



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

The Parsha Discussion: Beha'alotecha Moses in Crisis

Moses is in crisis. He feels all alone. He feels worthless. You see, the nation is traveling to the promised land, to fulfill their historic destiny, but instead of appreciating the greatness of the moment, they care only about the “now.” They are consumed by a “gluttonous craving” for meat.

If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic... And Moses said to the Lord, ...Did I conceive this people, or give birth to them that You say to me, Carry them as an adopted father carries the suckling child ... to the land that You have promised... I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me... kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my misfortune! (11:11-15)

Moses imagines the nation as an infant who needs constant attention, as God’s child that he has been forced to adopt and carry. He asks to die rather than to continue as the national leader. He gives up.

How will God alleviate Moses’ distress?

The Lord said to Moses, Gather seventy of Israel’s elders ... and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them stand there with you. I will descend and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and place it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone.

And so, please raise the following for discussion:

- How does the solution of the seventy elders solve Moses’ problem?
- In what manner will these seventy elders “share the burden of the people”?
- What is meant by the phrase: “I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them”?

- [An added question: Do we witness these seventy elders functioning subsequently in the book of *Bamidbar* (Numbers), for example in the spies episode or the *Korach* controversy? If not, then what might the effect have been of this single event?

Approach 1. Moses' advocates

These elders did not hear the divine communication directly, nor did God appear to them in a dream or vision. Rather God spoke with Moses and from that spirit they became aware of the divine communication to Moses... and it would seem that throughout the lives of these elders, they had the knowledge of all that God commanded Moses in matters that pertained to public affairs ... thus 'they shall share the burden of the people with you' and as such they could communicate Moses' each to their own tribe. (Ramban 11:17)

In the mindset of the *Ramban*, these seventy elders become spectators to the great communication between God and Moses. They understand and identify with God's instructions to Moses and appreciate their rationale and objective. As such they can independently support Moses and the directives that he will issue to the nation. Hence, these seventy elders become partners and a support system for Moses, and advocates for God's leadership to the nation.

Approach 2: The Power of Giving

At that moment Moses was like a flame in a lantern. Everyone lit their candle from it, but it lacked nothing. (Rashi, quoting the Sifrei #93)

What is this metaphor that is offered by the *Midrash*? We might suggest the following reading: At times a leader is confronted by relentless opposition. He or she begins to doubt their self-worth and influence. Are my ideas valuable? Is anybody following? Is anyone receptive to my message?

The seventy elders all receive their prophecy from Moses and Moses empowers and illuminates them all, but loses nothing in this overflow of prophecy. This dramatic moment forces Moses to realize and internalize his immense capability and influence. By giving to others, by sharing, mentoring and guiding others, understanding what others might receive from you; one can rediscover one's own talents and potential.

There is a fascinating debate as to whether these seventy leaders continued to prophesize over time or whether this was a singular event (see Rashi's two readings of v.25.) Even as a unique, one-time experience, the sharing, overflow and magnification of Moses' prophecy would have functioned as a significant counterweight to Moses' loneliness, injecting spirit to his dispiritedness, value to his deflated sense of his self-worth.

Approach 3: A Peer Group

R. Yohanan once fell ill and R. Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could not R. Yohanan raise himself? —They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from prison. (Talmud Berakhot 5b)

The essential principle here is what the sages meant when they said, “A prisoner cannot release himself from prison.” It needs someone else to lift you from depression. That is why Judaism is so insistent on not leaving people alone at times of maximum vulnerability. Hence the principles of visiting the sick, comforting mourners, including the lonely (“the stranger, the orphan and the widow”) in festive celebrations, and offering hospitality – an act said to be “greater than receiving the Shekhinah.” Precisely because depression isolates you from others, remaining alone intensifies the despair. What the seventy elders actually did to help Moses is unclear. But simply *being there with him* was part of the cure. (Rabbi Sacks. Covenant and Conversation, 2016/5776)

Moses felt alone. He was the only prophet in the camp. Having another 70 people who gathered around the Tent of Meeting, experiencing his prophecy, meant that he now had somewhat of a peer group. They could enquire after his welfare, and he could share experiences with them. This peer association might have been the critical ingredient to alleviate Moses’ despondency.

- **Please discuss** each of these different approaches, and suggest others.

Shabbat Shalom!