



PARASHAT SHOFTIM



נבואה במבחן מימושה The Test of Prophecy

■ How Are We to Know?

In ancient times, when prophecy was prevalent in Israel, a difficult and problematic danger plagued the nation: the phenomenon of False Prophets. People with over-developed imaginations would interpret their dreams according to their own whims, claiming they had received messages from G-d – and leading to dire consequences.

The most famous story of false prophecy occurred during the period of Ahab, King of Israel. Four hundreds of these bogus seers unanimously advised him to make war with Aram, promising him victory. But the bitter end turned out quite differently: King Ahab fell in battle and was killed.

A significant proportion of the suffering that has befallen the People of Israel over the centuries resulted from mistakenly optimistic illusions implanted in their hearts and minds by false prophets. Accordingly, what is needed is a clear standard by which to determine whether a given prophet speaks the word of G-d, or is just a lying cheat.

In the Torah portion of Shoftim, the Torah tells us the test that every genuine prophet must pass. The relevant passage begins with a presentation of the problem:

וְכִי תֹאמַר בְּלִבְבְּךָ אֵיכָה גִדַּע אֶת הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא דִבְרוּ ה'.

And if you say in your heart,

“How will we know that which Hashem did not speak?” (D'varim 18,21)



The answer appears to leave no room for error:

אֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר הַנְּבִיא בְּשֵׁם ה' וְלֹא יְהִיֶה הַדְּבָר וְלֹא יָבֵא,
הוּא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא דִבְרוּ ה'...

*That which the prophet speaks in G-d's Name but does not
come true, that is the thing that G-d did not say...* (verse 22)

From here, it appears that every prophecy can be tested very simply, by seeing whether it is completely fulfilled or not. No differentiation is made between prophecies of peace, blessings and goodness, and those that foresee harsh decrees and punishments; whatever does not come true, must stem from a false prophet.

If this is the criterion, however, how can we explain that which occurred to the Prophet Yonah? He was sent to deliver this stern prophecy to the people of Ninveh:

עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוֵה נִהְפָּכֶת.

In another forty days, Ninveh will be overturned. (Yonah 3,4)

Yet, in the end, after Yonah ran away from G-d and spent three days inside a whale, what happened was this:

וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱ-לֹהִים עַל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה.

*G-d changed His mind regarding the evil He planned
to cause them, and did not do it.* (3,10)

True, the people of Ninveh repented of their sins, but the fact remains that Yonah's prophecy was never fulfilled. Does this mean Yonah was a false prophet?!

Furthermore: Yonah himself prayed to G-d and said:

עַל כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרַח תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵי חַנוּן וְרַחוּם...
וְנָחֵם עַל הָרָעָה.

*I therefore ran away to Tarshish,
because I knew that You are a merciful
and compassionate G-d... and You overlook the bad.* (4,2)

He explained that he ran away because he knew his prophecy might not be fulfilled – and he would then be suspected of having been a false prophet. But since he knew he was a true prophet, why would he assume his words would not be fulfilled?



A bitter dispute between the Prophet Yirmiyahu and a false prophet named Chananya ben Azor will help us understand the precise criteria by which to determine false prophecy. Yirmiyahu had prophesized destruction and exile for Israel, at the hands of King Nevuchadnetzar of Babylonia. At the same time, Chananya was publicly promising that Israel would be freed from the Babylonian choke-hold. Yirmiyahu therefore announced to Chananya in front of all the people,

אָמֵן כִּן יַעֲשֶׂה ה', יִקָּם ה' אֶת דְּבָרָיו...
 Amen, May it be G-d's will, may G-d uphold your words...

אֲדָ שְׁמַע נָא הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה... הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר יִנְבֵּא לְשָׁלוֹם בָּבֵא דְבַר הַנְּבִיא
 וְיָדַע הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר שְׁלָחוּ ה' בְּאֵמֶת.
 But hear what I say: ... The prophet who prophesizes for peace,
 when his words shall come true,
 then it will be known that Hashem has truly sent him. (Jeremiah 28,6-9)

What Yirmiyahu was saying was: “First of all, I hope you are right; I will be the first one to celebrate the fulfillment of your words. But know this: if your words do not come true, it is a clear sign that Hashem has not sent you and that your message is false – because your message is one of peace.”

Yirmiyahu specified that positive prophecies must come true – from which we can deduce that his own message of destruction need not. “If peace does come,” we understand from his words, “this does not prove that you [Chananya] are right and that I am a false prophet, because prophecies of doom need not come true – if the people repent.”

