

Are Rabbis and Prophets infallible?  
What does God say?

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## The Rabbis

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# DAS TORAH



The first time I heard the concept of “Das Torah” it struck me as strange. It is widely understood as current Torah leaders possessing flawless knowledge.

A friend explained that the great wise men (chachamim) receive divine inspiration allowing them to make correct decisions. This is why they are consulted for answers to our problems. But I asked him if we have greater divine providence today than back in the day of the prophets. Did the prophets – who were of the greatest moral and intellectual character – never make mistakes? If so, how could it be that today when we have no prophecy and even our greatest intellectual minds are nothing in comparison, that our current Rabbis might be infallible? His explanation struck me as well-meaning, but he projected papal infallibility onto Judaism.

I asked Rabbi Israel Chait about this concept. He told me that people have it all wrong. In fact, Rabbi Chait used this weeks Haftorah as a proof. When King David planned to build a permanent house for God, he first consults with Nathan the prophet: “See now I dwell in a house of cedar wood while the Ark of God dwells within a curtain.” (Samuel II 7:2) Nathan the prophet thinks this is a great idea, and in fact he tells King David “Whatever is in your heart go and do for Hashem is with you.” (ibid 7:3) At that

point in time, Nathan, one of our great prophets analyzed the plan presented to him and gave it his blessing. That night Hashem appears to Nathan in a prophecy telling him that David shall not build the Temple. We learn from this prophecy that Nathan mistakenly endorsed David’s plan to build the Temple. Now, if one of our prophets could be so wrong in a case involving such holiness as constructing the Beit Hamikdash, certainly, our current leaders are fallible.

A second proof that our leaders can make mistakes appears in this weeks Torah portion, Shemini. After the death of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron and his remaining sons entirely burn a sacrifice on the altar. This disturbs Moshe. He inquires. There are many different interpretations of what actually happened to the sacrifice, but Aaron explains what happened: “Were I to eat this day’s sin offering, would Hashem approve?” When Moshe heard Aaron’s answer the Torah tells us, “Moshe heard and it was well pleasing in his sight.” (Leviticus 10:20) Clearly, Moshe – our greatest prophet – mistakenly accused Aaron and his sons of wrongdoing. In fact Rashi supports this saying “He admitted and was not ashamed to say ‘I did not hear’ ”.

If the greatest prophet who ever lived made a mistake, how much more so does any wise man who came after him. In fact the greatness of Moshe here, according to Rashi, is his humbleness. He admitted to his brother and nephews that his mistake without hesitation. He did not allow his exalted position to justify any expression of arrogance, or conceal his error. This is a great lesson for all of us. Those who have a misconception of Das Torah must take an example from Moshe Rebbenu.

So what is Das Torah? I believe it is a strength and inspiration given to our leaders in their time of need. This does not make them infallible. I would like to note that on decisions pertaining to Jewish Law (Halacha) we must listen to the Rabbis; even if they tell us our left hand is our right. (They have rights to define our relationship to reality) If each person chooses the law for himself, Judaism will cease to exist. But we are not commanded to give up our minds. We must question the Rabbis and point out inconsistencies in thinking and in law. In the end we are all truth-seekers. We must question even our great Torah Scholars.

Have a good shabbos. ■