

Filled with the spirit of God

In order to assist Moses in the heavy task of leadership, the Lord instructs him (in Numbers 11:16-30) to gather seventy elders around the Tent of Meeting. There the Lord comes down in a cloud, speaks to Moses, and imparts some of the spirit on him to the seventy elders. *“When the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied”* (v.25).

But something unexpected happens. Two men who are not part of the select group also have the spirit rest on them, and they begin prophesying! Note the reaction of Joshua, and then ponder the response of Moses.

And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”
(Numbers 11:27-29)

Note how Moses reacts to the unexpected prophesying of Eldad and Medad, neither of whom have been officially commissioned.

Isaac Arama¹ views this incident as an example of Moses withstanding the test of jealousy. There is a Talmudic text that says: *“A man envies everyone except his own son and disciple”* (San. 105b). Arama points out that Moses’ humility goes a step further. He does not envy those who were his disciples; in fact, Moses earnestly desires that *all* the people of God should be prophets, and that the Almighty’s spirit should be bestowed upon them without Moses’ authoritative involvement. For most people, this event would arouse jealousy; yet Moses did not display jealousy.

After pondering the passage, what do you make of Arama’s view? Do you agree with it? Is there anything you wish to add, or to debate? For instance, notice how this passage follows on from the previous story of the people’s complaints about the lack of meat. Could it be that what we see in Moses is not a display of heroic humility, but

rather the fatigue of a leader worn down by an argumentative community? Upon hearing of two more people who are *not* conforming to his commands, perhaps he just hasn’t the energy to take it up! In which case his response to Joshua could be interpreted as either sarcasm, or as a plea to “leave them be (and me as well!).”

Not surprisingly, this interpretation does not find traction in the tradition. In fact, as Martin Buber² has pointed out, a tiny detail in the text gives rise to an even stronger affirmation of Arama’s view. While the report is that two men are **prophesying**, Moses replies using not the verb but the noun. *“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”* In other words, Moses is not referring to a fleeting instance of the prophetic urge; rather he is expressing a desire that all should attain the permanent status of prophet, a status which, as he knows full well, involves direct communion with God. From Moses’ example, Hirsch³ concludes:

“We are shown that there is no monopoly on spiritual leadership... The lowliest of the nation shares with the highest the opportunity of being granted Divine inspiration.”

How do you enter this Torah conversation? What details of the text affect your interpretation? What links do you find with other parts of Scripture? For instance, in the voice of the prophet Joel, we read:

“Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” (Joel 2:28-29).

1. Isaac Arama (1420-1494) Spanish Talmudic scholar.
2. Martin Buber, (1878-1965) philosopher.
3. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) German-Jewish rabbinical leader.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York, n.p.d.). Scripture: NRSV.

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