Yirmiyahu thus lays down an important principle: A prophecy that promises blessing *must* come true, unless delivered by a false seer. But a prophecy of destruction and punishment need not be fulfilled; if circumstances change, via repentance or prayer, it can be both a true prophecy and remain unfulfilled.

Confirmation of this approach is found in the Talmud:

R. Acha said in the name of R. Chanina: “It never happened that G-d promised blessing which He later changed to misfortune...” (Shabbat 55a)

This principle holds true even when the beneficiary of the blessing was no longer deserving, as the Rambam concludes in the introduction to his classic commentary on the Mishnah. He adds there that if there were any



possibility of a “prophecy of blessing” being canceled or withdrawn, there would remain no criteria by which to check if a prophecy is true or not.

■ When an Evil Man Repents

What we have learned is that the test of truth can only apply to a prophecy that promises goodness. Why is this?

The difference between a prophecy of goodness and one that predicts punishment is not just technical. The distinction is much deeper and more meaningful, and is connected with G-d’s true will, as Ezekiel teaches:

הֲחַפֵּץ אֶחְפֹּץ מוֹת רָשָׁע נָאִם ה' אֱלֹהִים? הֲלוֹא בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדְרָכָיו וְחָיָה.

“Do I really want the death of the wicked man,” says the Lord?

“I only want him to repent of his ways, and live.” (Yechezkel 18,23)

G-d’s essential desire is for sinners to repent of their sins, do teshuvah, and receive the gifts of life and goodness. This means that a prophecy that predicts punishment is merely a *threat*, for the purpose of deterring sinners and encouraging them to repent. When they then improve their actions, paving the way for them to receive life and blessing, Hashem’s true will has been fulfilled and the evil decree is necessarily revoked.

We can say that the non-fulfillment of a negative prophecy is the voiding of the threat – but in truth it is also the *revelation of Hashem’s essential desire* for goodness, which remains eternal and forever unchanging. A positive prophecy, predicting or promising blessing and goodness, is totally different. G-d is the source of good Who seeks to do only good, and a prophecy of blessing is the utter expression of His will. It is absolute: even if the prediction was made contingent on a condition that ultimately did not come true, it must, and will, still be fulfilled. If not, it was a false prophecy to begin with.

The Talmud makes this point perfectly clear:

Hashem does not change His mind regarding even a single word of blessing that comes from His mouth - even if it was stated conditionally. How do we know this? From Moshe Rabbeinu. Hashem promised him at the Sin of the Golden Calf (D’varim 9,14), “Loosen [your grip] from Me and I will destroy them... and I will make you into a great nation...” (B’rachot 7a)



Hashem made a promise to Moshe that if, Heaven forbid, Israel would be destroyed, he would be the seed from which a new Israel would sprout. Israel was not destroyed, of course, for Moshe prayed to G-d and had the Divine decree nullified – yet still, the blessing to Moshe came true via his own descendants, as the above Gemara continues based on Chronicles I 23.

When we analyze G-d's precise words to Moshe, we realize that His true desire was that the decree against Israel should *not* be fulfilled. The hint lies in the words "*Leave me go*," as if to say, "If you actually let go - that is, if you stop praying and pleading - I will destroy them; it's all up to you and your prayers."

Clearly, then, the condition Hashem set – the annihilation of Israel – is not His true will. It is merely a way of coaxing Moshe into praying for Israel – and in this merit, too, he had many descendants himself.

■ **Israel's Eternal One Will Not Lie**

The picture becomes even clearer when we review a critical conversation between the Prophet Shmuel and King Sha'ul. It happened after the king did not obey the prophet's instructions to kill King Agag of Amalek. King Sha'ul first asks forgiveness:

וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא אֶת חַטָּאתִי וְשׁוּב עִמִּי וְאַשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָּהּ.

*And now please forgive my sin,
and return with me, and I will bow before G-d.* (Shmuel I 15,25)

But Shmuel refuses, saying:

קָרַע ה' אֶת מַמְלַכּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַלְיָךְ הַיּוֹם וּנְתַנָּה לְרֵעֶךָ הַטּוֹב מִמֶּךָ.

*G-d has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day,
and has given it to your comrade who is better than you.*

וְגַם יֵצֵחַ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁקַר וְלֹא יִנָּחַם כִּי לֹא אָדָם הוּא לְהִנָּחֵם.

