

## Geulas Yisrael 103- Beha'alotecha

### Apocalyptic Fantasy

Everything was ready for our long-awaited entry into the promised land. 400 difficult years of wandering and slavery had elapsed since Hashem first awarded this land to our grandfather, and we were now primed to assume our national legacy. We had been regaled by stories of a magical land which flowed with milk and honey, and we currently stood at the doorstep of Israel and upon the perch of history.

The mishkan had been assembled, the population had been carefully counted and the camp was meticulously organized. Everything was ready, until, suddenly, it all fell apart. Though, eventually, it was the meraglim debacle and the Korach insurrection which shattered Jewish history, the fault lines were already evident in parshat Beha'alotecha. Petty complaints about food, false nostalgia about the creature comforts of Mitzrayim, and vicious slander against Moshe all foreshadowed the great collapse which soon follow.

Two prophets named Eldad and Meidad exacerbated the crisis by issuing unauthorized prophecy. Chazal depict them as two potential candidates for the Sanhedrin who were excluded in the final cut. Disenchanted with their exclusion they prophesied without authorization. This unlicensed prophecy was so toxic, that Yehoshua encouraged Moshe to incarcerate these two rebels.

### Poised Prophecy

As Yehuda Halevi remarks in the Kuzari, our nation was chosen by Hashem precisely because of our unique ability to process prophetic information. During the first Mikdash thousands of prophets guided both personal and national behavior. The 48 prophets in Tanach are merely a small cross-section of the countless nevi'im who operated during this supernatural era.

Yet, prophecy must be carefully regulated, so that it doesn't degenerate into spiritual anarchy and moral chaos. Imagine the mass confusion in a climate of unrestricted prophecy. Worse, imagine the scenario described in parshat Shoftim, of a false prophet who misleads us into religious violation. Sadly, religious history has been marred by false prophets who

speak fraudulently in the name of God. The unlicensed prophecy of Eldad and Meidad threatened the regulation of prophecy and the accuracy of divine instruction.

### Shrouded in Mystery

However, it wasn't just *that* they prophesied, but *what* they prophesied *about*. According to one opinion in Chazal these two renegade prophets predicted the future battles of Gog U'Magog and it was these war stories which made their prophetic recital so alarming.

We are meant to await Moshiach, but to not pry too deeply into the intricate and mysterious details of the Messianic era. Both Ya'akov Avinu and Daniel the navi, attempted to map the Messianic process, but were rebuffed by Hashem. Focusing too sharply upon the bright future of utopia can distract us from the "dreary" affairs and responsibilities of our current boring situation. Messianism can easily slip into escapism. Jewish consciousness is delicately balanced between the "here-and-now" and the golden future we anxiously await. Broadcasting exciting details about Gog U'magog upended this extremely delicate calibration.

### Apocalyptic Vision

However, there was a specific danger in highlighting future Messianic wars. Beyond violating our general aversion to Messianic whimsies, the Gog u'Magog prophecy was subversive to the social fabric.

Redemption is a transformation of our current order. This transformation of history may be gradual, or it may be dramatic; Messianic details are very grainy and, to a degree, the open-ended arc of Moshiach is dependent upon our behavior. Ultimately though, whether gradually or instantaneously, the Messianic era will induce major shifts in our current reality. We celebrate democracy, but Moshiach will be a monarch. We are repulsed by the thought of animal sacrifices, but the Mikdash will restore all those ceremonies. Most of the Jewish people aren't classically religious, yet Moshiach will generate a widespread religious revival. Hashem's unobscured entry into history and the clarity of the Messianic era will each be so transformational that our culture will shift, our attitudes will be altered, and the current world order will be radically overhauled. Messianic commitment requires apocalyptic vision and the belief that our world can, and will, one day, change.

## A New World Order

Yet, excessive apocalyptic vision foments anti-establishment sentiment and rebellious behavior. If our humdrum reality will soon be overturned and the current symbols of authority have an expiry date, their transient authority become less compelling and more brittle. Envisioning an apocalyptic tidal wave which washes away current conventions subverts the current social foundations and the existing Establishment.

In some ways this is what made Chassidut so threatening: Drawing upon kabbalah, Chassidut brought redemption and Moshiach to the forefront of religious consciousness. In addition, by posing a new model of Jewish leadership, it implicitly challenged the governing Rabbinic establishment. This volatile combination of modifying Jewish leadership coupled with the fueling of Messianic fervor could have potentially sabotaged the institutions of Jewish authority. Ironically and thankfully, Chassidut had the exact opposite effect, and in many unexpected ways has bolstered Rabbinic authority.

By mesmerizing the nation with dramatic war stories, these two maverick prophets were enflaming Messianic fever and, perhaps unintentionally, challenging Moshe's authority. Effectively they were undermining Moshe's authority *explicitly* by prophesizing without authorization and *implicitly* by depicting apocalyptic wars which would terminate history and render his current leadership irrelevant.

## Messianism and Militancy

Additionally, reports about future Messianic wars radicalizes latent militant tendencies. On paper, wars excite national pride and promise future success. In reality, war causes extreme suffering and agonizing loss of life. Too much discussion of apocalyptic battles creates a warlike culture, which disregards the value of human life.

Obviously, the end of days includes punishment for the wicked and possibly, even global warfare in which those who challenge Hashem and His historical design are subdued. The final accounting of history includes the death and elimination of the wicked. Yet the era of Moshiach will be characterized by accord and universal welfare and not by darkness or suffering. Most upstanding human beings will be redeemed by Moshiach, rather than extinguished by him. Too many war fantasies

paint Messianic experience as hostile and violent and obscures the ultimate Messianic goal of human welfare.

This peril is even more acute in Israel where we have, effectively, been at war since the inception of our state. Baruch Hashem, and with His help, we have become a military superpower and have fiercely defended our homeland and our historical rights. However, war breeds a belligerent culture of confrontation and when this culture is coupled with Messianic fervor it can explode into unrestrained aggression and the cheapening of human dignity. Peace is Hashem's greatest gift to Mankind but, sadly, it remains elusive in the land of God.

### Deflecting Responsibility

Finally, too much apocalyptic fervor can deflect responsibility and accountability. The seductive promise that major wars and extreme makeovers will eventually relandscape our reality, releases us from the responsibilities of our current condition. If everything is in the hands of Hashem and he will eventually remodel our world anyway, why should we labor in the trenches of our current struggles? There is an immensely satisfying and cathartic comfort in releasing ourselves from responsibility, while relying upon the larger forces of fate to shape our lives. This desire to be released from responsibility is the allure of determinism. By viewing fate as predetermined I am released from moral struggle. In a different way this apocalyptic release is behind modern culture's obsession with dystopian movies and books. If the world will be overrun by zombies anyway, I am acquitted from ethical decisions and from responsible behavior.

We await Moshiach, but aren't preoccupied with the shadowy details of this future era. We certainly don't obsess about apocalyptic wars, and we don't celebrate war.