



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Beha'alotcha 5774

By Rabbi Benjamin Adler

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Eight years ago, while traveling in El Salvador with AJWS as part of a delegation of rabbinical students, I found myself in front of the main cathedral in San Salvador, the capital city. Surrounded by crowds of people in the busy plaza, looking at the massive church with its mix of Spanish and Native American décor, we heard about the Salvadoran people's struggle to live in peace and to create a just society. I can still remember the moment when our guide, an activist and former priest named Chenco Alas, exhorted us to "be prophets" like his friend, the murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero. We looked at each other in bewilderment and may have even suppressed a giggle or two. We weren't even rabbis yet; how could we possibly be expected to live up to the expectation of being prophets? The notion seemed wildly absurd.

Chenco wasn't calling on us to be prophets in the biblical sense—he didn't expect us to engage in direct communication with God like Moses or Isaiah. Indeed, according to the Talmud, that kind of prophecy ended with the prophet Malachi thousands of years ago.¹ Rather, he was urging us, as future religious leaders, to bring a divine call to justice into our communities—as Romero and Martin Luther King, Jr. had done. Although this prospect was more realistic, it still felt daunting.

Over the years I have come to see that there are multiple ways of being a prophet and carrying the message of God's righteousness and compassion. We may not speak directly to God like Moses, and we may not be able to move thousands of people like King, but we can all access our own prophetic voices to influence people to take action in the interest of building a more just world.

Parashat Beha'alotcha offers insight into the different ways of experiencing and sharing prophecy. Moses complains to God that he can no longer take the whining of the people, who in the desert are unsatisfied with manna and demand meat. God's solution is for Moses to gather 70 elders to "share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone."² After the group is gathered, "the Lord came down in a cloud and spoke to him; God drew upon the spirit that was on him and put it upon the seventy elders. And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke in ecstasy, but did not continue."³

It appears from the verse that the 70 elders experience prophecy, but that their prophetic moment is fleeting; they get a taste of what it means for God to speak through them, but nothing more. The medieval commentator Rashi, however, presents two possible readings—one from the *midrash* in Sifrei and the other from the ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah, known as the Targum. According to the *midrash* in Sifrei the elders are given access to the holy spirit on only that day. Alternatively, the Targum understands the verse to mean the exact opposite: once the elders are given the gift of prophecy, they never let it go.⁴

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 11a.

² Numbers 11:17.

³ Numbers 11:25.

⁴ Rashi on Numbers 11:25.

So do the elders continue to be prophets after this moment or not?

Perhaps there is room for both of Rashi's possibilities. I'd like to imagine what transpired as follows: On that day in the desert God withdrew some of God's spirit from Moses and placed it on the elders, enabling them to experience the kind of crystal clear prophecy normally reserved for Moses. But from that day on, the kind of prophecy they delivered changed and evolved. The elders no longer experienced a direct connection to God, but they continued to exercise their collective leadership in other ways to inspire and move the people. I find the story of the elders encouraging because they took the brief moment of intense inspiration and translated it into a sustainable call to leadership. They may not have been Moses, but they helped lift the burden from him so that the Israelites could continue to be God's people and function as a society living according to the laws and values of the Torah.

For our group of rabbinical students, that afternoon in the plaza in front of the cathedral in San Salvador was our moment of inspiration. We were able to take some of Chenchó's spirit—his passion for social change—and incorporate it into our vision as leaders. We may not be Moses—or the next Romero or Martin Luther King, Jr., but we can still be prophets imbued with the divine spirit, possessing the ability to make change if we make our voices loud and clear.

This type of prophecy, the kind given to the elders, has not ceased and will not end as long as we are prepared to speak out. I see it today in the call to "Bring Back Our Girls," which has united so many people around the world to get Boko Haram to return the young women they kidnapped in Nigeria. So many groups like Boko Haram claim to have the prophetic voice and claim that they speak for God. It is up to us to respond that to be a true prophet means to stand for justice and defend human dignity—and, like the elders, to share the burden of others to create a more just society for all.



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