*And the Eternal One of Israel will not lie nor change His mind,
for He is not a man...* (Shmuel I 15,28-29)

Shmuel appears to be saying two contradictory things. First he says that Hashem has changed His mind about Saul's kingship, and has decided to tear it away from him. But then he declares that Hashem never changes His mind, and that once He decides to give the kingship to someone else, He will not change this decision!



Why should we not assume that just as Hashem changed His mind regarding Saul's kingship, He might do the same about tearing it away from him – and perhaps in the end, G-d will return the kingdom to Saul!

To answer this, let us first state that when G-d “changes His mind,” it is not the same as when a person does so. A mortal changes his mind because he has made a mistake in faulty thinking, lack of judgment, overlooking critical factors, and the like.

But with G-d, this is clearly not the case. He does not make mistakes or errors of judgment. Rather, Hashem places trust in us and charges us with important missions. When G-d entrusts a particular person with a job, he is given all the necessary qualities and conditions to succeed. However, he still has Free Will, and if he chooses not to fulfill it, G-d will choose someone else to carry it out.

In the case at hand, G-d's will was that the Nation of Israel should be led in G-d's ways and that Amalek should be destroyed. The chosen agent for the mission was King Sha'ul – who then proceeded to utilize his Free Will to adhere not to the voice of G-d, but to that of the people. G-d's desire remained firm: Torah leadership for the nation, and the annihilation of Amalek – and to this end, He dethroned King Sha'ul and appointed someone else in his stead.

■ **Except for This Thing...**

The quote we brought above from the Gemara – “Hashem does not change His mind regarding even a single word of blessing that He issues” – was actually not complete, and there is, in fact, one exception to this rule. What is it?

The Gemara tells us of an unusual event that happened when Yechezkel the Prophet saw the destruction of the First Temple in a prophetic vision. At the beginning of his vision, Yechezkel hears G-d order the angels not to harm the righteous people. Later in the vision, however, he sees the opposite: that the tzaddikim are the first ones to be punished!

Thus, a positive prophecy did not come true. The Gemara notes clearly that this is an exception to the stated rule – but what we want to understand is *why*. Why did Hashem change His mind about a favorable promise that He had made, and why did it happen specifically in this case?



We know that one of the rules of Divine Providence is that in the event of a plague, war or the like, even righteous people are very likely to be hurt. Our Sages phrased it this way:

Once permission is given for the destroyer to do damage, he does not differentiate between those who are good and those who are evil.

(Bava Kama 60a)

Why is this? Where is the justice in such a system?

The explanation is that we must look at the “default” situation. All things being equal, the tzaddik would normally not be sentenced to death or otherwise punished. But in times of plague or war, the “default” changes. It is natural that many people die in such circumstances, and in order to change this “default” so that the tzaddik can be saved, a special Divine decision is needed. If there is no such decision, the tzaddik can also be killed.

In short: In normal times, a Divine decree is required in order that a person should die, while in times of danger, a Divine reprieve is required in order for him to be saved. Let us see how this applies to the prophecy of Yechezkel. The original promise that he received was that the tzaddikim would not be harmed in the general destruction resulting from the sins of the wicked. However, this is only if they had nothing to do with these sins. But if they could have prevented them, yet did not do so – for instance, if they could have attempted to reprove the sinners – they themselves become liable for the very sin of not having taken action. In the words of the Talmud: היה להם למחות ולא מוחו, “They could have protested, but they did not protest.”

Therefore, the original promise was kept: They would not die because of the sins of others. But it was not promised that they would not die in punishment for their own sins.

Once again, we see that the “prophecy of blessing” was not violated. If they had been true tzaddikim without sin, they would have been saved. But because they were found to have a sin, they were judged just like everyone else.

■ **Yaakov’s Fear**

In light of what we have learned about G-d’s promises, something about the behavior of Yaakov Avinu arouses a major question mark. The Torah tells us that many years after he ran away from Esav in fear for his life, the



two brothers were about to meet up with each other again – and Yaakov was fearful:

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד...

Yaakov was very afraid... (B'reshit 32,7)

What was he afraid of? After all, Hashem had clearly promised him beforehand that He would be with him, as we read:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת...

*I will be with you, and I will guard you wherever you go,
and I will restore you to this land...* (28,15)

The Gemara's famous answer for this question is that Yaakov was afraid that his sins would cancel out this Divine promise (B'rachot 4a).

But we have just explained that Hashem does not change His mind regarding His promises to do good things!

