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## Parshat Beha'alotekha: On Gatherings, Good and Bad

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*Parshat Beha'alotekha* is a varied tale, but many vignettes therein aggregate around the theme of gathering, or in Hebrew *aseifa*. In the course of two chapters, *Bemidbar* 11 and 12, we move through deconstructive groupings, constructive assemblies, and finally noble pairings, each time subtly invoking variations of the verb “*la'asof*” (to gather). Let us begin with chapter 11.

The main story of the chapter opens with the following ominous words:

And the riffraff [*asafsuf*] that was in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat!" (Numbers 11:4)

וְהָאֲסֹפֹסִיף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הִתְאוּזוּ תְאוּזוּ וַיִּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ  
גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יַאֲכִלֵנוּ בֶּשֶׂר: (במדבר  
יא:ד)

The *asafsuf*—the plebeians, according to Rashi, who attached themselves to *bnei Yisrael* as they exited Egypt, who intercalated themselves into the group and poisoned it with their complaints—stirred up the grievances of an already whiny nation. Bored by the desert cuisine of manna day after day, appetites stirred by the craving masses, the Israelites turned to Moshe and demanded a meatier menu. “If only we had it as good as we did in Egypt,” they say.

Already deflated by previous complaints, Moshe is at wit’s end with his out-of-control, ungrateful bunch. He turns to God, expresses his inability to continue as is, and even asks God to kill him, rather than force him endure more.

God’s response to the debacle of *asafsuf* is the following:

16 The Lord said to Moses: **Gather** for Me seventy of Israel’s elders of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you. 17 I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone. (Num. 11:16-17)

טז וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲסֹפֶה-לִּי שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ  
מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יִדְעָתָּ כִּי-הֵם זִקְנֵי הָעָם  
וְשִׁטְרֵיו וְלִקְחָתָּ אֹתָם אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהִתְיַצְבוּ שָׁם  
עִמָּךְ: יז וַיֵּרְדְתִי וְדִבַּרְתִּי עִמָּךְ שָׁם וְאֶצְלֵתִי  
מִן-הַרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלַיךָ וְשִׁמַּתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתְּךָ  
בְּמִשְׁאֵל הָעָם וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא אֶתְהָ לְבַדְּךָ: (במדבר  
יא:טז-טז)

Apparently, the antidote to a pernicious grouping is a pure one. Moshe is to fight numbers with numbers. He is to neutralize the negative energy with positive force, and turn the hunger for meat into an appetite for spirit. So seventy elders are called to prophesy simultaneously, drawing from Moshe’s own *ruach*—his unique communion with God—to feed their own holy visions. In creating a group full of godliness, they allay Moshe’s own feelings of burden and isolation, and they counter the toxic model of the *asafsuf* with comradeship, cohesion, and joy. The result was powerful: “וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יָסְפוּ.” “They prophesied—or spoke in ecstasy, according to some translations—but did not continue. (Num. 11:25) According to the Gemara in Sanhedrin 17a, this was a *sui generis* experience of unity and transcendence, a model of purposeful joining for all Israel to see and to emulate.

But there is one more gathering in chapter 11--one smaller, more intimate, and more lasting--that immediately follows.

And two men remained in the camp. The name of one was Eldad and the name of the other was Medad. And the spirit rested upon them—they were among those inscribed, but they had not gone out to the Tent—and they prophesied in the camp. (Num. 11:26)

כו וַיִּשָּׂארוּ שְׁנֵי-אֲנָשִׁים | בְּמַחֲנֵה שֵׁם הָאֶחָד | אֶלְדָּד  
וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי מִיָּדָד וַתָּנוּחַ עֲלֵיהֶם הַרוּחַ וְהֵמָּה בְּכַתְּבִים  
וְלֹא יָצְאוּ הָאֶהָלָה וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ בְּמַחֲנֵה: (במדבר יא:כו)

Two lonely elders, too humble to join the public spectacle of spiritual solidarity, chose to remain in the camp, closer to the home front. They opted not to separate themselves from their community to seek out an other-worldly God, but to entrench themselves within the world, amongst their people. God might be calling, but local life and modest needs, alas, exerted a stronger pull. The result of such quiet resistance? God rewarded their self-effacing, other-affirming behavior, according to the Gemara, and came to meet them *where they were*. “The spirit rested upon them,” says the verse, suggesting that God’s own spirit visited them, not Moshe’s, as in the case of the elders. And it would not be a fleeting flash of God-inflected glory, as it was for the elders, but a sustained state of elevation that they would live in over time. “*Eldad u-Medad mitnab'im ba'machane,*” a witness reports. “Eldad and Medad are prophesying [continuously] in the camp.” Open for the world to see, these two would forever confront and challenge the people to take notice of a new form of prophesy—prophesy of the masses, on their own turf.

Joshua, Moshe’s protective successor could not handle this image of sustained ecstasy and asked Moshe to stop them. “*Kila'em,*” “Imprison them!,” he says (Num. 11:28). But Moshe understood that this form of prophesy—inside the camp, amongst people—would stand the test of time and that this would be the realization of a redemptive, radical vision. He declares,

...Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would place His spirit upon them. (Num. 11:29)
 
 ... ומי יתן כל־עם יהוה נביאים כִּי־יתן יהוה אֶת־רוחוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם: (במדבר יא:כט)

If only the whole camp, not just the elite elders, could experience God where they are at, in their homes and fields and paths. Not in the exclusive Tent of Meeting, and not in a temporary incommunicable form, but in the very places where they gather and live and love, and in a language that would stick.

Our chapter comes to a close:

And Moshe was **gathered** back into the camp, he and the elders of Israel. (Num. 11:30)
 
 וַיֵּאסֶף מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הוּא וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (במדבר יא:ל)

Alas, the grumbling mob headed by the *asafsuf*, tempered by the gathered elders at the Tent of Meeting, now gathers Moshe and company into their midst, for that is where they all truly belong. Eldad and Medad modeled the best kind of gathering—two unassuming souls prophesying, communing with God and with one another without end. That’s the real antidote to ill-intended groups and the real pathway toward transcendent living, it seems: fortification within a more intimate union, inside of the camp, amongst others. Moshe who threw up his hands in frustration at the beginning of our story finally learns where truly constructive groups reside and how relationships might be sustained. “*Va’ye’asef Moshe el ha-machane.*”

Prophesy might not be the most accessible model for healthy communal living, but Eldad and Medad’s tale of humble vision is at least instructive. It tells us something about human potential to achieve deep communion and transformation. It tells us that where we meet God, we also meet other human beings, sometimes in ecstatic experience and sometimes in homey, quiet places. And it tells us that in the camp or in the tent, privately or publicly, there are relationships to be had that will change our lives and the lives of those around us. May we be blessed to find them.



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