

Democracy, Dissent and Leadership Responsibility

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□ When does dissent and contrary opinion benefit the community, and when should it be squelched by responsible leadership? The *Book of Numbers* narrates an incident that illustrates both the opportunities and responsibilities of effective Jewish leadership. Moses, seeking to broaden the base of leadership, recruits seventy elders to receive the mantle of prophecy. Two of them, Eldad and Medad, remain within the camp and begin to prophesy publicly. Joshua urges Moses to "jail them." Moses refuses, saying that he wished that all of God's chosen people would merit the gift of prophecy. Numbers 11:24 - 29 relates the incident.

Moses came out and told the people what the Lord had said. He assembled seventy men from the elders of the people and stationed them around the Tent. Then the Lord descended in the cloud and spoke to him. He took back part of that same spirit which he had conferred on Moses and conferred it on the seventy elders; as the spirit alighted on them, they fell into a prophetic ecstasy, for the first and only time. Now two men named Eldad and Medad, who had been enrolled with the seventy, were left behind in the camp. But, though they had not gone out to the Tent, the spirit alighted on them nonetheless, and they fell into an ecstasy there in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses that Eldad and Medad were in an ecstasy in the camp, whereupon Joshua, son of Nun, who had served with Moses since he was a boy, broke in, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous on my account? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would confer his spirit on them all!"

The text raises a host of questions: What were Eldad and Medad saying to evoke such a strong reaction? Why does Joshua urge their silencing? What does Moses actually prefer in validating their right to prophesy?

Although the text itself does not specify, most Jewish commentators believe that Eldad and Medad were prophesying the death of Moses in the desert prior to the entry of the Jews into Canaan. This interpretation not only suggests why Joshua urges their imprisonment, but also concurs with the historical definition of the phenomenon of prophecy as generally relating to politics. As the German sociologist Max Weber once put it, the biblical prophets were the earliest known political pamphleteers. Their ecstatic appearance struck many as odd, but the content of their monologues usually demonstrated great political acuity.

As for Joshua, the text understands his recommendation of imprisonment

for Eldad and Medad as emanating from his immaturity (11:28). He appears suspicious of "instant prophets." The Talmud is somewhat more charitable in ascribing his motivations by suggesting that Joshua was advocating merely that Moses impose the restraints of public office upon the two prophets.

Yet Moses rejects even this more generous recommendation ascribed to Joshua claiming that he would rather be the leader of an entire people of prophets. Moses upholds the independence of prophets as a check upon state power. He does not believe that prophets should be restrained by public authority. In effect, Moses champions the meaning of prophecy as less the capacity to predict the future, the popular definition of prophecy, than the ability to challenge the status quo and speak truth to power. The subsequent role of the court prophets in biblical history would not be to tell the monarchy what it wished to hear so much as to serve as the conscience for the king -- even at the risk of personal danger.

This interesting if brief narrative of Moses, Joshua, Eldad, and Medad, suggests four implications for contemporary Jewish leaders: First, the story underscores the importance of delegating authority. Moses decides to share the status of prophet with seventy others and refuses to safeguard his prerogatives. Joshua, by contrast, is not mature enough to realize the importance of giving subordinates enough freedom and autonomy to act, even if that will entail some mistakes. To some extent, the story sets the stage for the subsequent challenges to Moses' authority in the *Book of Numbers* by members of his own family, Aaron and Miriam (12:1 - 16) and by fellow Levites, Korah and his associates (16: 1 - 35). Moses at this point realizes what his father-in-law, Jethro, had urged upon him much earlier, in Exodus 18, in recommending a multi-level judicial system: that no single individual can fulfill the mantle of leadership alone; a collaborative approach is necessary.

Secondly, the narrative upholds the right and importance of dissent. At a recent meeting of senior Jewish leaders, one key professional commented that today it was preferable to remain "below the radar screen" and refrain from public dissent, for the punishment inflicted usually proves too painful. I responded that leaders need to speak out when necessary and absorb the heat for doing so as the price to be paid. Moses' answer is far more eloquent: The Jewish people will be enriched by publicly dissenting voices. By the same token, the Talmud took a positive view of Eldad and Medad, suggesting that their differing messages needed to be heard.

Thirdly, the narrative hints at what responsible leadership entails. By invoking the restraints of public office, the Talmud suggests that leaders

are not entirely at liberty to articulate their personal viewpoints. From the perspective of the text, that is all the more reason to assign to prophets the freedom to critique from the outside the status quo. Through such a "separation of powers," dissenting voices and open debate will be encouraged. Yet the Talmud, in effect, also counsels restraint for those in leadership positions: Not everything said need be written, and not everything conceived need be publicly stated. Or, as the Talmud eloquently puts it, "Sages, be careful in your words!"

Last, the text provides some guides to democratization of leadership. Rather than a closed elite, Moses prefers an engaged people. His rebuke to Joshua effectively sets to rest subsequent charges of Moses' jealously guarding his personal authority. A leader willing to forgo private honor for the greater collective good truly merits the mantle of leadership. Of course, the Talmud concludes by noting that never since Moses have we had a leader of the caliber of Moses!

Questions for discussion:

How can we best uphold both the freedom to dissent and political effectiveness in contemporary Jewish public policy?

The names Eldad and Medad today are associated with the West Bank settlers' movement. [Explain why or how.] How apt is this comparison?

What is the relationship between personal ideology and public responsibility for current Jewish leaders?

Bibliography for further reading:

Martin Buber, *Moses* (Harper Torch) □ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary) □ Jeremy Silver, *Images of Moses* (Basic Books)