

Signs and Omens – Does G-d Send Us Signals Today?

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This essay is from the forthcoming book, "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d Issues and Rituals." This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).

In most religions today and in most normative religious circles, it is taken as a given that G-d no longer communicates with human beings on a daily basis. At one time there was prophecy, and G-d spoke to individual men and woman to relay His messages to the people, but no longer today. And yet, the following incident took place less than a century ago, involving the greatest Torah scholar of his time, Rabbi Yeshaya Karelitz (1878-1953), known as the Chazon Ish.¹

Rabbi Karelitz was the unquestioned leader of Ashkenazic Jewry. He was not a Chasid who believed in supernatural stories, not a great Sephardi Rabbi, whom some followers, even today, attribute "miracles" to them. And, yet, his nephew, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, relates that his uncle sent a messenger to meet an unknown man he was told to find. The messenger could not find the man. So, the Rabbi sent a second and then a third messenger, with the same results. After the third man came back emptyhanded, Rabbi Karelitz said that I will no longer pursue the man, as this is a clear sign from G-d that I should not meet that man. In another incident, the wife of the Chazon Ish was about to serve him his hot lunch, but someone important suddenly came to the door and the lunch had to wait. Afterwards, his wife warmed up the lunch again, but a poor man then appeared at the Rabbi's door. Once again, the lunch got cold. It was reheated, and then, when he was about to eat, a man came in and had to ask the Rabbi a Jewish law question. After the third man left, Rabbi Karelitz said to his wife, that this is a sign from G-d that there is something not kosher in the food, and G-d does not want me to eat it. In fact the food was inspected and found there was food from which maser was not taken.

How are we supposed to understand these stories? Does G-d send human beings these kinds of signals, like the Chazon Ish, telling him how to behave? Does G-d send messages like this only to holy men, or can everyone look for G-d's signal in a similar manner? How do we know when events are merely coincidence, and when it is a true G-dly message? As fantastic as it sounds, traditional Judaism answers these questions in the affirmative. The sources will show that G-d indeed communicates with each person today. But how? It is true that Judaism no longer believes in prophecy today, where the Almighty speaks directly to people.² Even though Judaism believes does believe that the "Holy Spirit-Ruach Hakodesh" exists today, that concept is not about any direct communication or specific sign from G-d. Where do we see that G-d communicates today with mankind and individual Jews?

WE FIND G-D SENDS DAILY MESSAGES IN THE TORAH AND MISHNA

The solution to our difficulty begins with the one time that G-d actually did communicate to every Jew alive at the time, at Mount Sinai, when each Jew heard the "voice" of G-d giving the Ten Commandments. In a verse that describes that one-time Revelation at Mount

¹ "Borchi Nafshi" by Rabbi Zilbershtein (brother-in-law of Rabbi Kanievsky) on Genesis 44:15

² Sanhedrin 11a

Sinai, the Torah says³ that G-d's voice was great/powerful and did not stop. Rashi⁴ explains that the "voice" or communication by G-d at Sinai has never ceased since that moment, and G-d continues to communicate with all Jews and all people every day until today. G-d's message has never ended and has never diminished. Rabbi Yehoshua even articulates the content of G-d's words of the daily message in the Mishne (the specific nature of that message and its significance for all Jews is beyond the scope of this chapter).⁵ Some say G-d communicates with man today with the deeper meanings of the words in the Torah, and that is the reason that the daily blessing before reading the Torah is in present tense: "Blessed are You our Lord who gives the Torah,"⁶ not in the past tense. The Torah has so many layers that it continues to send us messages and ideas for daily living if one looks and studies it deeply enough.⁷ The Torah can and should be understood by each person on a different level, and in this manner, G-d continues to communicate with us daily.

G-D'S DAILY MESSAGES THROUGH EVENTS IN OUR LIVES

But according to Rabbi Karelitz, the form of communication by G-d to people is not restricted to Torah words, but it also includes events in our daily lives. This is another explanation of G-d's non-stop "voice" or messages that began at Sinai and evolved to the events that occur daily in our lives. Jews should interpret what happens to them, for good or bad, as messages that G-d is sending them. Just as G-d spoke to Moses on a frequency unique to Moses, according to Rashi,⁸ inaudible to other humans, perhaps G-d speaks to each of us today through signals and events, different for each person. Shemos Raba and Pesichta D'Rav Kahana write⁹ that this phenomenon was not miraculous for Moses, but, rather, each person has a unique frequency to see and hear G-d.