The Rambam distinguishes between prophetic promises to individuals (which might not be fulfilled) and those made to the entire nation. But this is hard to understand, for we saw that the very example of a positive Divine promise that was kept despite the non-fulfillment of the requisite condition was made to an individual (Moshe)!

Let us attempt a different approach. When Yaakov Avinu originally left the Land of Israel, he lay down on a pillow of rocks, and G-d appeared to him in a dream, promising to watch over him: "**Behold, Hashem was standing over him**" (B'reshit 28,13). G-d is referred to here by His Name of mercy, "Hashem" (*Yud-keh-vuv-keh*), and not by the Name of Strict Judgment, "Elokim." What this means is that G-d's promise to Yaakov was a favor to him, a gift in the merit of his fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and not something he deserved on his own merits.

When he awoke from his dream in the morning, Yaakov asked that G-d fulfill these promises only if he deserves them. "I don't want any favors," Yaakov said, "but only that which I truly deserve according to my own actions." He wished to have the trait of Divine compassion towards him upgraded to that of judgment.

Based on this, we can understand why the Prophet Micha states, "**Grant truth to Yaakov**" (Micha 7,20) – for Yaakov wished to be treated with "truth," not with "compassion." Yaakov in fact used the Divine Name "Elokim" after he awoke from his dream: He made a vow that יהיה א-לוהים עמדי,



if Elokim will be with me (B'reshit 28,20), and in the next verse he again said, והיה ה' לי לא-לוהים, *then G-d will be my Elokim*. The first verse represents his request to be treated with the attribute of justice on his journey – that is, with justice and fairness, not compassion – and this is why he uses only the Divine Name of Elokim. Regarding his return home, “*Yaakov was very afraid*” that his spiritual stature might deteriorate and he would not be worthy of being judged, as he requested, with the attribute of justice; this is why he again asked that “*Hashem [should be his] Elokim*.”

We thus see that Yaakov did not fear that a positive Divine promise would be revoked. It was rather he himself who asked to be judged by a higher standard, that of *midah k'neged midah*, reward or punishment corresponding to his deeds. He feared that he had fallen from the high ethical level on which he started out, rendering him no longer worthy of that which he requested: Divine blessing and protection adjusted to his own actions.

Thus, the principle that Hashem's positive promises are carried out applies in this case as well, and is in fact universally valid.

Support for this explanation is found in the very words of Yaakov's prayer:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱ-לֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱ-לֹהֵי יִצְחָק ה' הָאֵמֹר אֵלַי
שׁוּב לְאֶרְצְךָ וְלִמְוֹלָדְתְּךָ וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ.

Yaakov said: “O G-d of my father Avraham and G-d of my father Yitzchak, Hashem Who said to me, ‘Return to your land and to your birthplace and I will benefit you.’” (B'reshit 32,9)

We see that Yaakov Avinu once again prays and asks for Divine help in the merit of his forefathers, using the *Havayah* Name. He no longer repeats his original request to be judged only by his actions according to strict judgement.

Based on all that we have said, we can understand why the Torah generally phrases its conditions in “if and only if” format. That is, it states not only, “If you do x, then y will happen,” but also, “if you do *not* do x, then y will *not* happen.” For instance, Parashat Bechukotai reads as follows:

אם בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ ... וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמִיכֶם בְּעֵתָם.

If you walk in My statutes...

I will bring you rains in their proper time. (Vayikra 26,3-4)



... וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ ... אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה זֹאת לָכֶם ...

*But if you do not adhere... I, too,
will act this way towards you...* (verses 14-16)

Why does the Torah make sure to state the negative clause, and not allow it to be inferred from the positive clause?

It is because this is not a simple “positive promise,” but rather a “double promise.” If the Torah would have mentioned only the condition for a positive promise, then according to what we have learned, the promise would be fulfilled no matter what. (The condition would be understood as being simply a way of encouraging us.) But the Torah took pains to immediately mention the other side of the coin as well, thus emphasizing that these promises will come about only if we deserve them.

All of the above stems from the fundamental understanding that G-d is the source of all good and wants only to provide goodness. We express this in our daily prayers towards the end of the Amidah (Sh’moneh Esrei):

הֵאֱ-לֹהֵינוּ יְשׁוּעָתֵנוּ וְעִזְרָתֵנוּ סֵלֶה הֵאֱ-לֹהֵינוּ הַטּוֹב ... הַטּוֹב שְׁמַךְ ...

“G-d, our Salvation and Aid,
the good G-d... Your Name is good...”

