



The Test of Prophecy

This weekly Torah portion [Be Ha'alot'cha; Num. 8:1-12:16] describes the lighting of the golden candelabrum, the blowing of trumpets to announce the Jubilee year and the carrying of the Ark of the Covenant. At the end of the portion, the people grumble and Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses. In between, we learn lessons that help us distinguish between pure prophecy and secondary prophecy. "And God came down in the cloud, and spoke unto him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, but they did so no more" (Num. 11:25). Here, the difference between prophecy (navua) and secondary prophecy (hitnavut) becomes clear.

Jewish Bible commentators such as Samson Raphael Hirsch and Yehezkel Kaufman explain that the passive form of the Hebrew word for prophecy (hinnaveh) indicates true prophecy -- pure and direct from the Source. The reflexive form (hitnaveh) indicates an indirect form of prophecy, a pale reflection of true prophecy. This is the quality of prophecy experienced by King Saul when he went among the prophets (1 Samuel 19:23-24). The spirit of the true prophets was so strong that the others were infected by it and experienced secondary prophecy.

Another example is found in Numbers 11, where two men begin to prophesy in the camp of the Israelites. Joshua is offended for the sake of the honor of his teacher Moses and asks him to stop them. Moses replies: "Art thou jealous for my sake? Would that all God's people were prophets, that God would put his Spirit upon them" (verse 29). According to the prophet Joel, this is what will happen in the Last Days: "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, and your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit" (Joel 2:28-30).

Dreams contain some of the elements of prophecy. God talks to prophets in their dreams, though not every dream is prophetic. The prophet Jeremiah urged that we carefully "separate the wheat from the chaff." The Jewish commentator Abravanel writes: "How are we able to recognize the true nature of our dreams, to know if the dream was a fantasy or a God-given inspiration? How do we distinguish between the wheat and the chaff? Even though both -- the prophetic dream and the regular human dream -- are of the same nature, there is still a major difference between them. The proof of authenticity lies in the intensity of the experience and clarity of the vision." And Rabbi Gamaliel adds: "If this plan or work should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them" (Acts 5:38, 39).

The fact that even people dedicated to God can be jealous is confirmed by Miriam and Aaron's rebellion against Moses. They were jealous of his level of prophecy: "Does God only speak with Moses?" they ask (Numbers 12:2). They claimed to be upset because Moses was married to a Cushite but this was just an alibi. In fact, they were jealous that Moses was a true prophet and they could only prophesy when they were close to him. As a result of her malicious gossip, Miriam is stricken with leprosy. And despite the fact that Miriam had spoken ill of Moses in front of people, he pleaded: "Dear God, heal her, I pray!" (12:13). Anyone who speaks ill of others becomes well again when the slandered person prays for him. In this we find a sign of a true prophet, one who "loves his enemies and prays for those who persecute him. With this they prove to be sons of the Heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:44, 45).

Finally, prophecy must be tested. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

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