

Eldad & Meidad: A Stray Prophecy

Parshat Beha'alotcha 2022 – Kol Nefesh Masorti, Maya Brookes

This week's Parsha includes a variety of interesting narratives. It begins with the instructions to Aaron for lighting the Menorah in the Tabernacle, then there is the consecration of the Levites. Other pieces include how the Israelites would camp and travel in the desert, the complaints about the Manna and the appointment of 70 Elders (or prophets) to assist Moshe in his leadership. The Parsha ends with story of Miriam and Aaron talking about Moshe and wife and the punishment they received as a result. As a side note, the verses discussing Miriam's punishment are used in a technical piece of Gemara that explains how a Kal V'Chomer (an a fortiori inference) works. This is a key method used by the rabbis in deriving halacha by comparing different topics or verses to each other.

Today I'd like to look at the story of the appointment of the elders, specifically at the part where two of the potential elders – Eldad and Meidad – decided not to go to the Tabernacle for the ceremony where they'd receive the power of prophecy. Despite not attending, they gain the ability to prophesy and begin to share prophecies in the civilian camp. This story is told in the following verses:

Numbers 11:23-29

(23) And ה' answered Moses, "Is there a limit to ה' power? You shall soon see whether what I have said happens to you or not!" (24) Moses went out and reported the words of ה' to the people. He gathered seventy of the people's elders and stationed them around the Tent. (25) Then, after coming down in a cloud and speaking to him, ה' drew upon the spirit that was on him and put it upon the seventy participating elders. And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke in ecstasy, but did not continue. (26) Two of the participants, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them—they were among those recorded, but they had not gone out to the Tent—and they spoke in ecstasy in the camp. (27) An assistant ran out and told Moses, saying, "Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!" (28) And Joshua son of Nun, Moses' attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, "My lord Moses, restrain them!" (29) But Moses said to him, "Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all ה's people were prophets, that ה' put [the divine] spirit upon them!"

The Talmudic and Midrashic commentaries have various things to say about this tale. First, the gemara in Sanhedrin, gives 2 different versions of what happened here. In the first version of the story, Moshe was worrying about how to choose 70 elders fairly from 12 tribes because it didn't add up neatly. Taking 5 men from each tribe would only give 60 but taking 6 from each would mean he had 72 which is too many. He was worried about choosing 6 from half the tribes and 5 from the other half because that could cause jealousy between the tribes and may incite fights amongst them. He decided to take 72 men and do a random selection process where there was a box with 72 tickets, 70 said "Zaken" (elder) and 2 were blank. Each of the men would take a ticket; if they picked up one with "Zaken" on it, Moshe said, "You've been chosen by G-D" and if they pulled out a blank, he'd say that G-D didn't need them (for this purpose). Using this method, he considered that everyone would be on board with the selection. In this version of the tale, Eldad and Meidad failed to come and select a ticket but were nonetheless selected as prophets and elders.

Rabi Shimon offers an alternative explanation to this story. He says that Eldad and Meidad were humble and remained in the camp rather than going to the Tabernacle because they were humble and did not think that they deserved the honour of becoming prophets. Seeing their display of humility, G-D decided that they would be the perfect people for such a role, and they gained the ability to prophesy along with those who had gone to the Mishkan with Moshe.

According to both versions of the story, they received the power and ability to prophesy despite their best efforts not to, so why was Yehoshua so irked by their prophesying in the camp? The Ran, a 14th Century commentator on the Talmud, explains that Yehoshua erred in his understanding as to why they didn't come to Mishkan with the others. Yehoshua thought that they were haughty and wanted to gain the ability prophecy by themselves rather than as a derivative of Moshe's power. Therefore, Yehoshua thought that they ought to be locked up to protect the people from their antics. Had he understood that they were truly humble and had only received the same derivative powers as those at the mishkan with Moshe, he may have been less worried.

Interestingly, if you look back at the verses, you see that rather than being offended, Moshe viewed Eldad's and Meidad's prophesying as a positive thing and wished for all the all the Israelites to be similarly blessed with G-D's spirit. On the podcast *Between the Lines*, Rabbi Daniel Silverstein of Applied Jewish Spirituality (an online learning platform) explained that according to Chasidic thought all the Israelites being blessed with spirit of G-d means that they would each be able to have a closer, more personal relationship with G-D similar to that of Moshe. Moshe's wish was that they all could have a personal relationship with G-D.

One final thought, the Midrash explains that when Moshe transferred his power to the elders it was like lighting a candle from a lit one where the original flame does not lose its luminosity. Moshe's power and ability to lead remained intact even while he shared and empowered the others. I think that can be lesson for us all, that by empowering others to something, we don't have lose anything ourselves.