Demagogues and Pedagogues: Thoughts for Parashat Beha'aloteha

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This week's Torah portion includes a strange episode. A "mixed multitude" (asafsuf) riled up the Israelites so that they complained bitterly about their situation. They longed to eat meat. They reminisced about the diet they had in Egypt--fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onion and garlic. The miraculous mannah from heaven, that was delivered to them daily in the wilderness, did not satisfy them.

Rabbinic commentators generally assume that the "asafsuf" was the non-Israelite group that attached itself to Israel at the time of the exodus from Egypt. Yet, this is a problematic assumption. Why would the Israelites have paid attention to complaints raised by the mixed multitude? They could have pointed out the obvious: we were slaves in Egypt! We would much rather eat mannah as free people, than whatever the Egyptians fed us when we were slaves.

The word "asafsuf" has the connotation of "adding on", or "gathering to". Instead of applying this term to the non-Israelites who attached themselves to Israel, I suggest that the term actually refers to charismatic Israelites who gathered people around them. These were demagogues who knew how to incite the public, to play on their fears and anxieties. Even though their message was easily refuted by facts, they were able to cause discontent among the masses by means of their fear-mongering and their complaining. Demagogues have that talent: they can talk nonsense and still arouse the public to panic.

When Moses was confronted by the angry masses of Israelites, he called to God in despair. He could not handle the situation. He needed help.

God replied: "Gather (esfah) unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them." God said He would give these men some of Moses' spirit, so that they would share in leadership with him. By using the word "esfah"--with the same root as "asafsuf"--the Torah is pointing out that demagogues can be quelled only by equally articulate and charismatic opponents who speak truth.

The Torah tells us that Moses "gathered seventy men of the elders of the people". These men "prophesied but they did so no more" (va-yitnabe'u ve-lo yasafu). This verse is generally understood to mean that these men prophesied only this one time, but did not continue with this power subsequently. This would seem odd. Why would their prophecy be so short-lived?

I think "lo yasafu"--from the same root as "asafsuf" and "esfah"-- should be understood to mean: they did not gather people around them; they were not successful against the demagogues. Why were they unsuccessful? Because Moses did not follow God's instructions correctly.

God had commanded Moses to choose seventy men who were elders and who were officers over the people. But when Moses chose these men, the Torah tells us that he chose elders--not that these elders were also officers. The occasion called not just for elders who were wise and reasonable--but for officers, who had the power and courage to act, to stand up against the crowd. To combat demagoguery, a correct message often is not enough. What is needed is strong, persuasive leadership who can rally people around them.

The "asafsuf" were charismatic Israelite trouble-makers and demagogues. Moses was told to gather--"esfah"--a team that could counterbalance the demagogues. But the team he chose did not have the requisite fortitude and eloquence to draw the public to them--"lo yasafu".

The world always seems to have no shortage of demagogues who preach lies and vanities--and who nonetheless gather large crowds around themselves. To combat these demagogues, a true message does not necessarily persuade the masses. What is needed is not only a true message, but the courage and commitment to speak and lead clearly and passionately--to draw the masses to truth and away from demagoguery.

To fight the demagogues--we need real pedagogues, those who teach the truth in a powerful and convincing way.