"*Beha'alotcha*: What Moses had to contend with!"

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The sidrah Beha'alotcha records a curious story about two people with the equally curious names of Eldad and Medad. The Israelites had murmured against Moses and God regarding the terribly restricted diet of manna that was available to them in the desert. They craved after the 'fleshpots of Egypt,' and the incomparable cuisine that they claimed to have enjoyed there. Knowing full well that he did not have sufficient animals to provide meat for the entire nation, Moses is at his wit's end, and he turns to God, saying, "I can no longer cope single-handedly with this rabble!"

God responds by telling Moses that he should select seventy elders to help him sort out the problem, but that the downside would be that some of Moses' unique spirituality would be removed from him and shared among those elders. This was necessary to enable them to possess the prophetic quality and inspiration required to provide inspired leadership.

A strange thing happened. The Torah states that, as soon as the spirit descended on those elders – *va-yitnabu v'lo yasafu* – 'they started prophesying, and never ceased to do so' (*Nu. 11:25. We follow here the translation of Targum Onkelos, rather than the problematic rendering of the Midrash, as followed by Rashi, 'but did not do so again.' It is difficult to understand how a single utterance of prophecy – subordinate in quality to that of Moses – could possibly have quelled the anger of the rabble, solved the problem of which they complained, and enabled the nation to move forward harmoniously!)*

Now, Eldad and Medad had been among those originally selected as elders (See v.26), however, for reasons unstated, they refused to accept their appointment and did not join together with the others at the appointed place outside the Tent of Meeting. Enigmatically, rather than viewing them as rebels, God nevertheless chose to bestow upon them the full measure of prophetic ability, to the extent that they found themselves prophesying 'in the camp,' among the ordinary folk.

'A certain young man' – again, enigmatically, we are not told who, though the Midrash identifies him with Gershom, son of Moses (See Rashi on 11: 27) – was outraged and ran to Moses, breathlessly telling him of the terrible thing that had occurred. He clearly viewed their absence as an act of rebellion against Moses' leadership, and was so incensed that he could barely articulate more than four words to report what had occurred – *Eldad uMedad mitnab'im ba-machaneh* – "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!" (v.27). Joshua, who was standing by, and who was equally incensed, had even fewer words: *Adoni Mosheh k'la'eim* – "My lord, Moses, imprison them!" (v.28).

En passant, the central Talmudic principle of the authority of the Oral Law – so vehemently rejected by such dissident movements as the ancient Sadducees and Christians, the 8th cent. Karaites, and modern-day progressive Judaism – finds a corroborative echo in Joshua's ready reference to imprisonment, an institution alluded to again in the episode of the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day (Nu. 15:34). In the many previous chapters of the Torah that are devoted to crimes, sins, punishments, and legal procedures, there is not a single reference to the confinement of a transgressor prior to trial and sentence as an essential part of the penal system. However, the fact that, in the context of the latter two episodes, confinement was invoked as an established stage in the

legal process indicates that not every detail of laws and institutions is contained in the Torah and that these were orally transmitted 'from Moses on Sinai.' It should not surprise us that confinement in prison was incorporated into the biblical legal system given that the Israelites were familiar with it from their Egyptian experience (See Gen. 39:20-23; 40:3).

To return to Moses' response to Joshua, a response that reveals his unique humility and the self-effacing way he viewed his role:

> "Why are you so jealous for me? Would that the entire people of God could be prophets if God would but place His spirit upon them!" (11:29).

From the moment of his call, he had never viewed it as a privilege, but rather as an awesome task for which he felt wholly inadequate. And he was thus quite content for his brother Aaron to share the leadership role and for his sole administration of the judiciary to be taken out of his hands and replaced by a comprehensive localised system that enabled the nation to have almost immediate access to justice.

And the depth of his sympathy for his people knew no bounds, to the extent that, in the mould of Abraham, he was even prepared to challenge God's decisions, boldly, and, on occasions, audaciously. And our sidrah provides a notable example of this. When a rabble among the nation led a riot in protest against the same diet of manna miraculously provided by God each day, it galvanised the same feelings of dissatisfaction on the part of every family (See Nu.11:10). Moses, unable to deal with the situation, resorted to the

defence mechanism identified by Freud as 'psychological projection,' involving the projection onto another any responsibility for the problems faced by the sufferer.

So Moses blamed God:

> Moses said to God: "why have you done evil to Your servant; why have I not found favour in Your eyes that You place the burden of this entire people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people, or did I give birth to it that You say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling, to the land the You swore to its forefathers?' Where shall I get meat to give to this entire people… I alone cannot carry this entire nation, for it is too onerous for me! And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now, I beg You, and let me not see [the consequences of] my evil! (Nu. 11:11-15).

