

TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS

SHIMON BAKON

I will raise up a prophet . . . like you (Moses). I will put My words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I command them (Deut. 18:18). Moses assures the children of Israel that God will raise up prophets for them. These prophets will be like Moses serving as teachers and guides for their generation, instructing that which the Lord puts in their mouths. However, the exact criteria of what constitutes them as true prophets are very scant. *If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the word does not come true, that word was not spoken by the Lord; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously: do not stand in dread of him (Deut. 18:22).*

According to rabbinic tradition, there were 48 prophets and seven prophetesses (TB *Megillah* 14a) [69 according to the Vilna Gaon]. Although the only biblical sign of a true prophet is accurately foretelling the future, some prophets seemed to have gained acceptance among the people without this. For example, Samuel was told by God that the house of Eli would be destroyed (I Sam. 3:11-14) which did come to pass (I Sam. 4:16-18), however the popular acceptance of Samuel as a prophet preceded the fulfillment of his dire prediction (I Sam. 3:20). Similarly, Nathan, well known for his courageous denouncement of King David in the sordid affair of Batsheva, is termed a prophet (II Sam. 7:2) even before he foretells the future, that David will defeat his enemies and his son will build the Temple (II Sam. 7:11-13). Since these prophecies would only be proven to be true a long time later, it may be that other, unrecorded prophecies of more immediate events were given to establish the veracity of these prophets.

Early prophets had many roles, ranging from helping people find mundane lost objects (I Sam. 9:6) to reviving the dead (I Kgs. 17:22, II Kgs. 4:35). However, the performance of a miracle is not proof that the prophet is true (Deut. 13:2-4). With the latter prophets, from Amos and Hosea to Malachi, prophecy as we understand it today came to full fruition. They shared the following characteristics:

1. They served as the religious and moral conscience of Israel, berating the people for their misdeeds in tones "one octave too high" to use the terminology of A.J. Heschel in his magnum opus *The Prophets*.
2. They based their ministry on the firm belief that they were in the counsel (*sod*) of the Lord. To quote Amos: *The Lord will do nothing, but He revealeth His counsel to His servants, the prophets* (Amos 3:7). This sentiment is shared by Jeremiah (23:18).
3. They warned that disaster would strike as punishment for sins committed, which through true penitence could be avoided.
4. On the strength of being in the counsel of the Lord, they would make predictions for the future. Thus, Jeremiah predicted 70 years in advance the downfall of mighty Babylon. *And when the seventy years of Babylon are over, I will take note of you and I will fulfill My promise to bring you back to this place* (Jer. 25:12; 29:10).
5. They had a vision of a glorious future, following a Day of Reckoning.

Today, looking back in hindsight, we know for sure who the true prophets were. However, projecting ourselves back to the time of their ministry, when two "prophets" were speaking in the name of the Lord, proclaiming contrasting messages, who was to be believed to be the true prophet? A classic example of this dilemma is the confrontation of Micaiah vs. Zedekiah at the end of the reign of King Ahab (I Kgs. 22:6-28). In this incident, Deuteronomy 18:20-22 offers a clear solution. *If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the word does not come true, that word was not spoken by the Lord; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously: do not stand in dread of him* (Deut. 18:22).

MICAIAH VS. ZEDEKIAH

How can we know the word which the Lord has spoken? The Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 89a), discussing the question of false prophets, specifically points to Zedekiah who "prophesied what he had not heard", presuming to speak in the name of the Lord, and to Hananiah son of Azzur (Jer. 28:1-17) who will be discussed later on.

Following are the events that led to a confrontation of Micaiah and Zedekiah. King Ahab (874-853 BCE) had to contend with a formidable adversary, King Ben-hadad II of Aram. At one of their military encounters, Ben-hadad, severely beaten in battle, was told by his ministers *We have heard that the kings of the House of Israel are magnanimous kings* (I Kgs 20:31). He surrendered and begged for his life. Ahab complied on condition that Ben-hadad return the cities Ahab lost, a condition that Ben-hadad ignored.

Ahab then approached Jehoshaphat king of Judah with the request of a joint campaign to reconquer Ramot Gilead, a fortified town strategically located on heights commanding the approach of Israel from Transjordan. Jehoshaphat agreed on condition that Ahab inquire of the Lord. Ahab gathered 400 prophets with their leader Zedekiah who unanimously encouraged him to *march and the Lord will deliver (it) into Your Majesty's hands* (I Kgs 22:6). Jehoshaphat was suspicious of the unanimous prophecy and asked if there was another prophet not consulted. Ahab answered: *There is one more man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good for me, only misfortune: Micaiah son of Imlah* (I Kgs 22:8).

