

Geulas Yisrael #55

Bha'alotecha: Messianic Sabotage

The first Sanhedrin in history is being assembled. There are 72 candidates for 70 positions and, unfortunately, two will not make the final cut. Eldad and Meidad aren't nominated and, feeling spurned, they go "renegade" and begin to prophesize without authorization. Their unlicensed prophecy riles Yehoshua, Moshe's trusted student, who suggests a stiff penalty for these rebels. It is only Moshe's magnanimity and generosity which spares them a potentially harsh fate.

What were these two rebel prophets speaking about? Evidently, it was something so provocative and so treacherous that it warranted severe punishment. The gemara suggests that they were prophesizing about Moshe's ultimate demise, including the fact that he would not lead the people into the promised land. Another account has them mocking the "slav" or the birds which Moshe had miraculously summoned to feed the starving nation. Each of these cynical prophecies subverts Moshe's authority, and these incendiary statements must be stifled.

The gemara presents a third opinion: they predicted the Messianic wars of Gog and Magog. What is so sinister about this prophecy, and why does it elicit such a harsh response? Don't we eagerly anticipate Messianic redemption? Prophecies about that era should be welcomed, not sanctioned!

Part of the problem, is the timing of these prophecies. Our nation stood at a very critical crossroads. We had spent an entire year at the mountain of Sinai, but now, we were beginning a journey into the great unknown. We now faced the specter of a long hot summer in an unforgiving desert. Hungry and fragile, the people began to vent their grievances against Moshe. Tensions were running high, to the point that Moshe required administrative assistance through a newly formed Sanhedrin. At this stage, the national mood was jittery and the state of the nation very unsteady.

These grandiose and provocative Messianic prophecies exploited the nation's fragile psyche. Misguided Messianism offers a seductive escape from our world and its struggles. It offers us an easy pass into a perfect world without suffering and without hardship. "Escapist Messianism" de-anchors us from our world. The

lure of messianic fantasy can dislodge humanity from its ideological bearings. Of course, we dream of a better world, but we must not abandon the current one. Utopia isn't a "replacement" but a "result". We gradually perfect our current world, building a platform for the Messianic state.

Reality will always appear dreary and tedious when compared to the luster of the Messianic world. It is more exciting to imagine the dramatic wars of Gog and Magog and the conclusion of history, than it is to wrestle with social strife and food shortages in the desert. At this stage, the war stories of Gog and Magog are nothing more than irresponsible distractions in the middle of a severe extreme national crisis.

Beyond the manipulative nature of their prophecies, these predictions are also subversive to Moshe's authority. Messianism is sometimes weaponized to upend the established authority. As they portray a new world order, Messianic narratives dismiss or cancel the current order. Who needs current institutions of authority if a new world is about to break upon the horizon?

In its most extreme version, "anti-establishment Messianism" manifests as "antinomianism"- a complete rejection of law or religious norms. In 1666, having promoted himself as the Moshiach, Shabtai Tzvi conducted a meal of non-kosher foods. He began the feast by reciting a blessing of "boruch matir issurim" (blessed is the One who has now permitted previously forbidden foods"), signaling, that in his Messianic world, former prohibitions no longer applied.

Even when it doesn't erupt into rejection of halacha or law, unbalanced Messianism induces general anti-establishment sentiment. By offering a glimmering vision of a future and better world, it casts the current authorities as irrelevant or boring. Why comply with Moshe's decrees when they will just be washed away in the wars of Gog U'Magog? By posing zero-sum scenarios, aggressive Messianism subverts current systems of authority.

We are currently facing a more subtle form of anti-establishment Messianism. 1948 marked a shift into a new period of history. After a historical shift it is difficult to deeply identify with our past traditions. Those who don't view 1948 as a shift, aren't forced to wrestle with this issue. If 1948 is similar to 1748, our traditions aren't any less compelling today than they were two hundred years ago. Those who do believe that we are living in the future, must reinforce the

past, its traditions, and its institutions. The leap into the future sometimes makes the trail of the past seem outworn.

There is a third danger to these radical prophecies about future wars. Interestingly, these two prophets do not portray pastoral Messianic images. They don't cite Yeshaya's idyllic scenes of beating swords into ploughshares. Instead, their imagination is riveted upon war and militancy. Very often, Millenarianism-extreme Messianic belief in apocalyptic change- is predicated upon violence and militancy. There is no better way to supplant the current reality than to bleed it to death. This type of unabated Messianism can easily slip into war mongering and confrontation. Bloodshed and violence can easily be justified as a necessary price for the larger payoff of the Messianic era. By speaking of war these two prophets are welding Messianic prophecies to war and violence.

There may be violent wars which occasion the end of days. We certainly have ample traditions which assert as much. Sadly, there may be large scale suffering. However, it doesn't have to be that way. If we merit, we may be able to steer a more peaceful Messianic course. without apocalyptic suffering.

Even if accept the inevitably of Messianic wars it is not something we welcome but something we dread. It should never have been the inaugural prophecy of Eldad and Meidad.