

Parashat Re'eh



False Prophets

- Is it conceivable that a prophet encourage idol-worship?
- Is it conceivable that a false prophet's predictions come true?
- How can one differentiate between a true and a false prophet?
- What is the significance of a false prophet's existence?

1. One Who Prophesies to Serve Idols

Many warnings about idolatry

Chapters 12-13 of parashat Re'eh discuss different warnings in regard to idol worship.¹ The fear of being enticed by idol worship is very great, and therefore, the Torah needs to warn Bnei Yisrael to keep away from idol worship and all that is associated with it many times.

In this lesson we will discuss the issue of a prophet who calls *for* idol worship:

¹ In chapter 12, Bnei Yisrael are warned to uproot idolatry from the Land, and to distinguish worship of God from idol worship by serving Him in a particular place, with a different kind of service; at the end of chapter 12 the warning "Take care lest you be ensnared by them..." (30-31); chapter 13 discusses three instances of temptation to idol worship: by a prophet, an enticer, or a town gone astray.

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears within you and announces to you a sign or wonder; and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," You must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from within you. (13:2-6)

יִקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֵלֶם
חִלּוֹם וְנָתַן אֵלֶיךָ אוֹת אוֹ
מוֹפֵת: וְכֵן הָאוֹת וְהַמוֹפֵת
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר
גִּלְגָּה אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרַי
אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְדַעְתֶּם וְנִעַבְדֶם:
לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֶל דְּבַר הַנְּבִיא
הַהוּא אוֹ אֶל הוֹלֵם הַחִלּוֹם
הַהוּא כִּי מִנְסָה ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
אֶתְכֶם לְדַעַת הִישְׁכֶם
אֲהָבִים אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נְפְשְׁכֶם:
אַחֲרַי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תִּלְכוּ וְאֵתוּ
תִירְאוּ וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו תִּשְׁמְרוּ
וּבְקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ וְאֵתוּ תַעֲבֹדוּ
וּבֹ תִדְבְּקוּן: וְהַנְּבִיא הַהוּא
אוֹ חֵלֶם הַחִלּוֹם הַהוּא יוֹמֵת
כִּי דִבֶּר סָרָה עַל ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
הַמוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם וְהַפְדֶּךָ מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים
לְהִדְיָתְךָ מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ
ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַקֵּת בָּהּ וּבַעֲרֹתָ
הָרַע מִקִּרְבְּךָ.

2. Prophet or False Prophet?

In these verses, Bnei Yisrael are warned not to listen to a *prophet* who tells them to serve idols. A “prophet” is presumably a messenger of God whose task is to convey God’s words to people, and if so, it is not clear why the Torah refers to one who preaches idol-worship as “a prophet” – isn’t it obvious that this impostor was not sent by God? While we must interpret the language of the Torah, “if a *prophet* rises up within you” to mean a person masquerading as a prophet, it is questionable why the Torah does not use such language explicitly.

Similarly, how can it be that a person who acts in direct violation of God’s will be able to perform signs and wonders, changing the order of creation?²



2 The Abrabanel raises this problem:

הנה הנביא הזה הנוכח בפרשה לא ימלט אם הנאמר שיהיה נביא שקר... והנה אמר "נלכה אחרי אלוהים אחרים" ולכן יומת – ויקשה לזה אמרו "ונתן אליך אות ומופת ובא האות והמופת", כי אם הוא נביא שקר, איך יצאו מופתיו לפעל?...
ואם אמרנו שהוא נביא אמת ולכן בא האות והמופת והיה ענינו לנסיון כמו שאמר הכתוב, יקשה אמרו "והנביא ההוא... יומת, כי דבר סרה... להדיחך מן הדרך..." והלא הוא היה ירא ה' ולא אמר מה שאמר, כי אם לנסותם לדעת הישכם אוהבים את ה'... ולא היה דעתו להדיחכם מן הדרך, אם כן למה יומת??

There is no way out of saying that the prophet mentioned is a false prophet... as he said “let us serve other gods,” and he is therefore put to death – and this is difficult considering that “he announces to you a sign or wonder, and the sign or wonder spoken of takes place,” for if he is a false prophet, how can his wonders take place?... and if we said that he is a true prophet and therefore this sign came to pass as a test, as the text says, it is problematic that it says “and that prophet...shall be put to death, for he tried to turn you away from the path...” but he only said those words to test if you love God...but his intention was not to lead you astray, then why should he be put to death??

**A Dispute
between
Rabbi Yossi
and Rabbi
Akiva**

The Midrash *Sifri* relates to this question in two ways:

“and the sign or wonder spoken of takes place.” Rabbi Yossi HaGelili said: See to what extent the test reaches; if the idol worshipers give signs about the sun or moon, stars or constellations, do not listen to them, why? For the Lord your God is testing you to know if you love Him...”.

