

TORAH SHMOOZE BEHAALOTECHA

Scriptural Context

- The people had been speaking evil. They complained of not having meat to eat, and they remembered the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic they had “for free” in Egypt. (Numbers 11:5) Moses heard them and he knew God's anger. (11:10) He complained to God of the burden it was to carry the people (11:11-13) and he told God, "I alone am not able to bear all this people, because it is too heavy for me." (11:14) Then God told Moses to gather 70 men from the elders of Israel (11:16), and God said to Moses:
- "And I will come down and speak with you there; and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you, and I will put (it) on them; and they shall carry with you the burden of the people, that you not bear it alone." (11:17)

Commentary

- This episode is one of the ten instances of God's "coming down" mentioned in the Torah (Rashi), each describing a manifestation of God on earth, presumably because the process of one individual's spiritual endowment empowering others requires the active presence of the Creator in human affairs.
- The verse "hints" that from that moment on, Moses would have to "share his authority. . . [and] henceforth he would no longer be the only prophet in Israel but would have to share that distinction with the elders." (Or Hachayim)
- In regard to God's "draw[ing] upon the spirit" that was on Moses, the root of the word (לָקַח—to *join*) suggests "withdraw" or "reserve." Thus the effect of “drawing” might be supposed to have diminished the spirit within Moses or, alternatively, to have simply transferred its effects to others without any diminution in him. (J. Milgrom)
- So on the one hand: "Perhaps . . . the purpose was for God to speak to Moses in order to assure him that he would continue to serve as God's intermediary, despite the diminution of his spirit." (J. Milgrom)
- Or on the other hand: The spirit would in no way be diminished in Moses—which may be compared to "a light lying upon a candlestick, and everyone kindles (the other lights) from it, but its own light does not diminish at all" (Rashi)—and, to the contrary, because he sought to uplift others as leaders, the approbation of his own leadership would only increase.
- On the question of whether or not the spirit of Moses was diminished, one of our great rabbis taught: ". . . It would not mean, 'I shall take some of the spirit that is in you and lay it on them,' but [instead that] 'I will keep back some of the spirit which comes upon you (when I speak to you) and lay it on them. When I speak to you I will let some of the spirit that otherwise comes over you alone, come over them too. Thereby they will become a spiritual part of your personality, will belong spiritually most intimately to you.'" (S.R. Hirsch)
- The leadership of those who act as Moses did shall be more readily accepted since the people will see that "the elders are with you and concur in your actions" (Sforno), which the people recognize as essential because their afflictions and troubles are so numerous that many leaders are required.

- "I will make great" (Rashi) the spirit that is on you to make it possible when you gather the 70 elders (11:16) that My spirit shall guide you to recognize those who were afflicted for the sake of the people in Egypt, so they too shall receive the spirit.
- The afflictions of the people have both spiritual and material consequences—apparent in the loss of intimate family relationships, the overwhelming demands of daily work, and the withering of community life—and thus the prophetic spirit of God must be instilled in many leaders to ensure that the people is uplifted.

Questions

- To what extent do those who occupy formal congregational offices act as congregational leaders, and do you think we have an adequate number of congregational leaders at present?
- If you have ever served or contemplated serving as a congregational leader, what did you imagine were the most important aspects of leadership that you would be called upon to demonstrate?
- What were the characteristics of spirit possessed by Moses that empowered others, and would it be important for our congregational leaders to possess those particular characteristics?
- How important do think it is that congregational leaders be dedicated to the development of new leaders, which requires that they be *spiritually* prepared to “share their authority”?
- In what way do you imagine it's true that when one person spiritually empowers another it requires the "active presence of the Creator"—and what might that mean as a practical matter?