Zedekiah, in the presence of both kings, provided himself with iron horns and said, *Thus said the Lord: With these you shall gore the Arameans until you make an end of them* (I Kgs 22:11). Micaiah is brought to the kings and at first joined the chorus of the 400 prophets. However, adjured by Ahab to *tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord* (I Kgs 22:16), he prophesies a major defeat of Israel. Zedekiah is incensed and strikes Micaiah on the cheek and demands *Which way did the spirit of the Lord pass from me to speak with you?* (I Kgs 22:24). To which Micaiah responds: *You'll find out on the day when you try to hide in the innermost room* (I Kgs 22:25).

Not satisfied with the humbling treatment of Micaiah, Ahab orders him to be imprisoned and *his fare to be scant bread and scant water until I come home safe* (I Kgs 22:27). Micaiah retorts: *If you ever come home safe, the Lord has not spoken through me* (I Kgs 22:28). In the ensuing battle, the life of Ahab comes to a sad end. Disguised as an ordinary soldier, he is shot by a random arrow which strikes him between the plates of his armor, mortally wounding him. Heroically propped up in his chariot facing Aram during the

day-long battle, he bleeds to death. Only when he dies does word spread for a general retreat.

It is not recorded what happened to Micaiah. In hindsight, we know who the true prophet was. However, at that instance when a vital decision had to be reached, two kings and their military advisors had to decide which of the two contradictory claimants to speak in the name of the Lord was in fact the true prophet. The encounter of Zedekiah and Micaiah seems to be a classic example of the Deuteronomic definition of a lying prophet: he who *speaks in the name of the Lord and the word does not come true* (Deut. 18:22), but it also highlights the difficulty with this method, one must wait and see if the prophecy comes to pass and only then can we know if the prophet is true.

JEREMIAH AND FALSE PROPHETS

Jeremiah was initiated to be a prophet when the word of the Lord came to him, saying: *Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; Before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the nation* (Jer. 1:5). Reluctantly Jeremiah answers: *I don't know how to speak for I am still a boy* (Jer. 1:6). God then commands: *Go wherever I send you and speak whatever I command you* (1:7). A vision of a boiling pot facing northward, symbolizing disaster coming from kingdoms in the north, shapes his life and ministry of a prophet. He was totally committed to the Lord's mandate and a sure knowledge that disaster looms from the north.

He lived in a most turbulent period, ending in the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah. In the 40 years of his ministry (725 – 685 BCE), he was involved in relentless battles with false prophets and was repeatedly threatened with death. Thus, already as a young man, still living in his hometown Anathoth, his townsmen sought his death.

Jeremiah derided the false prophets for rushing in to utter prophecy not transmitted to them by the Lord. He accused them of leading the people of Israel astray, prophesying by Baal (23:13). *Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophecy to you. They are deluding you; the prophecies they speak are from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord* (23:16). He accused them of lulling the people into a false sense of peace and security, and of encouraging the illusion that the very existence of the Temple, the House of God, was assurance of the safety of Jerusalem.

TEMPLE OF THE LORD, TEMPLE OF THE LORD (JER. 7:3-4)

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, 'The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these buildings' (7:3-4).

The message is clear: God's dwelling in His holy Temple depends on the conduct of the people. Shocked by the worship of Moloch he observed in the disreputable Valley of Ben-hinnom, Jeremiah goes to the court of the House of the Lord and prophesies disaster upon Jerusalem. On hearing this, Pashhur, the priest who was chief officer of the Temple, has Jeremiah flogged and imprisoned.

His agony is recorded in one of the most heartrending chapters of the Bible. After being flogged and imprisoned, he bares his soul and says:

You enticed me O Lord, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and You prevailed. I have become a constant laughingstock, everyone jeers at me . . . For the word of the Lord causes me constant disgrace and contempt. I thought, 'I will not mention Him, no more will I speak in His name.' But His word was like a raging fire in my heart, shut up in my bones; I could not hold it in, I was hopeless (20:7-9).