Rabbi Akiva said: Heaven forbid that an idol worshiper make the sun and moon, stars or constellations be still! [The Torah] is only referring to one who was a true prophet at first, but then became a false prophet like Hananiah the son of Azur... (*Sifri Devarim* 84)

”ובא האות והמופת”. אמר רבי יוסי הגלילי: ראה עד היכן הגיע הכתוב; סוף עובדי עבודה זרה ינתן להם ממשלה אפילו על חמה ולבנה כוכבים ומזלות אל תשמע להם, מפני מה? כי מנסה ה' אלהיכם אתכם לדעת הישכם אוהבים...”.

אמר רבי עקיבא: חס ושלום שמעמיד המקום חמה ולבנה כוכבים ומזלות לעובדי עבודה זרה! הא אינו מדבר אלא במי שהיו נביאי אמת מתחילה וחזרו להיות נביאי שקר כחנניה בן עזור...

**A True
Prophet
who Then
Became
a False
Prophet**

Rabbi Akiva is not willing to accept that the Torah would refer to a false prophet as a prophet, nor that God would allow his signs to come to pass. Rabbi Akiva justifies his view by arguing that any such prophet would have initially been a true prophet, his signs therefore coming true, and only after did he become a false prophet.³

3 Abrabanel claims that it is not conceivable that a true prophet would then become a false prophet. In his opinion, the verses are not describing a realistic situation, but are an exaggeration that expresses that even if such a person bids one to serve

A False
Prophet
whose
Signs
Come to
Pass

In contrast, Rabbi Yossi HaGelili holds that it may well be that a false prophet's signs come true, for God allows them to be fulfilled in order to test those who hear the false prophet. Even if such wonders do come to pass, a person who says such things must never be obeyed.

Rabbi Yossi's opinion seems to be the plain meaning of the verses – the Torah indeed intends to warn us against “prophets” who call for idol worship. But if so, we must understand: how *can* such a person be referred to as a prophet, and why do his wonders come to pass?⁴

idols, he should not be believed.

- 4 This question is not only relevant in regard to a false prophet's wonders, but may be asked about the very existence of pagan magic and forbidden powers. The Talmud in *Avoda Zara* 55a relates to this issue:

Rava ben Rav Yitzhak said to Rav Yehuda: There is a house of idolatry in our area, and when the world needs rain, [the idolaters] hear in their dreams, Slaughter a person and I will bring rain – [If] they slaughter a person, will rain come?

And the answer received:

He said to him...what is written, “that the Lord your God shared them with all the nations,” teaches that He gave such things so that they would trouble the world. As Resh Lakish said, What does it mean, “He mocks those who mock and gives grace to the humble? Whoever comes to defile – they open for him, and whoever comes to purify – they help him.

The Talmud answers that God gives power to idolaters in order to trouble the world. The Ramban answers similarly in his commentary on Devarim (18:12). In his opinion, sorcery is something that really exists, and that can be useful, and nonetheless, the Torah forbids it. In contrast, the Rambam (in the Halachot of Avoda Zarah, 11:16) completely rules this possibility out, writing:

ודברים האלו כולם דברי שקר וכזב הם, והם שהטעו בהם עובדי כוכבים הקדמונים לגויי הארצות כדי שינהגו אחריהם. ואין ראוי לישראל, שהם חכמים מוחוכמים, להמשך בהבלים

3. The Term “Prophet” in the Torah

Examining the term “prophet” in the Torah will only intensify our question and perplexity.

**Avraham –
the First
Prophet**

The word “prophet” appears for the first time in Bereshit, when Avimelech takes Sara and God appears to him, saying: “Now, return the wife of the man, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live” (20:7). The significance of the phrase, as attributed to Avraham Avinu in the context of Avimelech’s dream

אלו ולא להעלות על לב שיש תועלת בהם, שנאמר: כי לא נחש ביעקב ולא קסם בישראל (במדבר כ"ג, כג), ונאמר: "כי הגוים האלה אשר אתה יורש אותם אל מעוננים ואל קוסמים ישמעו ואתה לא כן וגו'" (דברים י"ח, יד). כל המאמין בדברים האלו וכיוצא בהם ומחשב בלבו שהם אמת ודבר חכמה אבל התורה אסרתם אינו אלא מן הסכלים ומחסרי הדעת ובכלל הנשים והקטנים שאין דעתם שלימה. אבל בעלי החכמה ותמימי הדעת ידעו בראיות ברורות שכל אלו הדברים שאסרה תורה אינם דברי חכמה אלא תהו והבל שנמשכו בהם חסרי הדעת ונטשו כל דרכי האמת בגללם, ומפני זה אמרה תורה כשהזירה על כל אלו ההבלים: "תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך" (שם, יג).

