

From the Ohr Hachayim – Shoftim – 5779

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Moshe tells the B'nei Yisrael that they should never turn to sorcerers and wizards, for those are the ways of "the nations that you are possessing". He reassures the people that they will always have a line to G-d, with the words:

G-d will establish a prophet like me... [He] will place [His] words in his mouth and he will tell you whatever [G-d] commands... (18:14,18)

As the S'forno explains, Moshe assured Am Yisrael that they need not fear the efforts of sorcerers because their destiny is far above anyone's ability to harm them. And that they would continue to be given G-d's instruction after his death on a "need to know" basis: through a navi who would receive G-d's word. That need to know basis is from the words: "I shall tell him my words which will instruct you what to do" (18:18).

It appears that it is this "need to know basis" that Sha'ul HaMelech - at the end of his life - may have overlooked when he sought the services of a sorceress to advise him in the face of the overwhelming enemy Philistine forces stationed by Mount Gilboa:

'Now Shmuel was already dead... Sha'ul saw the Philistine camp and greatly trembled. Sha'ul got no reply from G-d in any form; neither from through dreams, nor through the Urim, nor through the prophets. Sha'ul

therefore sent his servants to find a sorceress to advise him... (Later on when he was with the sorceress of Ein Dor), she said: "an old man is coming up, and he is wearing a robe". Sha'ul knew that it was Shmuel. Shmuel told him that he should have never disturbed him as "G-d has left you and taken the side of adversary... because you did not obey G-d... therefore you are in this situation today. G-d will deliver Israel with you into the hands of the Philistines and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me" (Shmuel I 28:3-19).

Rashi suggests that his main source of Divine instruction was from the codes emanating from the Urim lights on the breastplate of the High Priest. Because of Sha'ul's earlier massacre of the Kohanim at Nov (Shmuel I 22:18) for having given David (his archrival) and his men food supplies, he did not merit help from a Kohanim-derived source. In other words, Sha'ul was not worthy of drinking from the well whose waters he himself had dirtied.

Yet the Ohr Hachayim suggests that Sha'ul HaMelech reasoned in his reading into Moshe's words on prophecy that if no navi was forthcoming, it was permitted to seek help for the future through other means. Yet Sh'muel was not pleased to be brought down to earth (literally) by Sha'ul.

He may have erred for the following reason, as suggested in the following parable. Before an ocean liner sets on a journey, it has to go through extensive maintenance, load up with supplies, and needs expert navigation through

and out of the harbor. Thereafter it sets and follows the compass, and has its huge resources to draw on throughout the voyage, and especially when the storms and gales are unleashed. The crew needs to be well trained and equipped to adapt to the fast-moving and unexpected events. Only towards the end of the voyage, when the destination is in sight, do the coastguard service and tugs trek out to the liner and slowly guide it into the harbor.

Sha'ul had received his instruction 'en route' from Shmuel, and on occasion had gone against the word of that prophet. He was warned that he would lose his kingdom in favor of a worthier person. He knew what he needed to know, and had the resources to find out without subsequently turning to supernatural means.

That is what the text means by Moshe telling the Israelites "I will tell him (the prophet) my words and instruct him what to do". Only when instruction is needed, only on a need to know basis, when guidance is available from no other source.

That is an important message for today. Much as we yearn for an assurance from a navi figure that we are indeed heading in the right direction, our sources for what to do are (as the ship's compass) the Torah and the application of our sacred traditions. That can help to explain the reason for the heavy weighting that we put on Torah learning. Only when we arrive at spiritual destination, Yemot HaMashiach, will a new generation of prophecy 'come to meet us', as a ship

nearing its destination being met by tugboats that ease and guide the voyage into the safe harbor.