

## Parashat Beha'alotecha 2016

One of the several literary observations on this parashah made by Rabbi Helfgot (*Mikra and Meaning*) is to point out the unusual frequency of two dominant words in chapter 11: 'basar' (flesh) appears eight times; 'ruach' (spirit) appears six times. Rabbi Helfgot states that the only other section of Torah where we find the frequent conjunction of these words in close proximity is the Flood narrative of Bereshit chapter 6. He suggests that our parashah describes a type of 'flood experience' in which the Jewish People becomes overwhelmed by the lure of physical gratification (basar) and allows the spirituality of Sinai (ruach) to slip away (see Rashi on 11:5 and 11:10 to support this thesis).

The juxtaposition of 'basar' and 'ruach' demands further attention. Moshe despairs of how to provide adequately for an entire people that demands meat and complains that he cannot alone carry this nation. In response, Hashem instructs him to gather seventy elders who will be granted some of Moshe's 'ruach' and to inform the people of the imminent arrival of meat. Moshe duly carries out these instructions, the seventy elders experience a prophetic state at the Ohel Mo'ed and, upon their return to their tents, a wind from Hashem blows the meat into the camp. How do we make sense of the juxtaposition of the supply of 'basar' and the exalted state of the elders?

Evidently, Moshe's needs were not met by the hierarchy of leaders and judges that were appointed in response to Yitro's advice (Shemot 18:24 – 26). Rashi informs us (Bemidbar 11:16) that the seventy elders that had been convened in Egypt (Shemot 3:16) were consumed by the heavenly fire of Tav'erah (Bemidbar 11:1 – 4) and thus we understand that it is their sudden absence that has now rendered Moshe feeling weakened (see Rashi on 11:15). He is, in effect, a Nasi without his Sanhedrin. What, then, is expected to be the unique contribution of this new body of elders? Ha'amek Davar explains that their function would be to admonish the people and point out the errors of their ways. Ramban explains that Moshe hoped that the leaders would calm the people and relieve him of some of their complaints. Yet there seems to be more beneath the surface than is offered by these rational explanations.

Malbim offers a fascinating analysis that revolves around the miraculous manna, water and shelter provided by each of Moshe, Miriam and Aharon

respectively. It was their unique spiritual stature that made such provisions possible. The repeated emphasis made by Moshe on himself ('I alone cannot carry this entire nation, for it is too heavy for me!' - see 11:12 – 15 for more examples) suggests that he believes that it is he who is the obstacle to the provision of meat. It is his 'ruach' that makes the supply of 'basar' an impossibility. Verse 15 can be reinterpreted to mean that Moshe declared that if he were to become the conduit for such food, he would rather choose death than suffer such a consequent loss of spirituality.

How, then, would such a mundane provision be supplied? The pipeline had to be the seventy elders but their prophetic experience would necessarily have to be kept at an appropriately low level. Thus they are to be taken to the Ohel Mo'ed without any time to prepare to receive prophecy. Verse 17 tells us that the 'ruach' that they receive will not be directly from Hashem. Rather, the candle of their spiritual illumination will be lit by Moshe (see Rashi on this verse). Verse 23 is reinterpreted by Malbim to be a declarative statement rather than a rhetorical question so that the phrase is rendered as 'the hand of Hashem is limited' and is understood to mean that the prophetic experience will be of a lower form. This is reinforced by the use of 'lashon mikreh' ("hayikrecha devari") to indicate something that happens once only, haphazardly. Verse 25 tells us that Hashem descends; that when He does so, it is in a cloud; and that the prophetic state experienced by the elders does not last. The text thus offers several examples that show the impossibility of providing 'basar' through the lofty 'ruach' of Moshe.

The experience of Eldad and Maydad who achieve prophecy independently - in the camp and not at the Ohel Mo'ed; directly from Hashem and not via Moshe - and whose heightened spiritual state is maintained and not curtailed, provokes a sense of alarm for Yehoshua. By contrast, Moshe's response is inspired and yet filled with pathos. As he senses the great mission of the nation starting to unravel, he pines: "I only wish that all of Hashem's people would have the gift of prophecy! Let Hashem grant His spirit to them all!" His wish will find its fulfilment in the messianic era, as promised by Yoel: 'And it shall come to pass afterwards that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh' (3:1).