All these matters [i.e. necromancy, enchantment, et cetera] are all matters of falsehood and deceit, and it was with these that the early idolaters made the other [non-idolatrous] gentiles deviate and follow them. It is not fitting for Jews, who are the cleverest of the clever, to use such nonsense, or even to think that they are of any use, for it is written, "Surely there is no enchantment in Jacob, or divination in Israel", and it is also written, "For these nations, whom you shall dispossess, listen to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so". Anyone who believes in these or similar things and privately thinks that they are true and wise, but that [we don't practice them because] the Torah forbade them, is an idiot and lacks knowledge, and is in the category of women and children, who are of an deficient mentality. But those people who are wise and of a perfect mentality know very clearly that all these things that the Torah forbade are not wise, but are merely stuff and nonsense which those lacking in knowledge follow and because of which abandon the ways of truth. Because of this, when warning us against these nonsenses, the Torah says, "You shall be perfect with the Lord your God".

is “one who prays” whose prayer is accepted by God, as the Rashbam comments: “for he is a prophet” – an expression of the yield of his lips. He regularly evokes Me and utters My words and I love his words and listen to his prayer.”

**The Prophet
as One who
Prays**

According to the Rashbam, a prophet is one of special eloquence, who is thus elected to bring God’s word to humankind; and he or she is therefore suitable to represent humankind and present their words before God.

**The
Prophet
Knows
Hidden
Things**

However, Rashi’s ad loc. interpretation of this term is different:

“for he is a prophet” – and knows you have not touched her, thus he will pray on your behalf.

According to Rashi, a prophet is capable of seeing and knowing matters that are hidden to the regular human eye, and he or she is chosen because of this ability to interpret the prophetic vision presented. (In the case of Avimelech, Avraham’s ability to know hidden matters was the reason for his agreement to pray for Avimelech, but not the reason for God’s acceptance of his prayers, as the Rashbam explains).

**The
Prophet
Transmits
Words to
the People**

The term “prophet” next appears in the Torah when Aharon is appointed as Moshe’s speaker: “And the Lord said to Moshe, See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and Aharon will be your prophet” (Shemot 7:1). Aharon’s role was to convey to Pharaoh what Moshe had told him, and in this context, “prophet” takes on the meaning of “speaker” – to be

a spokesperson of God's word unto the people. And indeed, both Rashi and Rashbam interpret the verse in this sense:

“will be your prophet” – as interpreter: “your interpreter,” and similarly all prophetic language of a person declares and pronounces words of rebuke to the people, derived from “the yield of lips” (Isaiah 57:19), “he will yield wisdom” (Proverbs 10:31)...the word “preacher” in foreign language. (Rashi, ad loc.) “your prophet” – who will speak for you. (Rashbam, ad loc.) “נביאך” – דברן תחתיך. רשב"ם, שם”

“יהיה נביאך” – כתרגומו: “מתורגמן”, וכן כל לשון נבואה אדם המכריז ומשמיע לעם דברי תוכחות, והוא מגזרת “ניב שפתים” (ישעיה נ"ז, ט), “ינוב חכמה” (משלי י, לא), “ויכל מהתנבות” דשמואל (א, יג). ובלעז קוראין לופרקיר”א (מליץ ומטיף). רש"י, שם

**The
Prophet
Knows
God's
Secrets**

However, the Ibn Ezra does not agree with this interpretation, from neither a linguistic nor a semantic perspective:

“Behold, I gave you as a God to Pharaoh” – I made you as of great a status as an angel in the eyes of Pharaoh, and this is “as a god,” and he speaks to the prophet, and the prophet speaks to the people of his generation. And those who say that [the word] prophet is derived from ניב “the yield of lips” (Isaiah 57:19) is incorrect, for the word

“ראה נתתיך אלהים לפרעה” – ...שעשית לך מעלה גדולה שתהיה נחשב בעיני פרעה כמעלת מלאך, וזהו “אלהים”, והוא מדבר אל הנביא, והנביא מדבר אל אנשי דורו. והאומרים כי נביא מגזרת “ניב שפתים” (ישעיה נ"ז, ט) איננו נכון, כי שרש ניב

בני's root is two letters... and the root of נביא is three letters... Moreover, why should the man's wife be returned because the man is a prophet (Bereshit 20:7) if the word means "speaker"? Rather, its meaning is that a prophet is one to whom I will reveal My secret, as in "for if He reveals His secrets to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7) and he takes pleasure in Me, and therefore he will pray on your behalf and you will live" (Bereshit 20:7). (Ibn Ezra, Shemot 7:1)

מהשניים... ושרש נביא שלש אותיות... וועוד, מה מעם השב אשת האיש כי נביא הוא (בראשית כ, ז), אם פירושו דברן הוא? רק פירושו הוא נביא שאגלה לו סודי בדרך "כי אם גלה סודו אל עבדיו הנביאים" (עמוס ג, ז) והוא מתענג עלי, על כן ויתפלל בעדך וחייה (בראשית כ, ז).
 אבן עזרא [הארון], שמות ז, א

In the Ibn Ezra's opinion, the word "prophet" means: close, beloved, a knower of secrets. The prophet's closeness to God and his delight in the word of God are the reasons for which He selects them to be the messengers of His word to humankind, like one who reveals his secrets to those who he is closest to. The prophet's role is born of his or her closeness, "intimacy" with God and his or her desire for the good of the people. It is therefore clear why the prophet's prayer is desirable and so readily accepted by God.

