

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps Torah Portion: *Be-ha'alotekha*

HOW TO STOP A PROPHET

Be very wary of appointments [to positions of public responsibility]. Anyone who has attained a very high spiritual level (יִרְאָה/*yirah*) will develop a craving for such positions, since people will accept their teachings, and once their teachings are accepted, they begin to desire public responsibility.

But you must guard yourself carefully against these positions of responsibility, for they cause a person to lose the medium of prophecy – sometimes referred to as an angel – that is created through a very high spiritual level.

This is the meaning of Joshua's words to Moses, when two people were spotted prophesying in the Israelite camp: *Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!... "Stop them, my lord!"* said Joshua (Numbers 11:29).

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 17a) explains what Joshua meant by *Stop them!*: "Burden them with the community's needs, and they will stop all by themselves." From this you can see that communal needs and public responsibility destroy and banish prophecy. [It is even apparent in the Hebrew letters]: "Angel" (מַלְאֲכִי) turns into "stop them" (כִּלְאוּם).

[Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRaN* II 1:7]

Questions: 1) Rebbe Nahman (died 1810) was himself in a position of public responsibility as the leader of a fairly large group of hasidim who considered him to be their guiding light. What does it mean for him to be teaching that public responsibility dims a person's ability to be a visionary/prophet? What sorts of inner struggles might his teaching illuminate for people who seek to serve the public good, especially those with a strong vision and spirit?

2) A medieval commentary called *Tosafot*, which appears in the standard editions of the Talmud, explains why communal responsibility causes prophecy to cease: "We know that the Divine presence [= prophecy] does not rest on a person who is sad, but only on those who are joyous."

The implication seems to be that people who hold positions of communal responsibility will usually not feel joyous. Do you think that this is what the Talmud meant by its interpretation of Joshua's words? Are there other ways in which public service is at odds with prophetic work? If being a prophet and holding a position of public responsibility do conflict, are there ways to overcome opposition? Can you think of people who have successfully combined the two?

Extra: Find a Bible and read chapter 11 of the book of Numbers. Then compare the Talmud's interpretation of Joshua's words at verse 29 to the simple meaning of the Torah text. Is there a difference? What is Joshua asking according to the story in the Torah? What do you think of Moses' response?