

Can A Prophet Reveal the Future?

Category: Bamidbar, Be'halos'cha

Confidentiality is an integral part of so many agreements. What is Torah's view of the matter?

The Oath of Confidentiality

Anyone who visits a doctor knows that there's something called confidentiality. This means that the doctor has a duty not to share his patient's medical information with anyone else (except other doctors as necessary). This confidentiality is even part of the physician's oath.

Many doctors today take the Hippocratic Oath. Many Jewish doctors, especially religious ones, prefer the Oath of Maimonides. However, there is a physician's oath written by a Jew of ancient times called Assaf the Healer. Included in Assaf's oath is one of the axioms a doctor is sworn to uphold: "Do not reveal the secret of the man who believes in you."

We also expect the same ethics from attorneys, financial advisors, and so on.

In Judaism, we find the same thing. In the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 29a), a Mishnah tells us that a Jewish court is composed of three judges, and the ruling follows the majority opinion. This is unlike most American courts where one judge presides and makes decisions. In Judaism, cases are generally not given to a solitary judge to decide in the first place, because only G-d can be a solitary judge.

In the American system, the court presents both the majority opinion and minority opinion. However, in the Jewish Beis Din system, the entire court must stand behind the ruling as one man; even those who didn't agree with the ruling are not allowed to let people know that they disagreed.

The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 31b) relates: "A rumor circulated that a certain student revealed something... and Rav Ami removed him from the yeshivah..." The student had studied under Rav Ami for 22 years, but because he had revealed one secret, Rav Ami threw him out.

In many cases, the so-called “statute of limitations” expires after seven years. But in Judaism, if something is confidential it may never be revealed.

G-d’s Secrets

In this week’s Torah portion of Beha’aloscha, we find an even higher level. The Torah tells us that Aharon and Miriam spoke negatively about Moshe, and suddenly G-d mixed into the conversation.

First of all, God praised Moshe: “He is trustworthy throughout My House.” The Rebbe explains: What does *ne’eman*, “trustworthy,” mean? It means that he didn’t reveal confidential matters; he didn’t relay everything he knew. G-d could depend upon Moshe not to reveal secrets.

For example, a prophet knows who has sinned. But he is also charged with the prohibition of telling secrets, and if he tells secrets, then he breaches the trust that he was entrusted with.

A prophet may know how long a person is destined to live. But he does not approach the person and say, “You know, you have such-and-such an amount of time left to live.” Rather, he reveals no secrets whatsoever—unless G-d explicitly tells him to do so. That’s what “He is trustworthy throughout My House” means.

We find the same thing with our Patriarch Yitzchak. When the brothers sold Yosef into slavery and swore not to tell their father, the Torah tells us that Yaakov sat and mourned for his son for many days. The Torah then states, his father wept for him.

Rashi explains that it’s referring to Yitzchak—Yaakov’s father. As Rashi states: “Yitzchok cried for Yaakov’s pain, but he did not mourn [for Yosef] because he knew he was alive.” And why did he not tell Yaakov? On a later verse, Rashi explains: “But Yitzchok, who knew he was alive, said: ‘How can I reveal it when G-d doesn’t want to reveal it to him?’” We see from this that a prophet who knows something does not reveal it.

An even higher level of protecting information is where the prophet has information but knows he is barred from using it or even making decisions based on it. For example, the Talmud (Tractate Brachos 8a) tells us that when King

Chizkiyahu was ill, G-d instructed the prophet Yeshayahu to pay him a get-well visit—but to tell him to go home and die because his time had come.

When he heard this prophecy, the king wanted to know the reason for his punishment. “Why am I getting such a severe reprimand?” he asked. The prophet told him, “Because you did not have children.” The king replied, “I did not have children because I saw with Divine inspiration that I would have unfitting sons.” Indeed, Chizkiyahu’s two sons Menashe and Ravshakay were profoundly sinful people, and Chizkiyahu had pure intentions in not taking a wife—because he didn’t want more sinners in the world. But the prophet Yeshayahu responded, “Why are you meddling in G-d’s secrets?” In other words, you are obligated to do your duties, including the mitzvah of procreating—and G-d will do what is good in His eyes. It’s not up to your free choice.

