

Be-Ha'alotekha, 2 June 2007
Cambridge, Beth Shalom

The Torah parashah (Numbers 11) provides an extraordinary insight into the nature of leadership. Let me review the narrative with you. Once again, as on so many occasions, the Israelites begin to grumble in the wilderness. They are tired of their monotonous menu: manna every day. They want meat, nothing less will satisfy them. Moses, exasperated, turns to God with two problems. The immediate challenge is to satisfy their demand for better food. But there is a deeper problem as well: Moses confesses that he is simply unable to bear the burdens of leadership alone, particularly since this people is so contentious.

God responds to both issues. Meat will be provided – quail – so much that the people will grow sick of it. More important, a mechanism is introduced that will lighten some of the awesome responsibility that Moses has shouldered alone. Seventy elders are to be gathered and brought to the *ohel mo'ed*, and there they are to receive some of the divine inspiration which had until this point rested exclusively upon Moses. (You will recall that a similar change was instituted through the initiative of Moses' father-in-law Jethro [Exodus 18], but that entailed only the sharing of judicial responsibilities. Here the issue is considerably more serious).

And so we come to what is for me one of the most fascinating vignettes in the Book of Numbers. We are told that two of the seventy men chosen, Eldad and Medad, rather than going with the others to the tent of meeting, remain in the camp. At the moment when the divine spirit rests upon the others, they too begin to prophesy. Someone comes running to report to Moses: "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Joshua sees this as a threat to the leadership of Moses, and counsels decisive action to suppress it: אֲדוֹנָי מֹשֶׁה כְּלָאֵם , My lord Moses, arrest them! But Moses refuses to follow this advice, saying,

הַמִּקְנָא אַתָּה בִּי? וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל עַם יִהְיֶה נְבִיאִים כִּי יִתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת רוּחוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם
"Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit upon them."

Some of the classical commentators have seen this response as an expression of Moses' humility. There are, after all, many leaders who react quite differently when other, younger individuals show talents that are as impressive as their own. These older leaders feel most secure when they believe that they are irreplaceable and no one can do what they can. If others show initiative and imagination, they feel threatened, and they often react defensively, treating the others as rivals, and seeking to undermine their effectiveness, or even to destroy them. Moses shows no such jealousy; he is happy to share with others not only the burdens of leadership but also the psychological rewards of a special relationship with God.

I see in these verses, however, more than merely an indication of Moses' personality. I see here a profound and daring political statement about the nature of government and leadership, with deep resonance for our own time. But in order to appreciate the power of Moses' view, we need to understand the danger that Joshua perceived. For individuals to prophecy in the camp, in public, where everyone could see and hear them, was not merely something that might arouse the jealousy of

Moses. It was a development that could potentially threaten any possibility for a stable government and an ordered society.

What, after all, is a prophet? It is not someone who looks into a crystal ball and makes predictions about the future. A prophet is someone who claims to receive communication directly from God, in a society that believes in and values such communication—unlike our own society, which considers such claims to be symptoms for psychiatric evaluation. And this communication applies not only to the individual's own private life, not just a personal “calling,” but to others as well. Because the message comes from the ultimate source of authority, the prophet cannot concede the right of any human leader to override him. As the Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am noted in his classic essay כהן ונביא, “Priest and Prophet,” the prophet by his nature is unable to compromise. Pragmatic considerations, realism, the interests and needs of others, are all irrelevant. He has heard the voice of God, and everything else must give way.

What would it mean, then, if “all God's people were prophets,” as Moses wishes. Quite simply, it would mean a society in which everyone felt not only the right but the obligation to tell everyone else what to do, but no one was prepared to accept instruction from anyone else. “God speaks to me, why should I listen to what you say?” We will see something of this dynamic in a few weeks when we read the parashah about Korah's challenge to Moses: כל העדה כולם קדושים ובתוכם יהוה , “The entire congregation, all of them, are holy, and God is in their midst” Korah proclaims. Why do you, Moses and Aaron, elevate yourselves above God's congregation?” The argument of a demagogue, yes. But if all God's people were indeed prophets, would it not follow that no one could rule over the others?

In addition, if all of God's people were prophets, everyone would speak with the same authority. When there were contradictory messages—as indeed there were at critical moments of Israelite history—it would be difficult if not impossible to determine which was correct, and therefore how to act. A prophet cannot be overruled by a majority who disagree; he must insist on the validity of his own divine communication.

This was the problem in the time of Jeremiah. When the Babylonians conquered most of Judea and besieged Jerusalem, there were prophets who said that the holy city would not fall, that God would not allow His dwelling place to be violated. We may presume that these prophets sincerely believed that God had given them this message, particularly as it coincided precisely with what Isaiah had said when the Assyrians had besieged Jerusalem more than 100 years earlier. Jeremiah said NO—God had informed him that Jerusalem would be destroyed, there was no point in trying to defend it; God wanted the people to submit and go into exile. How was anyone at the time to decide which was the true message of God?

It was for such reasons that the Rabbis of the Talmudic period refused to recognize the existence of a prophet in their own time. They consigned prophecy to the past, saying, “When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi died, prophecy ceased in Israel (b. Yoma 9b). What they meant by this was not that God suddenly stopped talking—as if the Holy One was suffering from some kind of cosmic laryngitis lasting

from the end of the Biblical period down through the centuries—but rather that they would not recognize the claim of direct communication from God any more. If someone were to show up in the academy and say, “Thus says the Lord, the law is such and such” (as R. Eliezer did, in a passage I discussed here a few months ago), his statement would be ignored, just as it would be if someone appeared before the highest courts in the UK, United States, or Israel and made an argument based on divine communication. Prophecy was simply too dangerous, too uncontrollable, too anarchic, to permit its spread.