**Miriam
 the
 Prophetess
 Sings to
 God**

Miriam, too, is called "a prophetess": "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aharon, took the tambourine in her hand and all the women went out after her..." (Shemot 15:20).

Miriam’s prophecies are not included in the Torah. It is likely that there were such prophecies, which were not recorded because they were only relevant to that generation, but it is yet more likely that the title “prophetess” was awarded to her because of what we know about her from the Torah. She is referred to as a prophetess when she sings a song of thanksgiving to God. The Rashbam uses this appellation to support his argument that the significance of the term “prophet” is “speaker,” for such words of song do not come from God’s word, but from a heightened spiritual state of being: “the prophetess” – a prophet calls out words of praise or reproach to people (Rashbam, ad loc.)

**A Talent
for Speech**

If so, based on the first three appearances of the word “prophet,” it seems that the prophet is called thus because of his rhetoric capacity: and thereby selected to convey God’s word to humanity, and to speak to God on its behalf.

**Special
Spiritual
Power**

However, Rashi and Ibn Ezra mention another meaning of the concept – a person of particular spiritual potency; Rashi understands that the prophet is a person who can see things hidden from the naked eye, and Ibn Ezra emphasizes the prophet’s special closeness to God.⁵

PROPHECY AS A SETTLING OF SPIRIT

**The Spirit
Rests
Upon the
Elders**

Until now, we have discussed the qualities and talents of **the prophet**; we will now explore how the Torah relates to the concept of **prophecy**. A unique

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<sup>5</sup> See also different definitions of the word “prophet” in the Biblical Encyclopedia, vol. 5, p. 690 (Hebrew).

description of the nature of prophecy can be found in the story of Eldad and Medad and the seventy elders in parashat Behalotcha:

So Moshe went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and He **took some of the power of the Spirit** that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moshe, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moshe' aide since youth, spoke up and said, Moshe, my lord, stop them! But Moshe replied, Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would lay his Spirit on them!

(Bamidbar 11:24-29)

...וַיִּקַּח מִן הַרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלַי וַיָּשֶׂם עַל שְׁבַע הָאֲנָשִׁים  
מִזִּקְנֵי הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֵד אֹתָם סָבִיבַת הָאֹהֶל:  
וַיִּרְדּוּ ה' בְּעָנָן וַיִּדְבַּר אֲלֵי וַיֵּאמֶר מִן הָרוּחַ  
אֲשֶׁר עָלַי וַיִּתֵּן עַל שְׁבַע הָאֲנָשִׁים  
וַיְהִי כִּנְחֹשׁ עַל־הֶם הָרוּחַ וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יָסֹפּוּ:  
וַיִּשְׂאָרוּ שְׁנֵי אַנְשֵׁים בְּמִחְנֶה שֵׁם הָאֶחָד  
אֶלְדָּד וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי מֵדָד מִיַּד וַתָּנַח עֲלֵיהֶם  
הָרוּחַ וְהִמָּה בִּקְרָבִים וְלֹא יָצְאוּ הָאֶהֱלָה  
וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ בְּמִחְנֶה: וַיִּרְץ הַנָּעַר וַיַּגִּד לְמוֹשֶׁה  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְדָּד וּמֵדָד מִתְנַבְּאִים בְּמִחְנֶה...  
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה הֲמִי אֶתְּהָלָה לִּי וְמִי  
יִתֵּן כָּל עֵם ה' נְבִיאִים כִּי יִתֵּן ה' אֶת רוּחוֹ  
עַל־הֶם.

במדבר י"א, כדכט

According to these verses, the elders' prophecy was the result of God's spirit resting upon them. From a simple reading of these verses it seems that "and they prophesied" means "they received a prophecy," that is, God shared His words with them. However, the Ramban explains that the elders were not worthy to be prophets in themselves, but through their devotion to Moshe, they were granted to share in the Spirit he had been granted. Moshe received God's direct word, while they drew their heightened spiritual state from Moshe's prophecy, and they knew what God had said to Moshe, even though they did not prophesy in the fullest sense:

not hear speech from God's mouth and He did not appear to them in a vision or dream, but God spoke to Moshe and drawing upon this spirit they learned of that prophecy. And this is the reason that "they prophesied – but did not do so again," (ibid.), because they never again prophesied of their own accord...

And the closest to me, for this happened throughout their lives: they knew all that God commanded to Israel through Moshe...

