



Prophecy—A Family Business

R. David Kasher – kasher@hadar.org

Parashat BeHa'alotkha 5784

Moshe's unique status as the greatest prophet of Israel is challenged twice in this week's *parashah*—but in neither case does Moshe himself seem to care.

The first incident is reported to Moshe by a young boy,¹ who comes running out of the camp, seemingly panicked, and says:

במדבר י"א:כז

אֵלְדָּד וּמִידָּד מִתְנַבְּאִים בַּמַּחֲנֶה.

Numbers 11:27

“Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!”

It is Moshe's loyal attendant, Yehoshua, who immediately perceives this as a threat that must be stopped, and calls on Moshe to restrain them.

Moshe, however, seems entirely nonplussed, and responds almost nonchalantly:

¹ A tradition found (among other places) in Midrash Tanhuma BeHa'alotkha 12 says this “boy” was Moshe's son Gershom.



במדבר יא:כט

הֲמִקְנָא אֶתָּה לִי וְמִי יִתֵּן כָּל עַם ה' נְבִיאִים כִּי יִתֵּן ה' אֶת רוּחוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם.

Numbers 11:29

“Are you jealous on my account? Would that all of the people of the Eternal were prophets!
Would that the Eternal would place God’s spirit upon them!”

Far from guarding his own special role as the mouthpiece of God, Moshe offers a rather democratic approach to prophecy. In his ideal vision “all of the people” would be prophets!

We should not be too surprised by this response, since Moshe has just complained to God that the burden of his responsibility to the whole people is too much for him to bear. He is so anguished by the job that he actually begs God to kill him. That God does not do, but instead tells Moshe to gather 70 elders:

במדבר יא:יז

וַיִּרְדְּתִי וְדִבַּרְתִּי עִמָּךְ שָׁם וְאָצְלֹתִי מִן הָרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיךָ וְשָׁמַתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם וְנִשְׂאוּ אִתָּךְ בְּמִשְׁא הָעָם וְלֹא תִשָּׂא אֶתָּה לְבַדָּךְ.

Numbers 11:29

And I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw from the spirit that is on you, and I will place it on them, and they will share the burden of the people with you, and you will not bear it alone.

The language here is somewhat vague. What exactly does it mean that some of this “spirit” will be placed onto them? But soon after this, we learn that when that spirit does rest upon them, “וַיִּתְנַבֵּא - they spoke in prophecy.” So now we have 70 new prophets in Israel! No wonder Moshe seems unconcerned with a couple of extras.



Still, we might ask, if there are suddenly a whole new cohort of prophets, why does the Torah take the time to mention these other two, and even to call them out by name?

The first thing about them that jumps out at us is the names themselves: Eldad and Medad, two rhyming words that accentuate the pairing, like Heckle and Jeckle. The Torah wants us to notice something here.

Indeed, there are a whole host of theories as to who this Eldad and Medad are,² but the most interesting are those that place them in the midst of some very complicated family dynamics. Various traditions locate Eldad and Medad as either sons of Moshe's mother,³ Yokheved, or of Moshe's father, Amram.⁴ In other words, they are Moshe's half-siblings. There is a general tendency of *midrashim* to expand upon minor Torah characters and to provide them with a more expansive backstory. But why would these traditions specifically suggest, in various ways, that Moshe's half-siblings are the ones prophesying in the camp? What is the motivation to make this midrashic move?

This interpretive connection serves to frame Eldad and Medad as a kind of foreshadowing for the other great challenge to Moshe's prophetic authority in the *parashah*, which comes in the next chapter from his own **full** siblings Aharon (אהרן) and Miriam (מרים)—who in fact share initials with Eldad (אלדד) and Medad (מידד)!

² See, for example, Bemidbar Rabbah 15, which identifies each of them with one of the tribal chiefs named later in Numbers: "Eldad is Elidad ben Kishon (Numbers 34:21) and Medad is Kemuel ben Shafan (Numbers 34:24)."

³ See Targum Pseudo-Yonatan on Numbers 11:26: "Two men remained in the camp—the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other was Medad, and they were the children of Eltzafan bar Parnah, whom **Yokheved** bore to him during the period in which her husband separated from her, and she married [Eltzafan]—all this before Moshe was born."

⁴ See Da'at Zekeinim (a commentary from the Tosafists) on Numbers 11:27: "**Amram**, the father of Moshe, separated from his wife Yokheved and married another woman, and had two children with her: Eldad and Medad."



We find Aharon and Miriam at first speaking ill of Moshe because they disapprove of the wife he has taken.⁵ But it soon becomes clear that their real concern is being overshadowed by Moshe as a prophet:

במדבר יב:ב

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֶק אַךְ בְּמֹשֶׁה דִּבֶּר ה' הֲלֹא גַם בְּנֹוֹ דִּבֶּר.

