

ELDAD AND MEIDAD

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

In this week's parshah Moshe Rabbeinu voices his complaint to God Himself about leading the Jewish people on his own:

"Why have You mistreated me like this? Did I do something to anger You that You have given me such a burden? Did I conceive this people? Did I bear them so You could tell me, 'Carry them by your chest as a nurse carries an infant, until we reach the land which You swore to their fathers?' " (Bamidbar 11:11-13)

Apparently God took his complaint seriously and answered him:

"Gather seventy men from the elders of Israel to Me, whom you know to be elders of the people and their leaders. Bring them to the Appointed Tent and let them stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the spirit from upon you and put it upon them. They will share the burden of the people with you, so that you will not need to work alone." (Bamidbar 11:16-17)

Thus, as Rashi explains, without losing any of his own prophecy it was shared with 70 other Jewish leaders to help Moshe Rabbeinu with the burden of leading such a stiff-necked people. Obviously they had not received prophecy on the same level that Moshe Rabbeinu had, because he was the greatest prophet that ever lived. But it had been enough to help them function in their historic roles as assistants to the greatest leader the Jewish people have ever known.

The problem was that God only asked for 70 such elders, creating a potential political problem for Moshe Rabbeinu. There were 12 tribes altogether which did not divide into evenly 70. This meant that at least two of the tribes would only be able to contribute five men to the list, and that would have been a major slight to two of them. This is something that Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to avoid.

His solution was to let God take the rap for it. He decided on a lottery that six men from each of the 12 tribes would draw from, which being clearly a matter of Divine Providence would reduce the amount of contestants from 72 to 70 without Moshe's involvement. If any tribe had a complaint about the results it would have to take the matter up with God Himself, not with Moshe Rabbeinu.

Everything worked as planned—

Moshe went out and told the people what God had said. He gathered the seventy elders of the people, and brought them around the tent. God appeared in a cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit from upon him and gave it to the seventy elders. When the spirit rested upon them they gained prophesy and did not lose it. (Bamidbar 11:24-25)

—everything, that is, except for the following:

Two of the men in the camp [not part of the seventy], Eldad was the name of one and Meidad was the name of the other, also had the spirit rest upon them. They had been included in the list of names [from the elders], but were not chosen to stand by the Tent [with them]. [Yet] they also gained prophesy. The servant ran and told Moshe, "Eldad and Meidad prophesy in the camp!" Yehoshua bin Nun, Moshe's assistant since he was a young man said, "My master Moshe, lock them up!" Moshe answered him, "Are you jealous for me? If only God would make all of His people prophets and give His spirit to them!"
(Bamidbar 11:26-29)

Thus it turns out though only 70 elders were chosen to serve with Moshe Rabbeinu, 72 were chosen to receive prophecy. Since this was God's work, we can assume that it was not a case of the vending machine returning too much change to a purchaser. It had been God's intention that Eldad and Meidad receive prophecy as well at least temporarily, because as Rashi explains, in their humility they had not expected to be included in the 70 elders.

Consequently, Eldad and Meidad ended up getting a higher level of prophecy than the 70 elders who had been chosen. If so, then why all the fuss by the "servant," who had actually been Moshe Rabbeinu's older son Gershom, and Yehoshua bin Nun, his "assistant"? Clearly Eldad and Meidad had been given their prophecy from God Himself, and certainly not by mistake.

The answer has more to do with about what they prophesied than the fact that they did. According to the Midrash, Eldad had spoken about Moshe Rabbeinu dying in the desert and Yehoshua bin Nun leading the Jewish people into Eretz Yisroel. Meidad prophesied about the future onslaught of quails and the trap it would create for the Jewish people. Together they prophesied about the War of Gog and Magog at the End-of-Days as well as the Resurrection of the Dead.

It is interesting to note that until this parshah Eldad and Meidad had been virtual nobodies. In truth, their origin is both curious and controversial.

According to the Targum Yerushalmi, Yocheved, between her two marriages to Amram, wanted to continue having children though her husband, the Gadol HaDor at that time, had divorced to prevent such a thing. Pharaoh was throwing the male children into the Nile river and Amram had decided not to contribute to the cruelty.

Apparently Yocheved had not agreed with his decision. Therefore she married Eltzaphon ben Parnach from the tribe of Dan, from whom she gave birth to two sons: Eldad and Meidad. Eldad and Meidad, it ended up, became the stepbrothers of Aharon HaKohen, Miriam the prophetess, and of course, Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

The obvious question is, how could Yocheved have done such a thing? Even had Amram not been her husband he had still been the Torah leader of her generation who had rendered a decision about giving birth to additional males. How could she have ignored it?

