

# FALSE PROPHETS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

This week's parsha discusses the navi sheker, or false prophet. He's the guy who shows up claiming to have spoken to God and received instructions to do that which is contrary to Torah law. He might even SUCCESSFULLY perform a miracle to validate his assumed authority.

The Torah says to kill him. After being proven guilty before a Sanhedrin, he is executed as mandated by Torah. For obvious reasons, the world has no room for false prophets and dreamers who steer people away from God and truth.

Of course, now that the Jewish people are still in exile, we lack a Sanhedrin and any authority to execute anyone. Consequently, "false prophets" spring up everywhere and can say and do whatever they want. They can act without any obvious impunity.

Then again, we don't have prophecy either. We lost that in 313 BCE, long before we even entered this fourth and final exile. That being the case, it is even harder to be a false prophet than ever before, seemingly ending the entire issue of the navi sheker.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. There is usually a lot more to mitzvos than what first meets the eye. This is why when explaining the parameters of a mitzvah it is not uncommon to include actions that, at first, do not seem to be part of the mitzvah. Mitzvos have underlying principles that often have multiple and varied expressions, making them applicable even at times one might have thought they were no longer relevant.

For example, a navi sheker only CLAIMED to have received his instructions as prophecy. God, of course, never actually told him what he said to do. He doesn't need prophecy to be a false prophet. He just needs to say he had it, and that can apply in ANY generation, even today, especially if people are gullible enough to believe him/her.

I'm not sure if the prohibition can be stretched to include the following, but its message certainly does.

One of the main aspects of the false prophet is his credibility in the eyes of others. If everyone thinks that he is crazy, they won't listen to him. He is only dangerous as long as people believe he may speak on behalf of God, something God does not take lightly—AT ALL.

What about a "rabbi" or "leader" who tells their congregation what THEY think God REALLY meant when He commanded a particular mitzvah? I was once told by someone with authority in his

community, "I don't believe God meant for people to sit in the dark on Shabbos just because they forgot to turn on their lights, or that He wanted someone to be alone on Shabbos instead of driving to shul to be with others."

Now, he didn't say that God told him that. Even if he did, no one would have believed him and they would have let him go instead. That gullible they were not. But, when he expressed such beliefs as opinions, they carried weight in the minds of those to whom he spoke, partly because they wanted to believe the same thing, partly because he was an intelligent and "learned" man. They relied upon their rabbi for religious direction.

That too is speaking in the Name of God. It says, "Though God did not tell me to say this, He probably would have if prophecy was possible today." That implication is far from harmless.

There is a famous midrash in the Talmud in which Moshe Rabbeinu is shown the greatness of Rebi Akiva (Menachos 29b). The vision, apparently, occurred prior to Moshe Rabbeinu being taught the entire Torah on Mt. Sinai by God. Therefore, when Rebi Akiva expounded what he knew, Moshe Rabbeinu did not recognize what he said, and became concerned.

It wasn't until Rebi Akiva said that the law came directly from Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai that Moshe Rabbeinu calmed down. Moshe realized that Rebi Akiva had been teaching law that he himself had yet to learn.

The midrash is clear. Rebi Akiva had not known something Moshe Rabbeinu had not known as well. He had not originated a law, based upon the needs of his time, that had not begun with Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai. It had been a timing issue in the Talmud, not a knowledge one.

This did not stop a current branch of the Jewish people from using the midrash, in a large ad in the New York Times, to say exactly the opposite. They were faithful to the Talmudic account up until the end of the story. The conclusion THEY inserted was: If the great Moses did not know what Rebi Akiva knew in his time, then Rebi Akiva would not have known what he know in our time.

In other words, the ad ignored the most important part of the story, the punchline if you will. They inserted their own message which contradicted the point of the story. They used a midrash that was written to reduce any falsely assumed halachic authority in the future to invest themselves with it. And you can be sure that their words did not fall on deaf ears.

Now, if people do not believe in the authority of the Talmud, or even that Torah was given word-by-word by God to Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai, they can think they were just cleverly making THEIR point. What THEY believe however does not determine reality. What GOD thinks IS reality, and He is going to be far less impressed by their faulty and abusive representation of Torah and Judaism.

This does not just apply to secular religious leaders. It applies to everyone. "God" and "truth" are spelled differently, but they mean the same thing. A person may not believe in absolute truth, but that does not mean they aren't misrepresenting it when they express their opinion. If they convince

others of their tragically mistaken point of view, then they are guilty of lying about God.

It is something to consider unless a person is 100 percent certain that God doesn't exist, which he can never be. It is simply impossible to know enough to be 100 percent certain of such a thing. Too much exists to say otherwise to be even close to it. Doubt in God's existence is due to ignorance, not knowledge, even with respect to atheistic geniuses.

Even when a God-believing person acts in a way contrary to Torah—a profanation of the Name of God—he misrepresents truth to the world. He may not be a navi sheker, but his actions might be considered close to it. Torah believing Jews, for many, represent the word of God in the world. That's a HUGE responsibility that must be shouldered with care.

The bottom line? Pursue truth, and protect it. The reward is great for doing so, and the opposite is true when it is left vulnerable to abuse.