Is there any precedent in the Torah or scripture where G-d "speaks" to individuals through actions, through signs or signals? Indeed, there is. In the well-known story when Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to search for a wife for Isaac, Eliezer turns to G-d by the well and asks for a sign, to indicate the correct young woman. And Eliezer enumerates the sign in advance – the maiden that will not only offer him a drink, but also provide water for all his animals. But the specific words used by Eliezer indicate that G-d is speaking through the sign: "*Hakre Na Lifanai*-Give me a sign and make it look natural."¹⁰ Later, as Eliezer is quietly watching Rebecca feed the camels, Eliezer again prays "that G-d make his mission successful (through the sign)."

A similar narrative involves Jonathan, son of King Saul. Jonathan was unsure if the Jews would be successful against the mightier Philistines in a particular battle. So, the night before, he stealthily approaches the Philistines to "take their temperature." Jonathan asks G-d to send him a signal. If the Philistines are afraid of the Jews (or, according to one opinion, they are overconfident), they will tell the Jews to "go up," and that would signal to Jonathan that indeed

³ Deuteronomy 5:19

⁴ Rashi commentary on Deuteronomy 5:19

⁵ Mishne Avot 6:2

⁶ Blessing recited before the Torah reading

⁷ Ktav Vekabalah commentary on Deuteronomy 5:19

⁸ Leviticus 1:1, with Rashi commentary

⁹ Darchei Moshe commentary on Leviticus 1:1

¹⁰ Genesis 25:12-22

they could defeat the Philistines. And that is exactly what happened.¹¹ Therefore, we see two places in the text where prominent Jews relied on signals from G-d as a means of communicating with them.

There is an even stranger, more amazing story involving a great Rabbi about interpreting signals from G-d, that has been authenticated by the Steipler Rabbi.¹² Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762-1839) known as Chatam Sofer was certainly not known for belief in supernatural Judaism. And yet, one day, he was writing one of his many responsa. The question involved a Rabbi, Maharam Banet, Rabbi of Nickelsburg, who visited a small town and died there. He was buried immediately in that small town, according to Jewish law. After a few weeks, the people of Nickelsburg became upset, and wanted "their" Rabbi back. They asked Chatam Sofer for permission to re-inter the body in Nickelsburg where he had been Rabbi. Rabbi Sofer penned a responsum indicating that it is permissible to re-inter the body. And just as he completed the last words of his responsum, his ink spilled all over the paper, and made it unreadable. Rabbi Sofer took this "accident" as a clear sign from G-d that his decision was an incorrect one, and he never wrote the letter allowing for the re-interment. A few weeks later, Rabbi Sofer reported, the dead Rabbi Banet appeared to him in a dream. Rabbi Banet explained that when he was a young man, a girl from that small town had been suggested as a bride for the Rabbi. Rabbi Banet rejected the girl and the proposal. Rabbi Banet explained to Rabbi Sofer in the dream that he had been wrong in the manner he rejected the proposal, and G-d punished Rabbi Banet by making him die in that small town. But the "punishment" was only for three months. Now that the three months were over, Rabbi Banet could be re-interred in Nickelsburg. The next day, Rabbi Sofer wrote a new responsum to the people of Nickelsburg, allowing them to re-inter their Rabbi. But the signal by G-d to Rabbi Sofer through the spilled ink, was indeed a correct interpretation on Rabbi Sofer's part. Thus, it seems clear that signals today can be interpreted as messages from G-d.

BUT THE TORAH FORBIDS NICHUSH-OMENS

The Torah specifically forbids a Jew from predicting the future by using any signs or animals.¹³ Rashi explains this verse regarding the non-Jews who used to use a weasel or a bird to predict the future, or, if a piece of bread fell off the table or deer crossed its path (like a black cat), it was an omen for a terrible day. Another verse¹⁴ prohibits the practice of using a sign to guide the future, along with the prohibition of witchcraft and magic. Rashi explains this verse in a similar manner. Rashi based his examples on the Talmud in Sanhedrin, which defines the prohibition of working with these specific and similar omens to predict the future.¹⁵ Sefer Hachinuch explains¹⁶ that by taking such "nonsense" signs by non-G-d believers will only encourage Jews to abandon G-d. Nachmanides stresses¹⁷ that anyone who uses such signs to predict the future is guilty of sin. Based on this patent Torah prohibition and all the explanations by the commentaries, how could Chatam Sofer and Chazon Ish interpret signs in their lives to determine how to proceed next? How could Eliezer and Jonathan use their signs to guide their actions? It seems that they all seem to be sinners!!