There a couple of points to bring to bear in this discussion. First of all there is the story of Chizkiah HaMelech: What did The Holy One, Blessed is He, do? He brought suffering to Chizkiah and then told Yeshayahu, "Go and visit the sick," as it says, "In those days Chizkiah became ill to the point of death; and Yeshayahu son of Amotz, the prophet came and said to him, 'So says God, Lord of Hosts: Command your house for you shall die and not live.' " (Yeshayahu 38:1).

"Why do I deserve such a severe punishment?" asked Chizkiah.

"Because," answered Yeshayahu, "you did not have children."

"But I saw through prophecy that I would have evil children."

"What business have you with mysteries of God?" (Brochos 10a)

Chizkiah HaMelech had been one of the most righteous kings to ever rule the Jewish people. In fact, God almost made Chizkiah the Moshiach, the ultimate redeemer of the Jewish people after his miraculous defeat of Sancheriv's massive army (Sanhedrin 94a).

Yet, in this account from the Talmud Chizkiah himself is in need of personal redemption. Why? Because Chizkiah tried to second-guess God, avoiding the possibility of giving rise to an evil child by having no children at all. This was in spite of the Torah obligation to procreate, in spite of the fact that the Talmud says that the world was made for the sake of procreation (Temurah 2b).

It didn't make sense to the righteous and wise Chizkiah to bring an evil child into the world. Nevertheless, to God it did, and by abstaining from marriage Chizkiah interfered with the ultimate will of God. Thus God created a situation to solve the impasse: Chizkiah's extreme sickness led to his teshuvah, subsequent marriage, and child: Menashe, who turned the Jewish nation to idol worship for 33 years (Melachim 1:2:1-18), just as Chizkiah's prophecy had foretold!

Why did history require such an evil king, a son who undid all the good his father had worked so hard to accomplish?

The answer: the mysteries of God.

Another case-in-point has to do with Moshe Rabbeinu himself. When Moshe saw that Jewish children were being used in the building mortar in Egypt he complained vehemently to God. So to make a point God allowed only one child to escape such a fate. The child grew up to become Michah who took an idol out of Egypt with him during the exodus, brought it to Eretz Yisroel, and set it up as a place of worship in the territory of Dan. This eventually led to a civil war that cost the Jewish people 124,000 lives.

Back to our story and Amram. Not too long after Amram divorced Yocheved and started a trend, the following occurred:

A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation, and when he saw that the evil Pharaoh had decreed, "Every son that is born you will throw into the river" (Shemos 1:22), he said, "In vain do we labour," so he divorced his wife. Consequently all [the Jewish men] arose and divorced

their wives. His daughter said to him, "Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's, because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas you have decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas you have decreed concerning this world and the World-to-Come. In the case of the evil Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in your case, you are righteous and it is certain that your decree will be fulfilled, as it is said, "You shall also decree a thing, and it shall be established for you!" (Iyov 22:28). As a result, he arose and took his wife back, and they all arose and took their wives back. (Sotah 12a)

In effect, Miriam was saying in words what her mother had been saying in action: We have a mitzvah to bring children into the world. What God does with them is His business and calculation. We may not like what He does with them, but that does not change our mitzvah to bring children into this world and it certainly does not give us the right to second-guess Him. All that God does He does for the good, and in that we must trust above all else.

Few people represented this idea more than Eldad and Meidad whose very existence was a testimony to this belief, since it drove their mother, Yocheved, to remarry and give birth to them. What better time was there for them to make this point, and to vindicate their mother's earlier decision, other than when their step-brother and current Gadol HaDor told God:

"Why have You mistreated me like this? Did I do something to anger You that You have given me such a burden? Did I conceive this people? Did I bear them so You could tell me, 'Carry them by your chest as a nurse carries an infant, until we reach the land which You swore to their fathers?' " (Bamidbar 11:11-13)

God's response to Moshe Rabbeinu was, in effect, "Who says I am mistreating you? Who said that what is happening now is a punishment for angering Me? Why can't there simply be a higher, more mysterious reason for all of this, one that, at present, is beyond you, and is a mystery to later be solved? You know what," said God, "such an attitude will be the cause of your eventual downfall. It will cost you the opportunity to be Moshiach. You will end up dying in the desert, as Eldad will prophesy."

And so Eldad did, and so did Moshe Rabbeinu later die in the desert, after becoming upset during the incident of the rock. When the people angrily demanded water, instead of assuming that the situation was for the ultimate good, Moshe Rabbeinu became angry and hit the rock against God's instructions. Thus, true to Eldad's prophecy, Moshe was punished with death in the desert just short of the border of Eretz Yisroel.

Sometimes in life it seems that we do mitzvos in vain, that our good deeds are for naught. We may even wonder if God appreciates our self-sacrifice to do His will when He allows history to work against us. The answer is as Yeshayahu told Chizkiah: What business do you have with the mysteries of God? He left the mitzvos for us to perform, we must in turn leave the mysteries of life to Him.

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