

CHAPTER 4: THE PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE □ PARAGRAPH 2-3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There were once specific "schools" which the young people who were perceived as being gifted and righteous enough to become prophets attended. These students were referred to as "sons of prophets" (see 1 Kings 20:35, 2 Kings 2:3 for example), which is to say that they were prophets' disciples. And they would advance in their coursework, going from class to class, grade to grade, much the way young people do today.

But their curriculum was decidedly different. For not only did they study texts; among other things, they also studied from their master-prophet how to allow the emanation from above to seep into their beings.

They also learned to determine the difference between vague "senses" of something or another and actual communication with the Divine. That came in handy at the very beginning of their training. For though as we pointed out, true prophetic experiences were actually quite tumultuous, nonetheless some earlier communications could be more subdued. But that sometimes left the disciple wondering if he'd been communicated with or not. So he needed to rely on subsequent training to know which was which.

We have a couple of excellent examples of just such early trials in the tradition. The great prophet Samuel was a disciple of the elder prophet Eli when Samuel was a young boy. We're told that the young Samuel was once asleep in the Holy Temple, near his master, when G-d called out to him. "I'm right here!" Samuel responded, and he ran to Eli, thinking that it was his master who was calling him. He asked Eli what he wanted, but Eli (of course) said that he hadn't called him. This happened a few times since, as we're told "Samuel wasn't familiar with G-d yet".

Eli understood and said to Samuel, "Lie down again and if G-d calls you, then say, 'Speak, G-d -- Your servant is listening'". G-d did speak again, Samuel did as he was instructed, and he was indeed granted a visitation (see 1 Samuel 3:3-21).

Moses experienced much the same thing early on in his prophetic career. For he too didn't know he was being communicated to by G-d when he first encountered Him. We're told that "Moses ... led the flock (of sheep) far into the desert when he came upon the mountain of G-d An angel of G-d appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush" that was aflame but didn't burn up. So he turned to look at it more intently -- not knowing what he was looking at -- when "G-d (Himself) called to him from the bush" and began to communicate with him directly (Exodus 3:1-4).

In both instances, the prophet didn't know what he was experiencing at first because his insights weren't yet keen enough, but his training came to the fore after a while and cleared things up for him.

This series is dedicated to the memory of Yitzchak Hehrsh ben Daniel, and Sarah Rivka bas Yaakov Dovid.

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