



The False Prophet • Parshat Re'eh

“I ain’t no false prophet - I just know what I know. I go where only the lonely can go,” sings Bob Dylan in his song “False Prophet.” A false prophet makes claims to have secret knowledge that others cannot access. The false prophet uses this information to persuade followers to a particular agenda. Dylan warns against making him into this kind of person: “What are you lookin’ at - there’s nothing to see. Just a cool breeze encircling me.” A false prophet can only exert the authority others give him. Look elsewhere, Dylan asks.

It is for this reason that our Torah reading, *Re’eh*, does not caution people not to become false prophets but instead tells potential followers not to listen to such inauthentic leaders. The false prophet is nothing without followers. Do not give him – or her - that power. The way you know if the prophet is false is clear according to our verses; if a prophet tells you to go against the Torah, you know that he is misleading you: “If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner, who gives you a sign or a portent, saying, ‘Let us follow and worship another god’—whom you have not experienced—even if the sign or portent named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner” (Deut. 13:2-4).

Maimonides, in his encyclopedic legal work, alerts his readers to the dangers of false prophets. A false prophet does not have to prove himself through signs and wonders, Maimonides writes,

like Moses or Elijah. The true test of a prophet is “the fulfillment of his prediction of future events” (“Foundations of the Torah,” *Mishneh Torah* 10:1). We should not taunt the prophet by saying, “‘Split the sea for us, revive the dead, or the like, and then we will believe in you.’ Instead, we tell him, ‘If you are a prophet, tell us what will happen in the future.’ He makes his statements, and we wait to see whether his prophecy comes to fruition or not.”

This process of testing must happen, according to Maimonides, many times. The self-appointed prophet may have been lucky with his early prediction. To assume such a lofty place in Jewish life means proving oneself again and again. There are simply too many charlatans out there to believe in any human being with complete faith unless this leader’s predictions hold true, endure over time, and uphold the laws and principles of the Torah. A veneer of authenticity is not the same as being loyal to the cause.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that, “Those who are disloyal are eventually distrusted and lose whatever authority they might once have had. Leadership without loyalty is not leadership. Skills alone cannot substitute for the moral qualities that make people follow those who demonstrate them. We follow those we trust, because they have acted so as to earn our trust...Always be loyal to the people you lead” (“Leadership and Loyalty,” *Lessons in Leadership*). Our parsha asks leaders to

be loyal to the people, loyal to the Torah, and loyal to God. Anything else can become the bluster of the narcissistic leader anxious to be worshipped.

Maimonides differentiates the work of diviners and sorcerers from prophets precisely because it can be hard to tell them apart. A true prophet “will arise for the sole purpose of telling us the future events which will transpire in the world, whether there will be plenty or famine, war or peace, and the like. He even will inform a particular individual regarding his needs...These are the types of things that a prophet will say. He will not come to found a new faith or add or diminish a mitzva” (“Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,” *Mishneh Torah* 10:3).

Rather than leave us with a didactic teaching, the Torah, in this instance, explains why the appointment of a false prophet is so problematic using the lyrical language of the soul: “For your God is testing you to see whether you really love your God with all your heart and soul. It is your God alone whom you should follow, whom you should revere, whose commandments you should observe, whose orders you should heed, whom you should worship, and to whom you should hold fast” (Deut. 13:4-5). These are the words that undergird any covenantal commitment that demands loyalty. It should be total and uncompromising. It requires trust, faith, and humility. It demands both the heart and the mind.

If a false prophet is so problematic, why are we drawn to them? In a universe of uncertainty, moral opacity, and political confusion, we want someone to tell us that all will be fine, that we are wonderful, and that there is one right answer. We want clarity and certainty in our leaders. But truly great leaders will never offer that. In *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky write, “Managing one’s grandiosity means giving up on the idea of being the heroic lone warrior who saves the day. People may beg you to play that role; don’t let them seduce you. It robs them of the opportunity to develop their own strengths and settle their own issues.” Do not become a false prophet. Do not believe in false prophets.

Too many leaders have the messiah complex. They think they know it all and can fix it all. And with this false advertising, they rob us of our agency to fix our own problems. That is why the obligation is upon us not to create false idols, rather than on individuals not to set themselves up as prophets. There are false leaders everywhere. Will we believe in them and give them power or not?

Throughout Jewish history, we have had examples of charismatic figures who tried to lead others astray, from Bar Kokhba to Shabbetai Zvi to Jacob Frank. They may have started life as innocent and insightful Jews with a gift for persuading others. But, at some point in their complicated lives, they used their talents to undermine the convictions and traditional practices of their followers and often flamed out themselves.

Today we have modern-day prognosticators who make their own predictions about the future fate of the Jewish people. They are often doom sayers. The twentieth-century thinker Simon Rawidowicz, in his famous essay, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People,” writes that we have viewed ourselves and others have said of us that we are “constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing.” And yet, here we are still, alive and flourishing. Rawidowicz leaves us with an ironic blessing of continuity: “Let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days.” In other words, don’t believe the false prophets who predict our demise. Look around. We are still here.

When have you believed you could fix someone else’s problems and deprived that individual of his or her own agency?