Moses reached the highest level of prophecy attainable. He virtually became an angel on earth. He was not tainted in the slightest by his physical self. His understanding of G-d and His laws was as whole and complete as humanly possible.

Moses, as compared to the other prophets, was thus not just more of the same. His prophecy was a different experience entirely. And this is critically significant for two reasons.

First of all, this authenticates the entire Torah and the 613 Commandments. Many the other prophetic works we have -- especially ones discussing the distant future -- are vague and confusing. G-d spoke to the prophets in riddle and metaphor, which no doubt had multiple possible interpretations. When G-d told Jonah the city of Nineveh would be overturned (Jonah 3:4), it may have meant physically -- via destruction, or spiritually -- via a dramatic change of heart on the part of its populace. The people were wise enough to choose the latter. Likewise, many of the prophecies we have of the End of Days -- Armageddon, the arrival of the Messiah, the Messianic age -- are purposely vague. They may transpire in any number of ways -- depending, of course, on how deserving we will be.

Thus, the words of the Prophets are vague and imprecise. Their visions of the future were clouded and ambiguous -- purposely so. Yet this could not be the case with the Torah of Moses. It had to be crystal clear. Every word, every nuance was precisely the utterance of G-d. As some thinkers express it, it was the word of G-d coming through Moses's throat. Anything less, and the Torah would be Moses's subjective understanding of G-d's messages to him. But it is not. The Torah is G-d's absolute, objective truth, not tainted in the slightest by Moses' personal perspective or understanding. No one could ever doubt in the slightest if G-d really meant what Moses claimed He did. Casting any such doubt on Moses would destroy the Torah's entire sanctity and immutability. (Based on thoughts heard from my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#).)

There is a second, equally critical idea behind this principle. Let's say someone comes along later, making the following claim. "Although Moses was a great man and a fine prophet in his day, his time has passed. I am a new prophet, and I know better than Moses what G-d wants of you." How can we know whom to believe -- the original prophet or the new improved one? Although ever since the experience of Mt. Sinai no one could ever deny the validity of Moses's prophecy, can another come along -- without denying Moses (in his time), yet proffering a new, improved covenant? (Yes, it's been done more than once since.)

There is an important passage regarding this authored by R. Moshe ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides or the Ramban based on the acronym of his name (Talmud and Bible commentator of

13th Century Spain, considered one of the foremost scholars of his age. Note that the acronym of his name ends with an 'n' rather than an 'm', as Maimonides). The following is an elaboration of his commentary to Exodus 19:9.

Exodus 19-20 describes the Revelation at Sinai, in which G-d appeared to all Israel in all His glory, communicating to them the Ten Commandments. Verse 19:9 states as follows. "And the L-rd said to Moses, 'Behold I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, in order that the nation will hear My speaking with you, and they will believe in you eternally.'" Thus, the purpose of Sinai was not only to receive the Decalogue or even to gain a glimpse of G-d. It was in order that Israel witness G-d speaking to Moses firsthand. We would be spectators to the prophecy of Moses, overhearing Moses's prophecy as it actually occurred. (This was the case for most of the commandments given at Mt. Sinai. The first two commandments were spoken directly by G-d to all Israel (Talmud Makkos 24a).)

Why was this so significant? Why was it so important that Israel witness Moses's prophecy? Did not the Children of Israel know of prophecy since the time of Abraham? The answer, explains the Ramban, is in order that we see for ourselves the level of prophecy Moses reached. He attained the highest level of prophecy achievable. He had an absolutely direct and unimpeded line with G-d -- and every one of us witnessed it and knew it personally.

As a result, no prophet could ever come along later and claim he knows better, that his prophecy or covenant supersedes that of Moses. When Moses told us "...and the revealed matters are for us and our children **forever** to perform the words of this Torah" (Deut. 29:28) or when the Torah many times states "...it is an eternal law for all your generations" (e.g. Levit. 3:17, 10:9, 23:14), no one could ever come along and say, "Their time is up; they are no longer binding." Theologically -- as well as legally, such a claim is no longer tenable.

I actually do not know if Christianity and Islam, both of which accept the Torah of Moses in its time, grapple with or are even disturbed by this glaring self-contradiction going to their very core. My readers know that I am not at all in the habit of bashing other religions -- nor other Jews who disagree with my basic beliefs. We all share so many basic beliefs and values, and we gain much more by finding and building upon common ground rather than harping on those wedges which drive us apart.

Nevertheless, the issue of the permanence and immutability of Moses's prophecy is well-established in the Torah -- irrefutably so. It was witnessed by an entire nation of 2-3 million specifically in order that no one could ever come along with a new and improved covenant. (Needless to say, G-d knew of the heresies which would ultimately challenge mankind. He did what He could, so to speak, to prepare us for the eventuality.) And that nation, millions strong, would tell its children about the eternal truth of Moses and his Torah, and they would tell their children, and their children would tell their children until the coming of the Messiah and the End of Days.

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