(Ramban, Bamidbar 11:17)

כי הזקנים אשר אמר בהם שהתנבאו לא שמעו דבור מפי השם ולא נראה להם במראה או בחלום, אבל השם מדבר עם משה ומאצילות רוח משה הם יודעים הנבואה ההיא. וזה טעם "ויתנבאו ולא יספו" (שם), שלא יספו להתנבאות מעצמם... והקרוב אלי, כי כל ימי הזקנים נעשה להם כן, שידעו בכל מה שיצוה השם לישראל ביד משה בצרכי שעתם והמקרים אשר יבואו להם במדבר... רמב"ן, במדבר י"א, יז

For the elders who were said to have prophesied did If so, the Torah’s expression, “prophesying,” shows that the principle aspect of prophecy does not depend on the prophet’s rhetorical capacity, but rather on the particular level of his or her revelatory experience with God’s word. There are different levels of prophecy – some are granted complete prophecy and thereby defined as the messenger of God’s word to the people, while the prophetic capacity of others lies in their role as receptacles for the Divine Presence.

And of course, the prophets themselves are on different prophetic levels, as illustrated, for example, through God’s rebuke of Miriam concerning her words about Moshe:

And He said: Now hear My words: When there is a prophet within you, I, the Lord, reveal Myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of My servant Moshe; he is faithful in all My house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. (Bamidbar 12:6-8)

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמְעוּ נָא דְבָרַי אִם יְהִיֶה נְבִיאֵכֶם ה' בְּמִרְאָה אֵלָיו אֶתְנַדְּעַ בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ: לֹא כֵן עֲבָדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֹאמָן הוּא: פֶּה אֶל פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְּחִידוֹת וּתְמִנֹת ה' יִבִּיט...  
במדבר י"ב, ו

Other prophets are described as receiving the word of the Lord through visions and dreams, in contrast with Moshe, who is spoken to “face to face.” Similarly,

Moshe, of special closeness to God, is described here not as a prophet but as “My servant.”<sup>6</sup>

From the sources presented until now, it emerges that the idea of prophecy is not clear-cut. The prophet is a person of special rhetorical capacity, but it seems that this is not the only aspect of a prophetically endowed person. While it is not exactly clear what “prophecy” is, it seems that the prophet is a person of particular spiritual strength, which allows him special closeness to God. His or her prayer, therefore, has special potency, and the prophet may even be privy to God’s word. Similarly, it is clear that there are different degrees of prophecy, and each prophet receives God’s word according to his or spiritual level.

Let us now return to our original question – how can the Torah describe the false prophet as a “prophet” without further clarification of this term?

## 4. Prophetic Power that is Not from God

**Presenting himself as a Prophet**

In his first comment of the word “prophet” in our verse, the Ramban feels compelled to explain that this term is not the Torah’s objective description of the situation, but the false prophet’s own self-description. According to this explanation, the verse reads: “if one

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<sup>6</sup> Moshe is only described as a “prophet” once in all of the Torah, at the end of Devarim: “And there was no other prophet in Israel like Moshe, who knew God face to face” (Devarim 34:10).

who calls himself a prophet appears within you...”:

“The text refers to the “prophet” according to what he calls himself – he says, God spoke with me in a vision, and I am his prophet, sent to you so that you shall do so” (Ramban, Devarim 13:2).

”כי יקום בקרבך נביא או חלם חלום” – יקראנו הכתוב “נביא” על פי עצמו, שיאמר הוא השם דבר עמי בהקיץ ואני נביאו שלוח לכם שתעשו כן. רמב”ן, דברים י”ג, ב

**Spiritual  
Attainment  
Unrelated to  
God’s Word**

The Ramban, however, recognized the problematic aspect of this explanation, and raised another possibility:

And it may be that the text is hinting to what he **really** is. For a minority of people harbor prophetic power or the ability to see the future, and the person knows not where it comes from, but he may seclude himself and be seized by the spirit that says, Such-and-such will come to pass to such-and-such... and this person will be called a “prophet” for he *is* prophesying, and therefore his sign and wonder comes to pass. (Ramban, *ibid.*)

ויתכן שירמוז הכתוב למה שהוא אמת. כי בנפשות בקצת האנשים כח נבואי ידעו בו עתידות, לא ידע האיש מאין יבא בו, אבל יתבודד ותבוא בו רוח לאמר ככה יהיה לעתיד לבא בדבר פלוני... והאיש הזה יקרא “נביא” כי מתנבא הוא, ועל כן יבא האות והמופת אשר יאמר אליך. רמב”ן, שם

According to this explanation, the person is in fact a “prophet.” That is, he has special spiritual powers that allow him access to the unknown (such as the

future, or deeds done in private or in secret). According to the Ramban, therefore, the Torah is illustrating the disparity that may be between **prophecy at its lowest** – basic spiritual capacity and certain powers – and between **full prophecy**, which comes through spiritual and verbal communion with God. This disparity may be so wide that a prophet of the former persuasion may not even be aware where his spiritual powers come from: **If their source is from Divine power or from the impure potency of idol-worship**. Therefore, the Torah refers to that person as a “prophet” – for his actual capacity of prophecy.

**Governing  
the Nations  
Through  
Ministering  
Angels and  
Mazalot**

How can it be that through such spiritual power, a person reaches “prophecy” that preaches idol worship?

