



Parashat Re'ei

Among the many topics covered in Parashat Re'ei is that of the alleged idolatrous prophet, who claims to have received a vision from a pagan deity calling for its worship. The Torah demands that we ignore any "signs" the alleged prophet produces and refuse to obey his instructions: "Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (13:4).

The question immediately arises as to why such an exhortation is necessary. The Torah has already strictly forbidden idolatry in many different contexts. In fact, much of the first half of the Book of Devarim is devoted to warnings against paganism. Why would the Torah find it necessary to issue a particular admonition against obeying the instructions of a self-proclaimed pagan prophet?

The answer very clearly emerges from Maimonides' codification of this law. We cite here from *Sefer Ha-mitzvot (lo ta'aseh 28)*:

We are forbidden from listening to one who prophesies in the name of idolatry, meaning, that we must not inquire of him or ask him and say, "What is your sign?" or "What is your wonder regarding this matter?" as we do for one who prophesies in the name of God. Rather, when we hear him prophesying in its [idolatry's] name, we must warn him about this as is appropriate regarding every sinner and violator...and we may not look upon that wonder that he performs or listen to any of his claims. The prohibition against this is the verse, "Do not listen to the words of that prophet."

In other words, the Torah here does not forbid following the alleged prophet's instructions; this prohibition is clear and obvious. Rather, the Torah here forbids paying any consideration to the prophet. His audience is bidden to outright ignore his contentions and not to allow them to as much as enter the realm of consideration. The prophet is to be immediately rejected and given no opportunity whatsoever to sell his ideological wares.

The *Sefer Ha-chinukh (467)* cites Maimonides' definition of this law and elaborates upon the importance of such a warning. The masses are easily impressed and misled by persuasive, charismatic speakers. Even the most ludicrous of claims can win an attentive ear through external media such as forceful intonation and elegant speech – not to mention so-called "signs" and "wonders." The Torah thus found it necessary to issue a specific warning to pay no regard whatsoever to anyone who delivers a prophetic message that undermines the basic tenets of Jewish faith, for once a person expresses a degree of curiosity or interest, he may easily be misled as a result of the prophet's persuasive tactics.