בס"ד

Parshas Shoftim 5778

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*If you put your faith and trust in Him, if you are whole-hearted, He will take care of you.*

Be Whole-Hearted with G-d!

In our parsha, the Torah forbids various types of sorcery, necromancy, and augury. The Torah calls those practices “an abomination.” The nations resort to such practices, but you, the Jewish people, must not. You should be *tamim*, whole-hearted with your G-d. Furthermore, G-d will send prophets, they will tell the people G-d’s commandments. (See Devarim 18: 9-22)

First, let’s discuss sorcery, divination, and the reading of omens. The Rambam (Maimonides) considers all of these things as false. They were devised by idolaters to control and influence the people. The Rambam tells us we should not say that magic and divination really work but the Torah forbids them. Rather, they are empty lies which the Torah forbids us to indulge in.

The Ramban (Nachmanides)takes a totally different approach. He maintains that there are spiritual forces above natural law. Sorcery can manipulate these forces and go against nature. The Torah forbids this because we are not allowed to change natural law. Thus, sorcery is real but strictly forbidden.

Augury and divination also are real although often inexact. The Torah forbids these too because it does not want us to rely on anything other than G-d and G-d’s word. The Ramban says that when the Torah refers to the forbidden practices as an abomination, it only means sorcery and not omens, etc. It is not an abomination for the nations to want to know the future. Nonetheless, the Torah forbids these practices for the Jewish people.

The Abarbanel as well sees sorcery as real. It works either by harnessing the powers of demons or by mischanneling the power of “destructive angels” into doing one’s bidding.

Let’s get back to the earlier passage, “Be *tamim*, be whole-hearted with G-d.”

The Rashbam and the Ramban understand this as a response to the fact that the nations resort to foreseeing the future by means of omens and divination. So how are the Jewish people supposed to know the future? The Torah says you have a much better way to know. I will send prophets. Their vision is perfect, not flawed like the readers of omens. They will tell you what you must know about the future.

Rashi in his comment on verse 14 seems to go along with this view. “G-d has not given you things like these.” (Devarim 14: 18) Rashi comments “[You do not listen] to diviners because G-d rests His presence upon the prophets and the Urim v’Tumim. In other words, the prophet (or the Urim v’Tumim) will tell you the future and there’s no need to consult with diviners.

Yet in his comment on the previous verse, Rashi seems to take another position. “Be whole-hearted with G-d.” (ibid 17) Rashi says, “Walk with Him in whole-heartedness, put your trust in Him, don’t try to investigate the future. Accept whatever happens to you with a whole heart, then you will be His people, His portion.”

Here Rashi is saying G-d does not have to provide you with the means to know the future so that you need not rely on omens. No! You don’t have to worry at all about the future. If you put your faith and trust in Him, if you are whole-hearted, He will take care of you.

I would like to present an argument that the thrust of our text is not that the prophet will tell you the future. Rather, the role of the prophet is to give us instruction in G-d’s word and help us live a G-dly life. The Torah compares the role of the prophet to the role of Moshe (verse 15). The Torah tells us that the Jews were afraid to hear G-d’s word directly (verse 16) and so G-d would speak to them through the prophets (verse 17, 18). So a prophet’s role is to teach the way of G-d. This fits with Rashi’s first interpretation: Trust G-d, and the prophets will lead you in His way.

And yet we find people did go to prophets who were “seers” who would deal with solving their immediate problem. The story of the future king Shaul comes to mind. His father Kish had lost his donkeys, so Shaul went to the prophet Shmuel to ask about the donkeys.

So which is it? Is the prophet the substitute for divination or is he a teacher of G-d’s word?

The answer seems to be: he is both.

On a lower level of human development, the prophet is the “answer-man” to your personal problems, as Rashi says in verse 14. We are nervous. We need answers to our everyday problems. So the Torah says, do not consult with diviners. The prophet will give you the answers to your questions.

But as a person develops religiously and spiritually in his relationship with G-d, he no longer fears the future. He puts his trust in G-d, he is “whole-hearted” as Rashi comments on verse 14. Then the true role of the prophet emerges, the bearer of the word of G-d.

I would like to compare this to a letter the Alter Rebbe wrote (Igeret HaKodesh 22):

The Alter Rebbe decries Chassidim who come to him seeking advice about material matters. The scholars and teachers’ role is to guide his students in the service of Hashem, not to provide answers about physical things. Only a prophet has the power to do that—the Alter Rebbe cites the story of Shaul and the lost donkeys which Shmuel resolved—even the sages of the Mishna and the Talmud do not have that ability.

The fact is that the Alter Rebbe and other Chassidic Rebbes did indeed counsel, advise, and bless concerning physical matters. Isn’t there a contradiction here?

Perhaps the Alter Rebbe was asking the ideal from his Chassidim. Do not be concerned with physical problems. Do what you can and trust in Hashem. Be whole-hearted with G-d. Let the role of the Rebbe be that of a teacher and spiritual guide in a way resembling—not on the same level, of course—the ideal role of the prophet: to inspire, enlighten, and guide the people in serving G-d.

But eventually reality set in. Most people are not able to shrug off their problems in the material world. They are looking for answers to their problems. Reluctantly, I think, the Alter Rebbe agreed to minister to the needs of his people and offer them blessing and guidance for their material needs.

But even as we concede our weakness—our need for answers from prophets or holy men—we must never forget the true role of the prophet and rabbi and Rebbe: to help us rise to a greater consciousness of G-d, to help us live the Torah life as it should really be lived. To be whole-hearted with G-d.