

The mighty fall fast and fall hard! Parshat Behaalotecha begins by showcasing a confident nation, primed to enter to land of destiny and to usher in historical utopia. The encampment has been divided into four quadrants encircling the mishkan, which itself is guarded by teams of Levites who will protect but also help port that mishkan to the land of Israel. Sadly, this idyllic scene quickly disintegrates into chaos. Complaints bubble over, material desire for food quickly mounts and simmering tensions between Moshe and his siblings surface. All this occurs amidst a major political and judiciary realignment. As the parsha concludes, the peaceful campsite has deteriorated into a scrapyard of complaints and distractions.

Amidst all this commotion two unlicensed prophets- named Eldad and Meidad- supply unauthorized prophecy. As the reports of this crime emerge, Yehoshua urges an aggressive response. It is unclear whether he suggested punishment or incarceration, but either way, this insolent crime could not go unanswered. Their self-driven prophetic initiative is disrespectful to Moshe who hadn't sanctioned them. In fact, according to Chazal their prophesized about Moshe's eventual 'early' retirement and his being banned from the land of Israel. In addition to the affront to Moshe's authority, this prophetic seepage can compromise the integrity of prophecy in general. This unwarranted outburst must be regulated and punished!

Moshe's disagrees with his student and issues a dual response. Firstly he assures Yehoshua that he is more than capable of defending his honor- if he so chooses. Ultimately, it is Moshe's unparalleled humility which prevents any tirade or flaring of tempers; he doesn't feel the need to respond or retaliate to this 'presumed' insult. Humility is a wonderful tool for anger containment.

Additionally, Moshe doesn't see this crime as that scandalous. Indeed, their prophecy is illegal and their remarks unlawful. However, they are driven by religious passion and they are motivated by a desire for spirituality. They are seeking contact with the Divine word, though they quench this thirst in an unsuitable fashion. Validating the purity of their intentions, Moshe yearns for a perfect world in which everyman achieves prophetic spirit- "mi yiten v'chol am Hashem nevi'im"! Guided by this perspective and his evaluation of their sincerity, Moshe resists imposing any punitive or corrective measures.

Oftentimes, in our own pursuit of religion it is difficult to channel religious passion or zeal in a balanced manner. Religious energy is often overwhelming or all-consuming and this interferes with our ability to properly calibrate our religious expressions. For example, it is unfortunate that sometimes fervent prayers are performed without sensibility to our 'surroundings' and without care to adjust our prayers in a way that does not inconvenience or hinder others. Another dismaying example is the discovery of zealous people who cannot discern the difference between judgement and judgementalism. In their haste for religious zeal, they transform into 'zealots' who are dismissive of others. There are numerous examples of religious passions which are expressed in ways which are imbalanced and sometimes offensive. We often find ourselves encountering an "Eldad-moment" as we witness deep religious desires expressed inelegantly and inappropriately. We should certainly strive for proper calibration and balance in expressing these very deep fires and passions.

As troubling as these situations may be, these conditions are far preferable to the alternative- the complete absence of religious energy and dynamism. A life of devotion and religious thirst – even if expressed improperly- is far preferable to one of religious listlessness and lethargy. It is relatively easy for religiously indifferent people to act in a balanced fashion. In the absence of religious "spikes" character remains 'leveled' and balance is built-in. It is a greater challenge for people suffused with vision and religious vigor- to channel their passions in a balanced manner. Moshe recognizes that a danger greater than unhealthy religious expression is a life of religious emptiness.

In a perfect world, religious energy runs 'deep' and 'still' and doesn't flare in imbalanced fashion. However, we don't inhabit a perfect world and we are often too quick and too hasty in harshly denigrating religious devotion whose expression doesn't always meet with our 'approval'.

This preference for religious motivation over religious listlessness is true in general, but is even more compelling in the context of this parsha's storyline. Amidst all the tensions and insurrections which are quickly snowballing, the unlicensed prophecy of two outliers should be the least of everyone's concerns. A

massive storm is about to erupt and is about to derail history. The tribal delegates are about to betray their G-d, slander their country and reroute the entire historical trajectory. The clouds of that storm have already begun to gather in this week's parsha; the 'meat' lust, popular bickering and slander of Moshe all foreshadow the gale storms of next week's parsha. It feels myopic to amplify this minor "infraction" based upon excess religious interest when the entire community is convulsing. In an environment of diminishing religious faith, an added infusion of religious energy may just be a helpful corrective. Even if this religious outburst is illegal and even if it should be curbed, it certainly shouldn't be punished. That would choke all efforts to jumpstart religious energy. It would deliver a stout message that society frowns upon religious passion.

Our modern world has shifted dramatically from the pursuit of spirit to the immersion in material. Our world is too convenient, our experience too empirical and our reality too concrete. This "vanishing of the spirit" has challenged our ability to generate and to sustain religiously oriented lifestyles. Witnessing deep religious passion in others can assist us in preserving our own religious temperature in the face of the modern deterrents. Constantly denigrating imbalanced religious passion in a disproportionate manner can signal a message that religious passion in general is unwelcome and undesirable.

AFTERWORD

Recently I was asked for advice from a departing student. He inquired for "tips" for sustaining the religious idealism he had achieved while in Yeshiva. Sensing that he sought some novel advice beyond the typical measures, I suggested to him that he identify people whose lives are driven by spirit and idealism. By reading about their lives or associating with them he would sustain his own idealism. Idealism is often contagious and by associating with idealistic people (even those whose ideals may be different from his ie non-Jews) he would be able to preserve his own Torah-centric commitment. In many ways the competition in our world is between lives of convenience and lives of spirit. Studying and admiring people who orient their lives around spirit helps reinforce our own ability to pivot our own lives upon spirit and our Torah passions.