

## Parashat Beha'alotkha 5780

Shabbat Shalom. Towards the end of this Shabbat's Torah reading a few particularly interesting things occur upon which I want to focus. First, as background, once again our ancestors are complaining to Moses who is feeling fed up with all of their complaints and feeling like he cannot handle it. In this particular incident, the people are complaining that in Egypt they had meat and fish to eat and now they don't have any meat or fish. To ease Moshe's burden, G!d instructs him to gather 70 elders and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and G!d will take of the spirit (*ruakh*) that rests upon him and put it upon them.

Another little point of background information – the word for prophet in Hebrew is *navi* as in Eliahu HaNavi (Elijah the prophet). The three letter root of the word for prophet, *navi*, is *nun, bet, aleph*. There are two verb forms which are used to say to prophesy and they are *l'hinaveh* and *l'hitnabeh* – the first is a passive verb and the second is a reflexive form. (Just a reminder that the *bet* and the *vet* are really one letter as is the *kaf* and *khaf* and the *peh* and *feh*). In this passage in our portion it uses the verb *l'hitnabeh* which also can mean to “go into a state of ecstasy or trance.” It's hard to know which is the condition referred to. At any rate, the Torah says that after the *ruakh*, the spirit, rests upon these 70 elders they begin to either “prophesy” or “enter a state of ecstasy,” but it doesn't last long.

Immediately after this passage it mentions that two men, Eldad and Medad, who had remained in the camp and had not been among the 70 elders were also either speaking in ecstasy or prophesying in the camp because the *ruakh*, the spirit, was also resting upon them. A youth ran out to tell Moses saying: “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” Joshua bin Nun, Moshe's attendant since he was young asks Moses to “restrain them” i.e. stop them. Moses responds to Joshua's request to restrain them by saying: “are you jealous for my sake?” He continues saying “would that all of G!d's people would be prophets and that the Eternal One would put the divine spirit upon them.”

I find this to be a fascinating episode.

Last time, I believe, I spoke of *khazal* i.e. the sages of the early rabbinic period i.e. primarily the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrashim. *Khazal* also found this to be an interesting episode. We don't know anything else about Eldad and Medad in the Torah except for this unique event of their prophesying in the camp. However it is immediately preceded by the 70

elders being overcome by a state of prophesy also, albeit for a shorter period of time. First the question arose as to how did Moses pick the 70 elders? There were twelve tribes. If Moses picked five from each that would make 60, ten short. If he chose six from each tribe, that would make 72. If he chose more from one tribe than another that might create a conflict between the tribes. So *khazal* conjectured that Eldad and Medad were the additional two (making 72) who stayed back from the tent of meeting and as a result of their selflessness that achieved a state of *nevuah* (prophecy) that was not short-lived like the 70 others. This issue of selflessness is reinforced by Moshe's response to Joshua. Rather than Moses being jealous of others encroaching on his turf, i.e. "I'm the prophet around here," Moses said the opposite: "would that all G!d's people would be prophets."

What does prophecy mean in our tradition? Generally it meant that someone had such a strong moral vision that they foretold the consequences of right and wrong behavior. The moral message was generally the focus of the words of the prophets, not predicting the future as much as predicting the consequences of good moral/spiritual lives and their opposite. However there's also a Midrash about Joshua's response to the prophesying of Eldad and Medad. Was Joshua just protective of his master's position of prophet as Moses seems to imply when he asks Joshua if Joshua's jealous on Moshe's behalf? In this Midrash Eldad and Medad did have a message regarding the future. They said that Moses would die and Joshua would lead the Jewish people into the land of Israel. Joshua was very uncomfortable with these words and that's why he wanted Moses to restrain Eldad and Medad. So once again we see the quality of selflessness in leaders.

After this incident we have another interesting event. Miriam and Aaron, Moshe's older siblings criticize Moshe apparently not to his face. At first they say it is regarding the Cushite woman he had married. (Cush is generally understood to mean Ethiopia). The sages don't want to see Miriam as unfairly criticizing Moses and conjecture that the criticism is about his neglecting his wife because he's always "at the office." Right after this criticism Miriam and Aaron say: Has the Eternal One only spoke through Moses? Has (G!d) not spoken through us as well?" Immediately after that it says that Moses was "most humble person on the earth." The word is spelt missing one letter. *Khazal* said that when he had to write this down in the Torah he was so embarrassed by it that he could not write the word out completely.

The theme that keeps recurring is that of the humility necessary for ideal leadership. What a contrast with the world we live in, where humility seems to be in hibernation. Every people, every nation needs leadership that is in it for the sake of ideals worth living for, worth believing in, worthy of inspiring others to act beyond their own immediate self-interest. In our world it seems so much is politicized that it's second-nature to doubt the sincerity of people's motivations. Instead of science being a value, it's treated as being politically biased, instead of concern for the welfare of the earth and those that dwell upon it, climate science is treated like it's politically biased. It goes on and on. I'm sure this isn't news to anyone. It's hard not to wonder how large a role money and material gain plays in this politicization of so much that should be beyond that. We see, unfortunately, how those less materially well-off are much more vulnerable to the coronavirus and to its by-products such as losing one's job, health insurance, etc. etc. Obviously we are in a time when our society is in great need of inspirational leaders, people who will unite us, guide us, teach us – on every level of our society from local to international. Our Torah portion teaches us the ideal qualities of a leader – it's something to strive for and hopefully, inspire some exceptional people to selflessly step into positions of leadership. Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mark