¹¹ I Samuel 14:4-14

¹² Borchi Nafshi (Rabbi Zilbershtein), on Genesis 44:15

¹³ Leviticus 19:26 with Rashi commentary

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 18:10-12 with Rashi commentary

¹⁵ Sanhedrin 65b with Rashi commentary

¹⁶ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 249

¹⁷ Ramban commentary on Deuteronomy 18:10

In fact, Rav in the Talmud¹⁸ indeed states that Eliezer and Jonathan were wrong to rely on their signs. But others disagree with Rav, and Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar writes that a "*Siman*-Sign" is permitted and reliable, while a "*Nichush*-Omen" is that which is forbidden. Tosafot try to defend Eliezer and Yonatan by showing that did not rely exclusively on signs.¹⁹ But there seems to be a consensus that a *Siman* sign is permitted but a *Nichush* sign is forbidden. What is the difference? And how does this impact on our discussion?

Before pointing out the key difference between *Siman* and *Nichush*, it is first important to point out a difference in two distinct categories of signs. The sign of interpreting events after they happen is one kind of sign but using a sign to predict future events is a very different kind of sign. When the ink spilled and Chatam Sofer then reacted, it was after the sign took place. But Eliezer gave his sign (offering to feed water to the camels) for a future event and waited for it to happen. Only then acted upon it. Maimonides seems to say that both kinds of signs are forbidden.²⁰ Raavad,²¹ the "nemeses" of Maimonides, attacks him on this ruling, asking how would the great Eliezer and Jonathan be sinners? Radak²² similarly defends the actions of Eliezer and Jonathan. If they had truly erred in using signs to determine their actions, why did G-d then let them both succeed in their quests? Rebecca was indeed the right wife for Yitzchak, and the Jews handily defeated the Philistines. Thus, the uses of these signs must have been correct, according to Radak.

In the following line Rambam gives us another type of sign, which he rules to be valid to use.²³ This is a sign of only looking back at events. Thus, if a person sees blessing in everything that happened after he married his wife, that is a legitimate sign to show that she was the right choice. On this ruling, Rabbi Yosef Karo²⁴ agrees with the above commentaries, and also defends Rambam's rulings, claiming that Maimonides was misinterpreted. In this defense, Rabbi Karo answers our crucial question: when is it a legitimate *Siman*-sign, and when is it the prohibited *Nichush*-omen? Rabbi Karo writes that Maimonides also agrees that a Jew may use signs – if they are logical. If there is a logical conclusion based on the sign to guide one's actions, then it is perfectly justifiable to use such a sign. If the sign is random and not connected to the interpretation, only then it is *Nichush* and forbidden. There is no connection between a piece of bread falling off a table and having a bad day, or a black cat predictive of bad things to come. Thus, those who use these signs are committing a sin. But if a person sees it is overcast outside, says Rabbi Karo, and then decides not to go out because it will rain, that is logical and legitimate as a sign. Chidushei HaRan agrees with this analysis,²⁵ and also explains that the very signs used by Eliezer and Jonathan as perfectly logical. Waiting to find a young woman who has the same kind of kindness as his master Abraham, would be a good predictor of what qualities to look for in a wife. Similarly, if the sign would ascertain that the Philistines were afraid of the Jews (or overconfident), then this is predictive of the defeat of the Philistines. This idea also summarized in the Code of Jewish law.²⁶ Rabbi Karo first cites the *Nichush*-Omens practices clearly forbidden

¹⁸ Chulin 95b with Rashi commentary

¹⁹ Tosafot commentary on Chulin 95b

²⁰ Maimonides, Hilchot Avodah Zara 11:4

²¹ Hasagat Raavad on Maimonides, Hilchot Avodah Zara 11:5

²² Radak commentary on I Samuel 14:9

²³ Maimonides, Hilchot Avodah Zara 11:5

²⁴ Kesef Mishne commentary on Maimonides, Hilchot Avodah Zara 11:4

²⁵ Chidushei HaRan commentary on Chulin 95b

²⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 179:3, 4

(because their occurrence is non-predictive and pure nonsense), and then Rema brings both sides of the argument about the signs used by Eliezer and Jonathan to predict the future, but he seems to side with those who rule that Eliezer and Yonatan were legitimate in doing what they did. Regarding using signs to learn from what already happened, like the stories of Chazon Ish and Chatam Sofer, no one seems to disagree that these kinds of signs are legitimate and not forbidden.