On this subject, the Ramban comments:

I have already explained (Vayikra 18:25) “that the Lord your God distributed to all nations” – for all have stars and constellations governed by Supreme angels, like it says in Daniel about the ministering angel of the Persian Empire and the ministering angel of the Greek Empire, and each makes gods of them and serves them. And it says “and you the Lord has taken,” - for you are God’s portion, so you

וכבר פירשתי (ויקרא י"ח, כה) “אשר חלק ה' אלהיך אתם לכל העמים” – כי לכולם כוכב ומזל וגבוהים עליהם מלאכי עליון, כגון הנאמר בדניאל שר מלכות פרס ושר מלכות יון, ובעבור כן יעשו להם אלהים מהם ויעבדום. ואמר “ואתכם לקח ה'” – כי אתם חלק השם, לא תקימו עליכם שר או עוזר זולתו. כי הוא הוציא

must not appoint any godly entity or helpers over you. For he took you out of the iron furnace, when you were in the furnace burning with flame and wood, and took you out of there against their godly entities by executing judgment against them, and if He had not defeated them you would not have come out, for you were not worthy of coming out, and behold, He did all this so that you would be a portion unto him and be a special people from all the nations for His great name. (The Ramban on Devarim 4:19).

אתכם מכור הברזל, שהייתם בתוך מצרים בכור אש ועצים, והוציא אתכם משם כנגד שריהם שעשה בהם שפטים, ולולי שהפילם לא הייתם יוצאים כיהיו הם במעלתם שלא תצאו, והנה עשה כל זה כדי שתהיו לו נחלה ותהיו לשמו הגדול סגולה מכל העמים.

רמב"ן, דברים ד', י"ט

According to the words of the Ramban, idol worship is not only the fruit of the human imagination, but it is a substantial concept, based on the appointment of different entities to govern different forces in the world, referred to by the Sages as *mazalot* - "forces," such as the astrological forces of the Zodiac, and "שרי אומות העולם", which literally translates as "the ministers of the nations of the world." The separation into nations, as decreed upon humanity following the episode of the Tower of Babel led to the revocation of God's direct providence over the nations and His appointment of a particular ministering angel to govern each nation; each of these angels is linked to

a particular *mazal*, and thus these *mazalot* have actual influence over the world. Prophetic ability is derived from a person's ability to negate his earthly senses in order to channel these spiritual powers. The spiritually gifted of each nation honed their abilities to tune in to and read these powers, and became prophets of these *mazalot* and ministering angels, prophets who know how to read these governing powers in the world.

**God's Rule  
Above All**

However, such prophets were unable to come close to the supreme form of prophecy, that is, to tune in to the word of God, who rules over everything - including, of course, the ministering angels and *mazalot*, which He can change and manipulate at will. In any case, Am Yisrael is not governed by these forces, but by God's direct providence (hence the famous saying, "Israel is above Fate"). Therefore, the highest form of prophecy - in Israel alone - is prophecy that receives God's direct word.

**False  
Prophecy -  
A Low  
Spiritual  
Attainment**

From this discussion of the Ramban, it emerges that such idol-worship and the prophets who preach it are not necessarily speaking nonsense. Rather, this phenomenon is based on an ideological-philosophical concept based on the connection (or rather, the disconnection) between the human and the Creator; on the need for an intermediary between people and the Master of the world. This concept illuminates why idol worship was such a strong, real desire people struggled with, as seen in many biblical stories. People were strongly attracted to the worship of entities far lower and more easily accessible than God Himself,

and this attraction was all the stronger because idol-worship was, in fact, a power of some substance.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Eliyahu and the Prophets of the Ba'al

Wavering  
Between  
Two  
Opinions

A most striking example of a struggle between a prophet of God and prophets of idolatry can be found in the story of Eliyahu on Mount Carmel:

Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table. So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and

וַעֲתָהּ שְׁלַח קְבוֹץ אֱלֹהֵי אֶת  
כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַר הַכַּרְמֶל  
וְאֵת נְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל אַרְבַּע  
מֵאוֹת וְחֲמֹשִׁים וְנְבִיאֵי  
הָאֲשֵׁרָה אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת  
אֲכָלֵי שֶׁלֶחַן אִיזֶבֶל: וַיִּשְׁלַח  
אֶחָאָב בְּכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

7 This is evident from the Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 102b:

Rav Ashi ... said: Tomorrow we will discuss *our friends* [a euphemism for the evil kings of Israel who, because of their wickedness did not receive a portion in the World to Come, and are therefore not worthy of a proper title]. [That night,] Menashe appeared to him in a dream. He said: *Friends and the friends of your father* you call us? Where do you slice the bread for the blessing? He said to him: I do not know. He said to him: You don't even know from where to start slicing the bread, and you call me *friend*? He said to him: Teach me, and tomorrow I'll quote this lesson in your name...but tell me, if you are such a learned man, then why did you serve idols? He said to him: If you had been there – you would have lifted the hems of your garments in order to run after idolatry. The next day, Ravi Ashi said to the Sages: Let us begin with *Our Rabbis*. Rashi explained there: “they would have lifted up the hems of their garments to run – because the desire for idol-worship was so strong [in those days].

assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Eliyahu went before the people and said, How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. (1 Kings 18:19-21)

וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת הַנְּבִיאִים אֶל הַר הַכַּרְמֶל: וַיֵּגֶשׂ אֱלִיָּהוּ אֶל כָּל הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר עַד מָתַי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִים אִם ה' הָאֱלֹהִים לָכֵן אַחְרָיו וְאִם הַבַּעַל לָכֵן אַחְרָיו וְלֹא עֲנֵנו הָעָם אֹתוֹ דְּבַר. מַלְכִים א' י"ח, יטכא

This “wavering between two opinions” testifies to Israel’s great difficulty in distinguishing between truth and falsehood – does the truth lie with Eliyahu, a prophet of God, or with the prophets of the Ba’al?

**Testing  
who is an  
Authentic  
Prophet**

In order to prove the truth of his word, Eliyahu declares a “test”:

Then Eliyahu said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” (22-24)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלִיָּהוּ אֶל הָעָם אֲנִי נֹתַרְתִּי וְנִבְיֵי ה' לְבַדִּי וְנִבְיֵי הַבַּעַל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת וַחֲמִשִּׁים אִישׁ: וַיִּתְּנֵנוּ לָנוּ שְׁנַיִם פָּרִים וַיִּבְחָרוּ לָהֶם הַכֹּהֵן הָאֶחָד וַיִּנְתְּחֵהוּ וַיְשִׂימוּ עַל הָעֵצִים וְאֵשׁ לֹא יָשִׂימוּ וַאֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה אֶת הַכֹּהֵן הָאֶחָד וְנִתַּתִּי עַל הָעֵצִים וְאֵשׁ לֹא אֲשִׂים: וַקְרָאתֶם בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וַאֲנִי אֶקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה' וְהָיָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲנֵה בְּאֵשׁ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַן כָּל הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ טוֹב הַדְּבַר. שֵׁם, כבכד

Eliyahu's test succeeds: the prophets of the Ba'al's prayers are not answered, while Eliyahu's altar lights up with fire:

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Eliyahu stepped forward and prayed: "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!" (36-39)

וַיְהִי בַעֲלוֹת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיֵּשֶׁב  
אֵלָיו הַנְּבִיא וַיֹּאמֶר  
ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵנוּם יִצְחָק  
וַיְשָׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם יִדְעוּ כִּי  
אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי  
עַבְדְּךָ וּבְדַבְּרֶךָ עָשִׂיתִי אֵת  
כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה: עֲנֵנִי  
ה' עֲנֵנִי וַיִּדְעוּ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי  
אַתָּה ה' הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַתָּה  
הַסַּבֵּת אֵת לִבָּם אַחֲרֵיכֶם:  
וַתִּפֹּל אֵשׁ ה' וַתֹּאכַל אֵת  
הָעֹלָה וְאֵת הָעֵצִים וְאֵת  
הָאֲבָנִים וְאֵת הָעֶפְרָר וְאֵת  
הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּתְּעֹלָה לְחֻבָּה:  
וַיִּרְא כָּל הָעָם וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל  
פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ ה' הוּא  
הָאֱלֹהִים ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים.  
שם, לולט

After this winning proof, the people clearly know who the true God is, and they are even willing to kill the prophets of the Ba'al:

Then Eliyahu commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Eliyahu had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. (40)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלִיָּהוּ לְהֵם תִּפְשׂוּ  
 אֶת נְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל אִישׁ אֶל  
 יְמִלְט מֵהֶם וְיִתְּפוּשׂוּם  
 וַיֹּרְדוּם אֱלִיָּהוּ אֶל נַחַל  
 קִישׁוֹן וַיִּשְׁחָטֵם שָׁם. שם,  
 מ

The  
 Difficulty  
 in  
 Discerning  
 True  
 Prophecy

However, such open miracles and indisputable shows of truth do not happen every day; and even Eliyahu’s dramatic performance on Mount Carmel did not manage to secure the people’s trust in God in the long term.

It seems that to believe in God was no simple feat; and it was no easy task to resist the magnetic pull of other, lower spiritual powers – all this stemming from the fact that these powers were not false, but an actual prophetic, spiritual achievement to some extent. Am Yisrael found it difficult to discern that such prophecies were of a lower, rather than supreme, quality.

## 6. Determining the Authenticity of a Prophecy

A person who hears a prophecy beckoning him to serve idols is liable to be torn between belief in the prophecy of Moshe and the Torah, and the prophet speaking before him: how can a person know who to believe?

