

PARSHAS REEH - SEGULOS, KOSHER AND NOT

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Segulos, Kosher and Not¹

If there should arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of a dream, and he will provide you with a sign or a wonder. If the sign or wonder comes about which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us follow other gods that you did not know, and we shall worship them!" Do not listen to the words of the prophet or the dreamer of a dream, for Hashem your G-d is testing you to know whether you love Hashem your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul. Hashem your G-d you shall follow and Him shall you fear. His commandments you shall observe and to His voice you shall listen. Him you shall serve and to Him you shall cleave.

Two principal approaches explain these pesukim. According to one of them, that of R. Akiva, the false navi does not work any miracles in the name of some false deity. Rather, he legitimately earned the distinction of prophet (or the lesser level of experiencing some sort of a prophetic experience in the form of a dream) at some earlier time. At some previous occasion or occasions, he had spoken in the Name of Hashem, and established his bona fides by predicting and producing a miraculous occurrence. Now, however, he brings a very different message, urging people to serve a false object of veneration.

R. Akiva's approach makes the miracle-worker status of the false prophet easier to deal with. The false prophet is not endowed with some special, mysterious power that he can manipulate to his own advantage, including to "prove" to his audience that he should be followed, no matter what he says. We do not have to explain to ourselves how it is that Hashem provides a charlatan with the power to work miracles in order to bolster his claim that another god be served. His miracle-working was limited to the time he served Hashem alone!

This advantage, however, comes at a price. If he performs no miracles in the name of idolatry, why is deciding whether or not to listen to him such a great test? There is nothing to distinguish him from any other preacher of a different faith! Furthermore, the entire premise of this parshah seems ludicrous. Why would anyone listen to a claim that Hashem Himself instructs people to worship another god, when the prohibition to do so was incorporated in the Ten Commandments! Finally, what is the point of the last pasuk, urging us to follow, fear, serve and cling to Hashem? Do they

comprise the essence of rejecting the idolatry proposed by the false prophet?

The key to this parshah is understanding that the navi sheker does not come to the Jewish community and prod the people into idolatrous practice. His pitch is more subtle - and more nefarious.

From time to time, the community will find itself in crisis. Some dread disease comes upon them, or any one of many conceivable threats. People see their lives and the lives of their loved ones hanging in the balance. The air is thick with desperation; desperate people clutch at straws and less for a chance to live.

The navi sheker enters such a scene. He eggs them on. "See here. You can trust me. Did I not perform wondrous things in the past? I have a plan that can save your lives! We face a difficult challenge. It happens to be - and don't ask me why! - that serving god X in a particular manner happens to be particularly effective in dealing with our problem. What choice do we have but to try it? If we don't, we may not live to talk about it."

When people stare death in the face, they do not necessarily become smarter. To the contrary, they are likely to make foolish decisions based on faulty judgment. In ordinary times, people would find an invitation to flirt with avodah zarah contemptible. When a limited nod to an avodah zarah is presented as a life-preserver, however, it stands a much better chance of being accepted.

The sense of our pesukim, therefore, goes something like this: "If there should arise in your midst a prophet" who provided a sign in the past that came true and established him as a credentialed prophet, he may now seek to use his prior success to argue that he still retains his standing as a faithful messenger of Hashem. He may abuse this trust by saying, "Let us follow other gods that you did not know, and we shall worship them." Pointing out that you "did not know these gods" is a kind way of saying that you will be vulnerable to his argument because you lack sufficient experience with those gods to be able to properly discredit his claim.

How are you expected to deal with such a situation? You should realize that you are being subjected to a test of your love of Hashem. Rather than look for a quick-fix of your predicament in some nonsense peddled by the false prophet, you should understand that there are legitimate ways in which you can better your standing before Hashem:

"Hashem your G-d you shall follow" - meaning, you should walk behind Him in full faith and confidence.

"His commandments you shall observe" - look carefully at the activities of the afflicted or endangered area. Are its citizens fully compliant with the demands of halacha? Mend the breaches in the fence of the law! Shore up commitment to details of what Hashem asks of us.

"And to His voice you shall listen" - by seeing to it that there are a cadre of people involved fully in learning Torah. Torah study is an effective defense against all the battles of this world.

"Him you shall serve" - through people fully devoted to avodas Hashem, like the ten batlanim of every tzibbur.

"To Him you shall cleave." - as Chazal say, by marrying off one's daughter to a talmid chacham. Even though this generally holds true, it is even more important in times of danger, when we seek special merit.

Thus, what our pesukim really speak about is resisting the sometimes strong temptation to seek refuge in forbidden, dangerous and false "segulos," and substituting tried and true ones.

1. *Based on Haamek Davar, Devarim 13:2-5*
