



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,” *M’ h eh T ah* 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,” *Le ‘ Leade h’*). Our parsha asks leaders to

