

A Muse: B'ha-alotecha

“And Moses went out, and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them around the tent....An it came to pass that when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, but they did so no more. But there remained two men in the camp, the name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad; and the spirit rested on them; and they were of them that were recorded, but had not gone out unto the tent; and they prophesied in the camp. And there ran a young man and told Moses and said: ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp’. And Joshua the son of Nun answered and said ‘shut them in’. And Moses said ‘art thou jealous for my sake’? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit on them!”

This week's portion as well as the three subsequent ones (Shelach, Korach and Hukat) relates the record of the Israelites lack of faith, the Dor Hamidbar, the Generation of the Wilderness and Moses' attempt at dealing with the problem. Moses was succumbing to the sheer weight of dealing with his people without the help, advice and guidance of others. He understands that effective leadership can't be achieved by fiat but by co-opting others in to the process. Chapter 11:16 sets up the means and method by which Moses would continue his leadership through delegation by convening 70 of the elders in the Tent of Meeting and sharing the burden of leadership and governance.

Rarely however, does any plan run smoothly. In verse 27 of the same chapter we read of the incident of Eldad and Medad, two men not included in the seventy, but sincere in their intentions and independently prophesied. Joshua seeing them as renegades and unauthorized to serve in the capacity of prophets appealed to Moses to have them silenced, by force if necessary. Moses resisted Joshua's request, rejecting rule by oligarchy and embracing pluralism.

This incident provides us with a lesson by which we can profile good leadership and the use of power versus poor leadership and the abuse of power. Joshua, it would appear, was the quintessential bureaucrat, following the rules to the letter, conservative in thought and actions, not comfortable with change or allowing for freedom of thought and speech even if it was for the general good. Moses on the other hand, was flexible, willing to experiment, interested in propagating freedom of expression even if it was misconstrued by others as a threat to his leadership. He showed strength of character, vision and daring in welcoming the prophesy of these two men, not seated with the seventy in the tent of meeting, but nevertheless prophets in their own right.

It appears that the pluralism as expressed within American Judaism contrasts dramatically with the singular monochromatic image of Judaism as permitted by the Ministry of Religion in Israel. How much more textured and genuine would Jewish practice and belief be in Israel if they espoused that which was taught by Moses.