There are two other incidents in the Scripture which seem to strengthen the argument that G-d is sending us signs – if they are logical, then we can draw proper conclusions. Rashi explains, concerning the story about King David,²⁷ where King David had already been saved (quite miraculously by G-d), when he faced down the lions. Now, one Jew was asked by King Saul to face the mighty Goliath and defeat the giant and the Philistines. King David reasoned to himself that he should volunteer for this task, since G-d had already saved him once. David concluded that G-d must have saved David in the past for some higher purpose in the future – to save the entire Jewish people by defeating Goliath. In a similar manner, the verse says²⁸ that Mordechai roamed the outskirts of the palace looking for (a sign?) what would happen to Esther, because he deduced that G-d would not have put his niece in a position to be Queen with a non-Jew without a higher purpose to eventually save the Jewish people.

HOW CAN WE INTERPRET G-D'S SIGNS TODAY IN OUR LIVES?

It is one thing for a great Tzadik like Rabbi Karelitz to understand that if the food got cold three times, G-d was telling him not to eat it. Or if the ink spilled on the writing, the great Rabbi Sofer saw it as a sign from G-d not to send it. But each of us are not as great as these giants. How are we to hone our skills and connect to G-d by interpreting everyday events as signs? How can we know?

A person must train himself or herself to become sensitive to events in one's life, and read the messages being sent daily by G-d. By looking at one's life through the spiritual lenses or spiritual transmitter, many seemingly meaningless or inconsequential events suddenly take on meaning and can be read as a personal message. King Solomon already told Jews that they can see, hear, and understand G-d in every aspect of this world²⁹ if they only pay spiritual attention. One simple but profound example is cited by Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen.³⁰ He says the messages are all around us, and shows the example of Reb Zusha, who had embedded in his heart the spiritual transmitter and spiritual glasses to notice these messages. One day, Reb Zusha passed by a non-Jewish wagon driver who was stuck in the mud, unable to move his wagon. The man called out to Reb Zusha for help, but Reb Zusha replied that he was not able to help the man. The wagon driver then said, "You are certainly able, but you are not willing to help me." Hearing these simple words from the non-Jewish wagon driver, Reb Zusha realized that this was a message from G-d about his own life and his observance of Judaism. These words helped Rabbi Zusha realize that when he felt like he could not do something or succeed in a Mitzvah, the truth is "I am able to do it, but not willing." Reb Zusha understood that if increased his desire, he would accomplish so much more, and he learned this profound message from a non-Jewish wagon driver who may not have even believed in G-d. But Zusha's "antennae" were up, and he

²⁷ I Samuel 17:34-37, Rashi commentary on verse 37

²⁸ Esther 2:11

²⁹ Proverbs 3:6

³⁰ Pri Tzaddik Naso 13

recognized these words as a message from G-d. Each of us need not be a Reb Zusha to take messages from a taxi driver, i.e., the wagon drivers of today.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov writes³¹ that if Jews spend the time and effort to look for these daily hints and messages from G-d, then they will see them and understand what G-d is trying to communicate to them. This will enable them to connect between events that occur in their daily lives and to understand what they are doing right, and what we are doing wrong. Every day, people face many situations that are both spiritual tests by G-d as well as messages that G-d is communicating to them. By turning on their spiritual transmitters to the right frequency, they will hear the messages and understand. We will find the answers or “hints” as Rav Nachman calls them.

But how do people know for sure that G-d is sending them a specific message? One way, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov says,³² is through the concept of equivalency, by seeing a direct connection between their behavior and something that occurs in their lives, especially if these events happen within a short time of each other. How does this law of equivalency (*Midah Kineged Midah*) work? For example, if we give exactly \$8 of Tzedaka (charity) to someone one day, and the next day we find under our bed exactly \$8, that is a message from G-d that we did the right thing. That is the law of equivalency at work. But this happens also when people do something immoral. For example, if they make fun of the way a person walks, and then a few minutes later, he or she stubs his or her toe, causing pain or a strange manner of walking (for a few hours), G-d is sending the message that they were punished (slightly) for making fun of that person’s walk. The message may be sent, but only if people are sensitized to it can they read the message properly. This concept of equivalency is not only an idea of Rabbi Nachman. The Talmud³³ informs us that G-d works in this manner, measure for measure. In fact, the Midrash says³⁴ while most other avenues of communication between G-d and humankind were eliminated, this aspect of how the world works continues unabated.

