

Prophets of Faith

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I often distinguish between faith and belief and consider myself to be a person of faith. Whereas *belief* implies a degree of certainty that I am uncomfortable with, *faith* embraces doubt. To my ear, the statement that I *believe* something to be true communicates that you *know* something is true. The statement that I have *faith* that something is true suggests that you *desire* or *suspect* something is true. Belief seems restrictive to me—confined by only what is known or can be known—and is at risk of dogmatism.

As a person of faith, I develop a religious language and perspective that extends beyond certainties. One that is not circumscribed by only that which I can know, see, and prove. And, most importantly, a language that encompasses aspirational qualities of the religious imagination and the human heart and soul.

I think of the distinction between faith and belief in the context of Parashat Shofetim which is concerned with the various types of leaders that governed Israelite society: judges, kings, priests, and prophets. Throughout the parashah, the Torah seems concerned with placing limitations upon Israelite leaders to prevent the abuse of power. Judges must not accept bribes in the pursuit of justice. Kings must not accumulate too many horses or wives. Priests have no territorial claims and are supported only through prescribed cultic offerings. Prophets must speak in God's name and may not practice any forms of divination by casting spells or consulting with spirits.

Prophets stand out among the leaders mentioned in Shofetim. Priests and kings are dynastic leaders born into their positions. Judges are appointed by the people, presumably because they demonstrated wisdom and

integrity. Prophets, however, are called into service by God, and therefore must assert their authority over, and prove their legitimacy before, the people. Given this, the question posed by the people in [Deut. 18:21](#) is genuine and vital: How will we know [אִיכָּה גִּדַּעַ] that the word spoken is the word of God?

The question “How will we know?” sounds to my ear like a fundamental question of belief not faith. The people want to know with certainty that the prophet speaks for God. In other words, they want to *believe* in the prophet and not *have faith* that the prophet speaks for God.

In response, the Torah offers two means to test the veracity of a prophet. First, the true prophet speaks in God's name and not in the name of other gods. Second, the prophecy must come true. The first criterion easily is satisfied. Even a false prophet should have enough smarts not to speak in the name of another god, though [Jer. 2:8](#) condemns prophets who apparently spoke in Baal's name. The second criterion is more difficult to fake. The prophet must prove right. There can be no doubt.

I do not blame the people for wanting to believe in (and not solely have faith in) their prophets and for asking the question “How will we know?” I understand their anxiety and desire for certainty. I, too, desire certainty in a world that appears to grow more and more unstable and want to appoint leaders that I know will guide me through it. Yet, unlike my ancient forebearers, I do not expect nor want to believe in my leaders. I want to have faith in them, particularly in my religious leaders. And I want my religious leaders to express themselves with the language of faith, not belief.

I look for religious leaders who strive to hear God, but who don't *know* they speak for God. I seek religious leaders who are sensitive to the mysteries of our existence and who are poets that can express those mysteries. I seek religious leaders who have faith that we are more than the sum of our parts and who offer some vision for what that means. Faith may lack certainty, but it incorporates hope. Expressions of faith offer a hopeful vision of what can be and not what is. I look for religious leaders who can express that vision and that can inspire me to claim my place within that vision.

In my view, Israel's prophets were people of faith and not belief. Their words were more effective than true. They were Israel's poets who were able to see and express the mysteries of the universe. They also expressed hope with images of a restored Israel. Even their visions of doom were, at some level, hopeful as they were meant to inspire repentance and a renewed commitment to God.

Israel's prophets could see beyond what was happening to what was possible. They could see beyond Israel's sins to Israel's potential for good. They were people of faith. There may be no better example of prophetic faith than Isaiah's words from this week's haftarah. Isaiah addresses a decimated Israel who has suffered God's rebuke—an Israel who swoons in the streets and reels from having drunk from the cup of God's wrath ([Isa. 51:20–22](#)).

To this Israel, Isaiah beckons them to arise from the dust and adorn robes of majesty (52:1–2).

To this Israel, the faithful prophet proclaims: “Your watchmen raise their voices. Together, they shout for joy. For every eye will see God's return to Zion. Raise a shout together, Ruins of Jerusalem! For God will comfort the people. God will redeem Jerusalem” (vv. 8–9).

How do we know that the prophet Isaiah speaks the truth? We don't. But I have faith that he does.

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