

Setting the Stage for Pluralistic Judaism

Parashat Beha'alotecha (Numbers 8:1–12:16)

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The Torah is not a text that generally extols and promotes “the power of the people” over the established hierarchy. G-d usually wins arguments. When G-d is not involved, Moses and his chosen few are generally the ones whose power rules over the Israelites. However, this is not always the case. The religious and political control of the Torah establishment and its hierarchy of G-d, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and the priests is not static. Sometimes those in power create a more populist power arrangement. As rare as that occurs, when the hierarchy actually desires populist change, it tends to be successful. There is no clearer example of that than in this parasha.

In *Beha'alotecha* Moses himself insists that *everyone* should have the opportunity to speak for G-d. If everyone has the chance to prophesy, then certainly, at least in *Beha'alotecha*, everyone in the community can lead. There is remarkable reach in such an idea. If the reader carries the concept to its fullest extent, then certainly the text supports a call to permit LGBT and women the rights of communal integration and leadership.

A more detailed look at the text shows how inclusive and populist the portion is. In chapter 11, Moses, weary of the constant complaining of the Israelites, asks G-d why he has this burden of leadership. He says that the burden is too great and in particularly dramatic and idiosyncratic Jewish guilt-invoking parlance asks G-d to take his life rather than force him to continue as leader. G-d is unusually sympathetic to this guilt-laden appeal and asks Moses to gather seventy elders to whom G-d grants the spirit of prophecy. Prophecy is the most intimate relationship between G-d and humanity because G-d and the prophet become so close that they actually become, for a time, a single voice and spirit. In this relationship G-d's spirit and will actually can be imbued in the words of the prophet. Two men, Eldad and Medad, who had been designated to be with the seventy but did not choose to join the gathering of elders begin prophesying in the camp. Joshua, Moses's lieutenant and in this portion the voice of the established order, asks Moses to restrain them.

In one of the most democratic verses anywhere in the Torah, Moses responds to Joshua, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put the Lord's spirit upon them.” This idea goes beyond the inclusion of Eldad and Medad, who had the right to be among the elders. Moses's revolutionary words include everyone. He goes beyond the idea of any limitation in

number or qualification. He simply says that all of G-d's people should be granted the most exalted status in Judaism, the status of prophets.

Similar sentiments are expressed by the prophet Joel (3:1) when he says, "And it shall come to pass afterward, That I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your elders shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions." Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, the great German Torah scholar, commenting on the *Beha'alotecha* verse wrote, "We are shown that there is no monopoly on spiritual leadership. The spiritual powers granted by G-d are not the privilege of any particular office or status. The lowliest of the nation shares with the highest the opportunity of being granted divine inspiration." Contrary to the normative voice of the tradition, which extols and protects the power of the hierarchy, here Moses reaches out and includes everyone. If Moses wishes that all of the Jewish people were prophets, certainly women and LGBT people are included.

The full meaning of this populist impulse of Moses is more completely fleshed out in chapter 12 when Aaron and Miriam lead a rebellion against Moses because of his marriage to a non-Israelite, a Cushite, possibly, according to scholars, a black woman—someone very different from a traditional member of the Israelite tribe. In responding to the rebellion, the Torah then states that Moses is "the most humble person in all the world." Moses not only would like everyone to have an intimate relationship with G-d; he himself is able and willing to have an intimate relationship with one of those the Torah would refer to as a *stranger*. The Moses of *Beha'alotecha* seems to have no boundaries as to whom he wants to include in the spheres of his life or the life of the Israelite nation. Humility in its purest form is not a practice that mandates putting "oneself down" but rather the practice of lifting everyone up to a place of equality in society and before G-d. Here Moses is doing exactly that.

It appears not only that G-d approves Moses's relationship but also that G-d chastises Miriam and Aaron for disapproving of it. When they complain that they too speak the word of the Lord, G-d tells them that Moses has a special place, a place above that of any other prophet, in G-d's house. Even though everyone can be a prophet, Moses's humility and leadership cause him to relate to G-d in the closest way possible. Even prophets can ascend to higher levels of prophecy if they do the right thing in their lives. In a powerful and symbolic verse, G-d states that Moses and G-d speak "mouth-to-mouth," an expression of utter intimacy. G-d then punishes Miriam by afflicting her with white scales, and it is left to Moses to plead with G-d to heal Miriam.

In this portion Moses's message is that everyone has the right to equality and leadership in G-d's world. If the great prophet-leader attests that all of G-d's people could be prophets, if he is given G-d's affirmation when he marries outside the tribe, then surely the field is open to everyone to be a part of the Israelite nation regardless of his or her sex or sexual inclinations. Homosexuality is not a reason to limit access to religious leadership or to sexual intimacy even in the time of the Torah. In this portion Moses's statements and victories are messages of acceptance and inclusion. And God's rebuke to Aaron and Miriam suggests that G-d too envisions a pluralistic world.