Of course, if a person is not attuned to the message, it will be sent for naught. There are many people, even religious people, who ignore G-d’s messages, even when staring them in the face. There are two stories which demonstrate this. A religious man caught in a flood prayed to G-d for help. While he was praying, a police officer came to the door and offered to evacuate him, but the man said, “No thanks, Officer, I am religious. I’ll stay here, and G-d will deliver me.” Then, as the floods got higher, a person in a rowboat came by as the waters were rising, and the man said, “No thanks. I am religious. I’ll stay here; G-d will deliver me.” The waters continued to rise, and the man had to climb onto his roof. At last, a helicopter came with a ladder and the pilot told him to climb aboard. He again refused, continued to pray to G-d and said, “I am religious. I’ll stay here, and G-d will deliver me.” Finally, the waters covered him, and he drowned. After he got to heaven, he told G-d how disappointed he was that G-d didn’t answer his prayers. G-d said, “What do you mean I didn’t answer? I sent a police officer, a rowboat, and a helicopter; what else did you want?” This man could not recognize these obvious and direct signs from G-d.

³¹ Likutei Maharan 54:2, Likutei Eitzot, Derech Zikaron

³² Likutei Maharan 187

³³ Sanhedrin 90a

³⁴ Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 9:11

A second story involves a wealthy Jewish businessman who was late for an important meeting in Manhattan. Every parking garage was full, and all the parking spots on the street were taken. If he misses the meeting, he stands to lose a fortune. Finally, he turns to G-d and says, "G-d, if you can get me a parking space in the next two minutes, I will pray in synagogue every day, give a lot to charity and become a much more moral person." Within 20 seconds, a parking space opens up, and the man promptly pulls in. Then he turns to G-d and says, "G-d, never mind. I found a parking space all by myself." Certain people refuse to see or hear the messages.

BUT HOW CAN WE KNOW FOR SURE?

We cannot. No person is so adept at understanding all of G-d's messages, even great Rabbis. Often, we may think events are legitimate messages from G-d, and, yet they are merely random events. Even Rabbi Nachman, who instructed us to look for messages and signs from G-d, writes³⁵ that we should not overdo it, and that common Jews are not always adept at discerning G-d's messages. Sometimes, we do not get it right. But we should continue to try. And, if we are not sure, we might consult a Rabbi who is more adept in this field than we are.

In that vein, one contemporary Rabbi, Yitzchak Zilbershtein (1934, son in law of Rabbi Elyashiv) writes that he was asked about this very question – what is a legitimate signal from G-d, and what is not.³⁶ The question involved an observant man who was scheduled to fly abroad. There was a small fire in his home, in one room, with minimal damage. But the airplane ticket was burned up in a drawer, with little other damage. He asked Rabbi Zilbershtein: is this signal from G-d that he should not fly on that flight? Rabbi Zilbershtein wrote a four-page treatise discussing this question (and if it is *Nichush*-Omen which is forbidden), and concludes it was NOT a sign from G-d, and the man can travel without worry, since there is little direct connection between a burned ticket and an airplane flight weeks later that might be dangerous. Another question about a sign from G-d was posed to this Rabbi³⁷ about a boy who was scheduled for surgery, but the surgeon cancelled at the last minute three times, each time for a different reason (which sounds like the original story of Rabbi Karelitz, whose meal was heated up three times before he concluded to throw it out). The parents asked if this is a sign from G-d not to have the surgery at all, and Rabbi Zilberstein ruled that it was NOT a sign from G-d, since surgeons cancel surgeries all the time.

We see from these situations that; indeed, we should continue to look for the signs from G-d in our daily lives, but when the significance of an event or sign is not clear, a Rabbi should certainly be consulted.

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³⁵ Likutei Maharan 54:2, Likutei Eitzot, Derech Zikaron

³⁶ Chashukei Chemed, Bava Metzia 27b

³⁷ "Borchi Nafshi" by Rabbi Zilbershtein on Genesis 44:15

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