Would that all the Lord's People were Prophets: Thoughts for Parashat Be-haalotekha

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This week's Torah portion includes a strange episode. In response to Moses' request that others share leadership with him, God rested the spirit of prophecy on 70 elders. Two men, though, continued to prophesy after the others had stopped. " But there remained two men in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad; and the spirit rested upon them...and they prophesied in the camp." When Joshua was informed of the irregular situation, he called upon Moses to arrest Eldad and Medad; he wanted them silenced. Moses responded: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit upon them."

We know nothing else about Eldad and Medad. We don't know why they prophesied longer than the others. We don't know why Joshua was upset. We don't know how Moses' answer to Joshua resolved the crisis.

I offer an interpretation--admittedly of a homiletical nature--based on the names Eldad and Medad. In the Song of Songs, God is symbolically referred to as "Dodi", my beloved. I suggest that the "dad" in both names is a reference to God. Eldad means: toward God; Medad means: away from God.

Prophecy is an overwhelming experience. It entails coming into direct contact with the Infinite and Eternal. Generally, those gifted with a prophetic experience are spiritually strengthened; they return to "normalcy" with a heightened sense of wisdom and responsibility. But everyone does not respond in the same way to prophecy. Eldad and Medad represent two opposite extremes.

Eldad was drawn to God by an overpowering intensity. Once touched by prophecy, he could not return to "normalcy" but wanted to cling ever more closely to God. Eldad was that type of mysical personality who wanted to dwell in the realm of the Lord totally, without being bothered by the mundane realities of this-worldly life. His entire direction was "toward God"--Eldad.

Medad was affected by prophecy in a diametrically opposite way. Coming into direct contact with God caused him to become terrified and confused. The spiritual overload was too great for him to absorb. His response to prophecy was

a tremendous desire to flee from God. He stayed in the camp longer than the others--because he was engaged in a painful spiritual conflict. He wanted to be close to God, yet he was frightened beyond words. His spiritual direction was "away from God"--Medad.

Joshua was bothered by the prolonged prophesying of Eldad and Medad. He believed that these two men created mixed messages, and would confuse the people of Israel. The Israelites had one spiritual leader--Moses. He was expected to give one, clear message, and people were expected to obey. Eldad and Medad were unpredictable characters. Eldad could lead people to extreme mysticism, Medad could lead to extreme rejection of religious experience. Joshua felt that Eldad and Medad were a threat to the smooth functioning of society and to the uni-vocal religious leadership of Moses.

Moses responded: don't worry Joshua, and don't be jealous on my behalf. I wish all of the Israelites could be prophets and experience God first-hand. Most of them would be strengthened by this experience. Yes, it is true that a few may be overwhelmed and may come to extreme views--but this is a risk worth taking. Religious society is not improved by silencing or imprisoning the likes of Eldad and Medad; on the contrary, let everyone prophesy, let everyone try his/her best to come close to God. There is room in our spiritual universe for diverse reactions to prophecy. We ought not condemn or stifle the "eccentrics"--we ought to try to understand them better, and perhaps even learn something from them.

We live in an era when there is no "official" prophecy. Nonetheless, we still have our share of Eldads, Medads, and Joshuas. We have those--like Eldad--who retreat to narrow spiritual ghettos and eschew responsibility for worldly matters. We have those--like Medad--who flee from God's presence because they don't want this confrontation with the Eternal. They focus on this-worldly concerns, and have an aversion to coming close to God. We have those--like Joshua--who think that religious life requires uniform opinions under the leadership of one person or one leadership clique. Such people are afraid of "loose canons", people who cannot be controlled or who think in unconventional ways.

What we need, though, is more who will learn from the wisdom of Moses. Religion is not strengthened by concentrating all power into one authority. Religion is not strengthened by demanding total conformity in thought and deed. Religion is not strengthened by silencing those with different visions and different insights. We need the self-confidence and humility to be able to understand that religion is best served when it strives for intellectual vitality, compassion and inclusiveness.

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Angel for Shabbat