

SPLIT-LEVEL PROPHECY

by Nechama Stampler

Split-level Prophecy¹

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Bnei Yisrael saying, "This is the matter that Hashem commanded."

Rashi: Moshe's prophecies used the expression, "So said Hashem." Other nevi'im as well prophesied using the expression, "So said Hashem." This usage shows a less significant prophecy relative to the language employed in our pasuk by Moshe: "This is the matter..."

R. Eliyahu Mizrachi explains in his commentary on Rashi that "this is the matter" expresses the idea of something that is clearly and entirely indicated. We know that Moshe's prophecy was far more definitive than that of the other prophets. As Chazal put it², all other prophets prophesied as if looking through a murky glass, while Moshe saw things through a clear, perfectly transmitting glass. In comparing "so" to "this," we understand the former to refer to the general content of a statement, while the latter expresses its exact nature. Only Moshe was capable of the latter.

This approach is unsatisfactory. Why would Moshe ever use "so," if his prophecy was categorically different - and better - than that of other prophets? He ought to always employ the more precise "this."

Rather, the two forms differentiate not between speakers, but between topics. Generally, prophecies form two distinct groups. In one group, a prophet relates something about G-d's activities, i.e. about how He conducts Himself in His actions in our world. Some of Moshe's prophecies belonged to this group. Others, however, belonged to a second group, in which Moshe conveyed information about the mitzvos that Hashem commanded us.

There is greater difference between these two forms than meets the eye. The first deals with events that are initiated at times. Each event shifts the course of the way things happen.

The second deals with mitzvos that are meant to be constant and unchanging. They instruct us as to how Hashem expects us to act at all times in history. These forms are really polar opposites. The second group, dealing with fixed, immutable principles, derives from the essential order and structure of the universe. Mitzvos are not arbitrary. They grow out of the very structure of the universe, and are inextricably tied to the essential nature of things. This is a much deeper level of

understanding, one that is suitable only for a Moshe Rabbenu.

Briefly stated, the first form deals with events that happen; the second deals with things as they are. The two are reflected in the two words we are considering here: "so" and "this." The less exact term - "so" - compares one thing to another, and instructs therefore by way of example. "So" means "like the following," or "similar to this." It is suited to a prophecy that speaks of events to come, which is attainable by many prophets. The clarity implied by "this" - just so, exactly - is attained only by a Moshe whose glass is clear and not murky.

It is perfectly reasonable that the same Moshe Rabbenu would sometimes use "so," and sometimes use "this." The topic of his prophecy determines which of the two is used. When Moshe relates events that are going to occur, his prophecy does not call for anything more than the lesser form of "so." When he speaks by way of his "clear glass" to relate matters of Torah and its demands, however, the content calls for the term "this."

We understand that it was not Moshe who moved between different levels of prophecy, depending on whether or not he achieved perfect clarity. Moshe's madregah remained constant. Rather, it was the subject matter itself which dictated the clarity of the vision - and the choice of expression. The terms "so" and "this" are dictated not by Moshe's wavering mood, spiritual output, or accomplishment, but solely by the topic of his vision.

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 30:2 2. Yevamos 49B
