

Parashat Beha'alotecha 5782, 2022:

Of Eldad and Medad

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains Hashem's command to Moshe to create the first Sanhedrin (Supreme Court of Jewish Law), to assist him in his juridic responsibilities:

Then Hashem said to Moshe, "Assemble for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the people's elders and officers, and you shall take them to the Tent of Meeting, and they shall stand there with You. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will increase the spirit that is upon you and bestow it upon them. Then they will bear the burden of the people with you so that you need not bear it alone." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 11:16-17, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Shortly thereafter, Moshe fulfilled Hashem's charge: "Moshe went out and told the people what Hashem had said, and he assembled seventy men of the elders of the people and stood them around the Tent." (11:24) Hashem, in turn, conferred Moshe's additional spirit upon them: "Hashem descended in a cloud and spoke to him [Moshe], and He increased some of the spirit (*haruach*) that was on him and bestowed it on the seventy elders..." (1:25) This *ruach hakodesh* immediately enabled them to prophesy: "And when the spirit rested upon them [the 70 elders], they prophesied, but they did not continue."

At this juncture we are met with Eldad and Medad, whose story diverges from the seventy men of the elders of the people: "Now two men remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the second was Medad, and the spirit rested upon them. They were among those written,

but they did not go out to the Tent, but prophesied in the camp.” (11:26) In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) interpreted the cryptic phrase, “they were among those written,” as “among those chosen for the Sanhedrin.” As such, instead of joining their peers “around the Tent” and vying for a seat in the Sanhedrin, Eldad and Medad remained in the camp, received *ruach hakodesh*, and began to prophesy.

Why did Eldad and Medad elect to remain in the camp? This question is addressed by Rabbi Shimon in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 17a*:

... at the time the Holy One blessed be He said to Moshe, “assemble for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel,” Eldad and Medad said: “We are not fitting for this greatness.” The Holy One blessed be He then said: “Since you have rendered yourselves small [that is, humbled yourselves], I will add greatness to your greatness.” And what greatness did he add to them? All the other prophets [that is, the seventy men of the elders of the people] prophesied and then ceased so doing, they, however, prophesied, continued, and did not stop. (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 17a*, translation and brackets my own)

According to Rabbi Shimon, Eldad and Medad did not believe they were worthy of being members of the Sanhedrin; accordingly, Hashem recognized their exceptional *anavah* (humility) and, like *Moshe Rabbeinu*, rewarded them with the gift of ongoing prophecy. While the Torah is silent regarding the substance of their prophecy, our *Gemara* presents three possible answers, in this order:

- Moshe will die and Yehoshua will bring the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. (Anonymous opinion)
- Abba Chanin said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer that they prophesied about the great piles of *s’lav* (quail) that would soon be found in and around the camp.
- Rav Nachman said: “They were prophesying about the matter of Gog and Magog.” (*Sefer Zechariah 14:1-21*)

These approaches differ both in timeframe and content. Abba Chanin in the name of Rabbi Eliezer focused on the immediate future, wherein the *s'lav* would be dumped before the lusting people and eventuate in a “*makka rabah m'ode*—very mighty blow” as punishment for their unfettered hedonism. (11:33) The anonymous opinion maintained Eldad and Medad prophesied that Yehoshua, rather than Moshe, would lead the people into *Eretz Yisrael*. In stark contrast to these views, Rav Nachman suggested that Eldad and Medad did not speak about the foreseeable future at all but, instead, gave voice to the violent war and universal upheavals that would precede the coming of *Mashiach*. On the aggadic level, this plurality of interpretations is an outstanding example of “*eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chayim*—these and those are the words of the living G-d,” one of the essential principles of Rabbinic analysis that contributes to the dynamic nature of the Torah.

Each of these prophecies reflect the extraordinary level of *ruach hakodesh* bestowed upon Eldad and Medad. As noted earlier, their divine gift was a spiritual *middah k'neged middah (quid pro quo)* that resulted from their thoroughgoing humility. As such, they were true students of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, who is described in our *parasha* as the master of *anavah*: “Now this man Moshe was exceedingly humble (*anav m'ode*), more so than any person on the face of the earth.” (12:3) I believe this *anavah* is the key to understanding the radically different ways Moshe and Yehoshua reacted to Eldad’s and Medad’s prophesying:

The lad ran and told Moshe, saying, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!” Yehoshua the son of Nun, Moshe’s servant from his youth, answered and said, “Moshe, my master, imprison them!” Moshe said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? If only all of Hashem’s people were prophets, and Hashem would bestow His spirit upon them!” (11:27-29 with my emendations)

The narrative of Eldad and Medad teaches a crucial lesson: Authentic *anavah* leads to genuine greatness. This idea was given powerful voice by the Ramban (1194-1270) when he declared

humility the most valuable *middah* (behavioral trait) one can cultivate: “When you consistently act with the *middah* of *anavah*... the spirit and divine illumination of the *Shechinah* will rest upon you, and you will [merit] the World to Come.” (*Iggeret HaRamban*, translation my own) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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