Note Moses' repetition of 'this entire people' (*lechol ha'am ha-zeh*), which is also psychologically revealing. He is clearly totally overwhelmed by the challenge of his calling, by his inability to deal with the nation's fractiousness, and with the burden of having to provide for its manifold necessities as they travelled through the sparse and hostile desert. (On *zeh* as a pejorative demonstrative pronoun, see Torah Thoughts to Sidrah

But the continuation of the dialogue between God and Moses reveals the depth of despair to which Moses had sunk, to the extent that when God reassures him and instructs him to tell the nation that He will provide so much meat – in the form of the quails – that "it will come out of your nose and become nauseating to you" (v.20), Moses does not react, as

expected, with relief and gratitude, but rather as if he hasn't heard a word of God's reassurance:

> And Moses said: "Six-hundred-thousand-foot soldiers are the people in whose midst I am, yet You say I shall give them meat…Can sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and be sufficient for them?" (vv.21-22).

Reading Moses' bitter reaction – and apparent lack of faith, hope, or ability to deal with the situation – in the light of the symptoms of clinical depression, one might well conclude that that was precisely his condition at that time. Its main symptoms are listed as, a continuous low mood, feeling hopeless and helpless, having low self-esteem, feeling irritable and intolerant of others, given to angry outbursts, lacking in motivation, finding it difficult to make decisions, feeling anxious and worried even to the extent of a contemplation of suicide (See www. Symptoms clinical-depression NHS). It will be noted that most of the above conditions are reflected in the dialogue.

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That unfortunate tension, occasioned by Moses having been caught in the crossfire between God and the nation, makes it difficult to decide which of the three parties deserves our sympathy most! After all, leaving aside the Midrashic notion that the manna took on whatever taste one desired (*Mechil. Yitro* ch.1), it must be admitted that few of us would relish having to eat, day after day, year after year, decade after decade, the identical ingredients of sweet food, 'tasting like a cake fried in honey' (Ex. 16:31)! So Moses'

attitude to the nation's complaint must have been ambivalent, which, again, might have contributed to his psychological condition.

Our sidrah will be seen to contain a number of episodes that reflect the difficult relationship between the leaders and the led, and between God and His chosen representatives, with the latter frequently finding themselves in that ambivalent situation of having to defend their people's shortcomings as they wilt before God's exacting standards. Thus, the sidrah commences with the account of the tension between Yitro and Moses, with the latter having to oppose his father-in-law's wish to leave the camp and return to his own land following a visit to the Israelite camp (10:29-34). The reason for Moses' opposition is almost impenetrable: 'Inasmuch as you know our encampments in the desert, and you have been as eyes to us' (10:31). This is followed by a reference to a widespread and in-grained malaise of rebelliousness and complaint that gripped the nation. The details, again, are surprisingly suppressed, which is surprising given that the heavenly punishment was dire (See Nu.11:1-3).

And, finally, there is the challenge to Moses' leadership on the part of Miriam and Aaron, one that, because it came from the two people whom he loved the most, must have been 'the unkindest cut of all.' Here also, the precise cause of their dissatisfaction with their brother is unclear. The episode opens with the statement that, 'Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses on account of the Cushite woman he had married, *for he had married a Cushite woman'* (12:1). Not surprisingly, given the suppression of detail in the previous episodes described in the sidrah, we are not told the name of the wife. If it was Tzipporah, why was she not mentioned here by name? and surely it was a bit late in the day to be complaining about his marriage to her decades later! Furthermore, Tzipporah was not a

Cushite (Ethiopian), but a Midianite! And, finally, why the double reference to their marriage?

The Midrashic attempts to unravel these problems are – dare we say it? – typically Midrashic (See Introductory comment of ArtScroll edition to 12:1), though the text does indeed appear to suggest that Moses had now taken a second wife, much to the chagrin of Miriam (in particular) and Aaron. The repetition of the above (italicised) statement should then be construed as a gloss, as if to say: 'For, indeed, he *had* married a Cushite woman!'

But the opaqueness does not end there, because the very next verse states: 'And they said, "Was it only to Moses that God spoke? Did he not speak to us as well?"' We may well ask what this had to do with his marriage! The link between the two has not been adequately explained, but we may speculate that they were both related to the previous issue of Moses' leadership which was not only being challenged by the nation, but, even more vehemently, by Moses himself when complaining to God (See 11:10-15)

We may speculate that, seeing their brother's grip on the leadership loosen, and his mental condition worsen, they concluded that a contributory factor to his inability to deal with the crisis at hand was his recent marriage to an alien woman (for the second time) which would have engendered considerable criticism among the nation, and been a contributory factor to the uprising. Hence the reference to it as a lead-in to the idea that was taking shape in their minds. Whether or not they were intending to step into the breach, or ready themselves if the breach became wider and Moses became incapacitated, their intention was 'to keep it within the family' if the need

arose. They were thus convincing themselves here of their qualifications: “Was it only to Moses that God spoke? Did He not speak to us as well?” (12:2).

On the verse *Kol k’doshav b’yadecha* – ‘All your saints are in your hand’ (Deut. 33:3), the Midrash states, This refers to Israel’s leaders who stand up for their people and give their lives for them.’ That Moses was a supreme saint in that regard is beyond doubt!

Shabbat shalom,

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