Numbers 12:2

They said, “Is it only Moshe that the Eternal has spoken to?! Has [God] not spoken through us as well?”

Aharon and Miriam have a point. They are indeed both prophets. God speaks “to Moshe **and** Aharon” throughout the Exodus narrative. And Miriam is specifically called “מרים הנביאה - Miriam the Prophet,” during the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:20).

But God hears them and, enraged at their audacity, calls them out to the Tent of Meeting and clarifies that, while there may be other prophets, no one is like Moshe:

במדבר יב:ז-ח

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ נָא דְבַרִּי אִם יְהִיֶּה נְבִיאֵכֶם ה' בְּמִרְאָה אֵלָיו אֶתְוַדַּע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ. לֹא כֵן עֲבָדִי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא. כָּה אֶל כָּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְחִידִית וְתַמְנִית ה' יִבִּיט וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יֵרָאֶתם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי בְּמֹשֶׁה.

⁵ There are lots of theories here about why they disapproved. Perhaps the problem was that he took a second wife—and she was a foreigner to boot! Or perhaps they meant Tzipporah, and were criticizing Moshe for devoting himself entirely to his work and not attending to his wife.



Numbers 12:6-8

[God] said, “Please hear My words: When prophets of the Eternal arise among you, I make Myself known to them in a vision, I speak with them in a dream. Not so with My servant Moshe; he is the most trusted member of My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Eternal. How then did you not fear to speak against My servant Moshe!”

So there can be many prophets in Israel. Moshe, Miriam and Aharon, Eldad and Medad and the 70 elders, and more. But there is no one like Moshe. His powers of prophecy were stronger and clearer than anyone else’s; and therefore, he is always the ultimate authority in the Camp of Israel, regardless of whomever else might summon some of his spirit on any given day.

This strong statement of Moshe’s unparalleled prophetic capabilities—which will be repeated in the last lines of the Torah⁶—is important to clarify here, at this point in the narrative. For Sefer Bemidbar is just beginning, and already we are seeing attempts to undermine Moshe’s status as a prophet. But that is a theme that will continue throughout the rest of this book. We will see a much more direct challenge to Moshe’s authority come from Korah (who is, importantly, also a relative of Moshe’s). No wonder God feels the need to establish Moshe as “the most trusted member of my household.”

One question remains, however: **why** was Moshe the greatest of all the prophets? If all of Moshe’s siblings were prophets, if prophecy was available to many others in Israel—even some Heckle and Jeckle duo in the camp—then what was it about Moshe that so clearly surpassed them all?

⁶ Deuteronomy 34:10: “There never arose again a prophet in Israel like Moshe, whom God knew, face to face.”



There are many theories of what it was that made Moshe the greatest of all the prophets.⁷ But I would suggest that one important clue is laid out here at the end of our *parashah*. Just after Aharon and Miriam ask, incredulously, “Has God not spoken to us as well?!” the very next verse, interrupting the flow of the story, reads as a kind of narrators’ aside:

במדבר יב:ג

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

Numbers 12:3

Now the man Moshe was very humble, more than any other person on earth.

This speaks to an essential quality in Moshe that we have been witnessing all along, and one that is directly relevant to his capacity for prophecy. What is different about Moshe’s prophecy is that he does not seem to covet it. He is only too happy to have everyone share in the gift of prophecy, as he reminded us earlier in the *parashah*. Indeed, if we go back to the early stories of Exodus, we will recall that Moshe never wanted the job in the first place, and was only convinced to take it with the assurance that Aharon would share the duty with him: “וְאַהֲרֹן אֶחָיו יִהְיֶה נָבִיאָךְ - And your brother Aharon will be your prophet” (Exodus 7:1).

We generally tend to admire that kind of leader—all too rare—who is not seeking power and status for its own sake, and would prefer not to have to take charge at all. That person we can trust not to put their own interests first. But in the realm of prophecy, that “humility” is more than just a sign of good character—it is the very quality which allows for prophecy. For what is prophecy except being filled with the spirit of God? And in order to be truly filled with God, one must be empty of self. Moshe was the greatest of all the prophets, then, precisely because he did not wish to be.

⁷ See the Rambam, for example, in *Hilkhot Yesodei Torah* 7:6.



We might have expected the Torah to make this point early on in Moshe's story, or to have saved it for praise at the end of his life. Yet by placing this statement about Moshe's humility here, in the midst of a conflict between his siblings, the point becomes even stronger. Sibling rivalry, after all, has been one of the major themes in the Torah from the very beginning. If Moshe were to be threatened by anyone, it would be his own big brother and sister. Yet even here, when they attack him, he says nothing. It is left to God to defend him. As always, Moshe lets God do the talking.