In other words, even though King Chizkiyahu prophetically knew the future, he still was forbidden to make decisions based on that knowledge.

This is the basis for the Jewish custom not to go to fortune-tellers, astrologers, palm readers and the like—because even if they know the future, it’s not important to us. If G-d hid it from us, He did so for a reason, and it’s better for us not to know it. The same is true of hypnotists who will tell you who you were in a previous life—whether you were a Prince or thief and so on. If G-d hid this from us, it’s a sign that we don’t need to know, and it makes no difference to our day-to-day life. We merely need to serve G-d today—and as for what was and what will be, that doesn’t matter at all. That’s in G-d’s Hands.

There is a famous tale of a man who saw a child walking the street holding a covered pot. He asked the kid, “What’s in the pot?” The child answered. “If my mother wanted you to see what’s in the pot, she wouldn’t have put on the lid.” So too with G-d. If G-d conceals something from us, it’s a sign that it’s good for us.

The Secret Torah

The same thing applies to another thing people constantly ask: Why did G-d do that?

Why did the Holocaust happen? Why is there pain? The true answer is, “Why are you meddling in G-d’s secrets?” If G-d has not revealed the secret to us, we don’t

need to know and it's better if we don't know.

We find this concept in this week's Torah portion. Moshe Rabbeinu complains to G-d, "I cannot bear this entire nation alone!" To which G-d replies, "Gather me 70 men from the elders of Israel and I shall emanate upon them from the spirit which is upon you, and they will bear the burden of the people with you."

Moshe set out and gathered 70 men—and here the story gets interesting. The verses state: "Two men remained in the camp, Eldad and Meidad, and the spirit rested upon them and they prophesied in the camp. And the lad [Moshe's son, Gershom] ran and told Moshe, 'Eldad and Meidad are prophesizing in the camp!'"

So, Joshua said,

"My lord Moshe! Stop them!"

But Moshe replied, "Are you jealous for me?! If only G-d would give the entire nation prophecy!"

When we read the story, we don't understand what all the fuss was about: Why did Moshe's son get angry? And why did Joshua want to stop them?

Rashi explains that they were prophesizing that Moshe would die and that Joshua would introduce the Jews to the Land of Israel. It was only one year after they had left Egypt, and everyone thought that Moshe would lead them to the Land of Israel any minute now—and now along came these two and broke the news. That's why Gershom and Joshua were angry at them: They had betrayed the trust G-d puts in prophets not to reveal secrets.

Even in the Torah itself, we find the concept that part of the Torah itself is a secret.

Kabbalah is referred to as "the secret teaching."

In truth, Moshe did not teach the Kabbalah in public. Neither did King David or Ezra the Scribe or even Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai, the author of the Zohar—even he didn't publicize Kabbalah. This secrecy went to such an extent that the Zohar's existence was not known to the public until about 900 years ago — meaning, its existence was kept a secret for 1,000 years, so much so that when it was revealed to the public, there was a debate that carried on for years on end whether the

Zohar was actually written by Rabbi Shimon or by someone else.

If so, how then is it that today, even Madonna studies Kabbalah?

The Masters of Kabbalah saw that the Jewish people were becoming more and more assimilated and felt we were entering the category of Pikuach Nefesh - a threat to the existence of the Jewish people. Therefore the Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, 1534-1572, the father of Kabbalah as we know it) taught that "it is a mitzvah to reveal this wisdom."

Usually, we're not allowed to reveal secrets - but when it comes to the Kabbalah - secrets of the Torah, not only are you allowed, but as the Arizal says, it's a Mitzvah!