An even more serious incident occurs in the early reign of King Jehoiakim. Staking his life, Jeremiah stands in the court of the Temple and prophesies that if the people won't obey the Lord, abiding by His teachings, *then I will make this House like Shiloh and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth* (26:6). On hearing this, the priests and the prophets seize Jeremiah shouting *'You shall die!'* (26:8) and bring him to a special session of the officials of Judah, stating that Jeremiah deserves the death penalty. Jeremiah says *'It was the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this House and this city'* (26:12). Then he adds that if the people mend their ways the Lord will surely renounce the decreed punishment. The officials who opposed the false prophets state that Jeremiah does not deserve the death penalty. They quote Micah the Morashtite, who during the reign of King Hezekiah prophesied that *'Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins and the Temple Mount, a shrine in the woods.'* *Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not rather fear the Lord and*

implore the Lord, so that the Lord renounced the punishment He had decreed against them? We are about to do great injury to ourselves! (26:18-19). Jeremiah's life was spared.

PEACE, PEACE WHEN THERE IS NO PEACE (JER. 8:11)

Ever since his vision of the boiling pot (Jer. 1:13), Jeremiah was in dread of the mortal danger looming from the north. He appealed first to King Jehoiakim and then, more urgently, to King Zedekiah to put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon. This call of submission to King Nebuchadnezzar brought Jeremiah into additional conflict with false prophets who either pleaded for reliance on Egypt, stirring up rebellion against Babylon, or lulled the people into a false sense of security. He cried, *Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They are deluding you; the prophecies they speak are from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They declare to men who despise Me: "The Lord has said: "All shall be well with you . . . no evil shall befall you"'* (23:16-17). And in a rare moment of sarcasm, he ridiculed them: *I did not send these prophets, but they rushed in; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied* (23:21).

JEREMIAH VS. HANANIAH BEN AZZUR

Jeremiah 28:1-4 informs us that in the early reign of King Zedekiah, a certain prophet by the name of Hananiah declared in the name of the Lord that God would break the yoke of Babylon and in two years, all the holy vessels of the Temple taken by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would be restored, and the captive King Jeconiah and all the exiles would be returned. Stunned by this prophecy of good tidings, Jeremiah makes two significant statements. He says, *The prophets who lived before you and me from ancient times prophesied war, disaster and pestilence against many lands and great kingdoms* (28:8). This sentence seems incomplete. What is the message Jeremiah wanted to convey? The traditional interpretation is that instilling fear would lead to repentance, thus forestalling disaster. In his second statement, qualifying the Deuteronomic definition of the true prophet, he declares: *If a prophet prophesies good fortune, then only when the word of the prophet comes true can it be known that the Lord really sent him* (28:9). Hananiah's prophecy differs from that of Micaiah vs. Zedekiah in I Kings 22. Verification of Ha-

nahiah's prophecy would have to wait two years while that of Micaiah was immediate. The battle for Ramot Gilead, lost in a day of fighting and Ahab's death in battle revealed who was the true prophet. In his controversy with Hananiah, Jeremiah added a new dimension to the Deuteronomic definition of a true prophet: one who prophesies something good and it comes true. Maimonides, the great master of terse style and lucidity, uses Jeremiah's statement to give the legal definition of a true prophet: "Words of calamity by a prophet, if not coming true, are no refutation of the prophecy. If there is repentance, the Lord will repeal the intended evil. However, assurance of good tidings which don't come true is a sign of a false prophet" (*Hilkhot Ye-sodei ha-Torah* 10:4).

Thus, it is the sad task of the true prophet to foretell disaster in the hope that this will lead to repentance. Ironically, the hope of the true prophet is that his prophecy of bad tidings won't be fulfilled. Jonah is denounced in the Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 89b) as a suppressor of prophecy [*kovesh et nevu'ato*]. His reluctance to preach disaster to Nineveh may have been motivated by his concern that his prophecy of disaster would be annulled by repentance.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes a prophet would make a prediction regarding the immediate future, thus his status could be quickly verified. At other times prophets would speak of events that were months or years away. It may well be that at the time, in those cases, the people could not be sure who the true prophet was based on the Deuteronomic definition. They would have to rely on other indicators until such a time as the prophecy would be proven by being fulfilled. These additional indicators may include the pedigree of the prophet, who his teachers were and what sort of training he received. We know of the institution of the *Benei nevi'im*, a kind of prophet in training under an established prophet (see for example II Kgs 2:7). Additionally, the words of the prophet in question may be compared to those of an established prophet to see if they concur, as Jeremiah counseled, *The prophets who lived before you and me from ancient times prophesied war, disaster and pestilence against many lands and great kingdoms* (28:8). These indicators gave the people a hint to the nature of the prophet as they waited for true confirmation when the prophecy was fulfilled.