Faith in  
God, Who  
Took Us  
Out of  
Egypt

The parasha we are discussing presents two points that will guide a person to a decision. Firstly, in Devarim 13:6, it says: “That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow.” That is, **faith** in God should not be based on the prophecy of a particular prophet; it is rooted deeply within us, ever since our nation was brought out of Egypt. The Divine revelation of “I, and not an angel” was directly imprinted upon the souls of Israel, and therefore, ultimately, no prophet can challenge it.

Loving God

The second point is: “whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.” Love does not require proof or wonder – it is something fixed within the heart. When love for God is awakened, all doubts in one’s faith disappear. No false prophecy, however potent the source of power from which they emanate, is able to uproot that Divine love that fills the heart and soul – “with all your heart and all your soul.” Our hearts will warn us not to trust that prophet, because we love God.

A True  
Prophet  
Never  
Contradicts  
the Torah

Besides that deep inner conviction, which stems from faith and love of God, there is also a practical way to discern if a prophet’s words ring true: “It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. **Keep his commands** and obey him” (13:8). The devotion to observance of the mitzvot is the way to distinguish between truth and falsehood. A prophet is not authorized to cancel mitzvot of the Torah, and if he does so, he must not be obeyed (the

only situation in which a prophet may cancel a certain mitzvah is through an emergency order, such as when Eliyahu built an altar on Mount Carmel during a time when building altars was forbidden. And even in an emergency, it is forbidden to call for idolatry, which is the inherent antithesis of Jewish prophecy. This is how the Rambam, in his preface to the Mishnah, explains the juxtaposition of this verse, “and you shall observe His mitzvot” to the episode of the false prophet).<sup>8</sup>

## 7. The Difficulty of the Test in False Prophecy

The Torah explains the phenomenon of this kind of “prophecy” as a test:<sup>9</sup>

|                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul. (4)</p> | <p>לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֶל דְּבַר הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא<br/> אֹי אֶל חוֹלָם הַחֲלוּם הַהוּא כִּי<br/> מִנְסָה ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶתְכֶם לְדַעַת<br/> הַיִּשְׁכֶּם אֱהָבִים אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם<br/> בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

8 Our parasha describes the struggle between faith in God and idol worship. However, there are other kinds of false prophecy – like those who speak in God’s name and do not contradict the Torah or the mitzvot, but their words are still not God’s words. The next parasha, in chapter 18, addresses this kind of prophet, and we will address this issue in parashat Shoftim.

9 Different commentators have given different explanations as to what aspect of this is a test: According to Ibn Ezra, the test is that God himself did not kill this prophet, but left the work to people, thus allowing them to consider if there is any justice in his words, for otherwise God would have killed him. According to the Rashbam and Ramban, the test is that God did give certain power to such entities in order to test Israel’s faith.

Why must God test Israel's faith? For what purpose does He grant prophetic powers to false prophets, who are capable of leading Israel astray? Surely He is capable of recognizing our love for Him without any such "tests"!

**False  
Prophecies  
and Inner  
Doubt**

In light of our discussion, it seems that the reality of false prophets reflects the perpetual struggle that a person must face in this world, in the existence of הסתר פנים – Divine Concealment. When God reveals Himself to Israel in miracles such as the Exodus from Egypt, and faith is in full force, no false prophets arise in Israel – and even if they do, their words ring false and are rejected. However, when a time is governed by Divine Concealment, questions and doubts may shadow a person's faith. Then, the lines between truth and falsehood become blurred: between true Divine prophecy and lowly pagan prophecy. False prophecy is an outward expression of questions that are rooted in inner doubt. Perhaps because of this, it says "when a prophet arises בקרבך, within you." "בקרבך" – from within you, from inside of you.

A false prophet is not an external messenger who has been sent to test the boundaries of one's faith. A false prophet is the direct product of a world that contains both truth and falsehood – in a reality of Divine Concealment ("הסתר פנים"). A person's main struggle in this world is with falsehood masquerading as truth, which seems equal to truth. In such a situation, low-grade spirituality may appear to be equal to true, Godly spirituality. A person's main

purpose in life is to distinguish between what is false and what is true, to discover which “prophecy” is in fact false, and which conveys the word of God. Once the true reality emerges, and such lies reveal their true face, there is no longer any such struggle – all is clear.

Here, the Torah comes and presents a solution to the problem of the false prophet, which also breaches the figurative wall of Divine Concealment—the deeply rooted faith in God, who brought Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, and recognition of the inner love of God imprinted deeply, deeply within the soul. “The Lord your God is testing you **to find out** whether you **love** Him.” Overcoming the doubt, the false prophet, is achieved through reaching in to the innate knowledge and love of God.

## 8. Conclusion

The Torah presents us with no simple task: to seek out the true word of God, and constantly be attuned to Him; to use spiritual strength to reach His word; and to distinguish between them and the lowly spiritual powers that lead to idolatry and falsehood. With sincere, honest searching, with deep faith and love of God, His word can be reached.