Today, not too many people go around claiming to be prophets, or to communicate a message which they have heard directly from God. (Some of you may remember a wonderful movie called “O God,” starring George Burns and John Denver, in which a young man does receive such a communication, and discovers how difficult it is to convince anyone that it is authentic, especially the representatives of the religious establishment.) Nevertheless, the danger in Moses’ statement **וְיִתֵּן כָּל עַם יִהְיֶה נְבִיאִים** is still often apparent. Although they do not pretend to have heard God’s voice, there are many among our people, and others, who still claim that they and they alone are fulfilling God’s will. They make this claim with the absolute certainty of the prophet, and because they feel commanded by ultimate authority, they are not open to rational challenge or pragmatic compromise. And I am not speaking only of Muslims who believe it is God’s will for them to strap explosives to their body and killing themselves along with as many civilians as possible.

There are Jews who believe that God’s honour is being violated if a group of women should pray together and read from a Torah scroll at the Western Wall; that God wants them to berate and curse such women, to throw chairs at them and attack them physically, in order to prevent their worship.

There are Jews who believe that God’s honour is being violated so long as Muslims are entitled to public worship on the site of the Temple Mount; that God wants them to destroy the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque in order to reassert Jewish sovereignty over the holiest of sites and clear the way for a rebuilding of the Temple.

There are Jews who believe that God’s honour is being violated by the toleration of non-Jews as equal citizens of the Jewish State, or even as residents on the soil of the land of Israel; that God wants them to remove the non-Jewish population from the Holy Land by any means necessary, including—if necessary—physical expulsion.

I am sure that all of us share repugnance for these and similar positions. But can we challenge the sincerity of these Jews. Most of them sincerely believe that they represent God’s will as expressed in the authentic Judaism, that they know what God requires and that they are fulfilling God’s commandment, despite the sacrifices it may entail. “Would that all God’s people were prophets”? This is where it could lead.

Yes, Moses’ wish is a dangerous one, as Joshua appreciated. A nation of prophets would not be an easy one to govern; indeed, it would make the very conception of government highly problematic, if not impossible. Joshua’s counsel of

clamping down on potential competition and asserting immediate firm control makes a lot of sense. Yet Moses rejected it. Why?

Moses seems to have understood that despite the dangers in allowing the entire people to feel that they have direct access to God, the alternative was even worse. The alternative is to convince the people that there is only one leader who knows God's will, that no one else has the right to challenge that leader, to express an alternate point of view, to think independently for themselves. The people are to find their fulfilment not as individuals but in their collective commitment to follow the instructions, or the orders, of the prophetic leader. Anyone who refuses or even hesitates is to be pressured into conformity, coerced into obedience, and if necessary destroyed.

Three generations ago, Nazism came to power in Germany as a result of an election in which the National Socialists openly proclaimed the cult of the Führer. They argued and convinced many Germans that parliamentary democracy of the liberal European tradition was inefficient and foolish, a multiplicity of small parties bickering and manoeuvring to form a coalition, debating endlessly while decisive action was necessary, a system incapable by its very nature of dealing with the massive problems at hand. And so the German people got its Führer—charismatic, eloquent, decisive, capable of reviving the economy and restoring Germany national pride—and also of leading Germany to the most monstrous evil of modern times. In recent years we have seen such types of leadership in other contexts as well, perhaps most noticeably in Iran.

Joshua's position is indeed understandable, but Moses' position is ultimately the one that we would choose to live by. It is inefficient, confusing, even dangerous to have a nation of prophets—or in Israeli terms, a nation of prime ministers. But this is the justifiable cost of the commitment to democracy, the belief that human beings have dignity not merely as part of a collective whole but as individuals, the idea that the human mind and the human conscience must remain free from the trammels of any government and any human leader.

Today there are forces in the Islamic world, and even in Israel, that are openly contemptuous of these values. To take the Israeli context: within Kach, Gush Emunim, and the Haredi Ultra-Orthodox community, we hear ideologists insisting that democracy, civil liberties, freedom of the individual conscience, are not “authentic Jewish values” at all, but the perverse legacy of Hellenism and western liberalism and the Enlightenment and other alien systems of thought. In this context, Moses' statement, with its unambiguous rejection of authoritarianism and its daring commitment to the very values sometimes deemed “alien,” is even more important. “Would that all God's people were prophets,” for all its potential to make mischief, is still a better wish, and a more Jewish wish, than “Would that all God's people were sheep, or robots,” blindly following a charismatic leaders who claims exclusive knowledge of the divine will.

The Biblical vision for the future is not merely of a Messiah, a unique leader who will solve all our problems, but of a time when the earth will be filled with knowledge of God. It is a broad, inclusive, universalistic vision, expressed by the prophet Joel in terms that may be a conscious echo of Moses' statement:

והיה אחרי כן אשפוך את רוחי על כל בשר, ונבאו בניכם ובנותיכם,
זקניכם חלומות יחלומון, בחרויכם חזיונות יראו.

Afterward, it shall come to pass, that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your elders shall dream dreams, your youth shall behold great visions.