

Each of Us Prophets (Numbers 11:29)

Parashat Be'haalotcha 5786

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Shabbat Shalom! One of the many things that I appreciate most about the longer days and warmer weather we are having is the ability to take in the beauty of our stain-glass windows. Right here in our chapel, our windows feature three words: justice, mercy, and humility. Words we need more of these days. They are inspired by the vision of the Prophet Micah who asked many years ago,

“And what does God require of you? Only to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹

The rabbis of the Talmud would later argue that all 613 commandments that we find in our Torah boil down to this one prophetic statement: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.²

Each year on Yom Kippur, the words of the Prophet Isaiah cry out for us to make our fasts mean something in the world:

“No, this is the fast I desire”, he preaches.

“To unlock fetters of wickedness...

To let the oppressed go free...

...To distribute your bread to the hungry

And to bring the wretched poor into your house...”³

¹ Micah 6:8

² Babylonian Talmud Makkot 24a:25

³ Isaiah 58:6-7

It was again the Prophet Micah who envisioned that one day,

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares

And their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation shall not take up

Sword against nation;

They shall never again know war...”⁴

And although we may know it best from the prophetic words of Dr. King in 1963, it was the Prophet Amos, thousands of years earlier, who implored us to

“Let justice well up like water,

And righteousness like an unfailing, mighty stream”⁵

⁴ Micah 4:3

⁵ Amos 5:24

The Hebrew Prophets were dramatic and inspiring figures who preached the word of God in hopes that the people around them, the Children of Israel, would change their ways and act with goodness, piety, and justice. They ultimately sought a people and world redeemed, living in peace; and they preached as if everything was on the line. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his seminal book, *The Prophets*, "To us a single act of injustice - cheating in business, exploitation of the poor - is a slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world."⁶

Although many of us contemporary Jews take inspiration from their calls for justice, mercy, compassion, truth, and peace, the Hebrew Prophets are challenging to fully understand. Their language, poetic in nature, is often difficult to comprehend, especially in translation. They can sometimes feel distant, preaching to the Israelites from a faraway hilltop, and to us from thousands of years in the past. And, with the grandeur of their statements and their stature, it may perhaps feel as if they are the only ones who can embody the prophetic tradition.

⁶ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, Pg. 4.

But our Torah says differently. In Parashat Be'haalotcha, the people begin to rebel against Moses. They are tired of wandering and tired of the food that they receive in the desert, so much so that they dream of going back to Egypt, back to enslavement, just so they can receive better food. In response, Moses asks for God's help in managing the people; and God replies by empowering Moses to appoint a new group of 70 leaders, the Sanhedrin, who will help navigate these challenges. It is at this point in the Torah in which we are introduced to two of these leaders, Eldad and Medad, the only ones of this group to be explicitly named. We learn about them because, following their appointment, וַתֵּנַח עֲלֵהֶם הָרוּחַ, "the spirit of God rested upon them", וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ בַּמַּחֲנֶה, and "they prophesized in the camp."⁷ Here we have two new Israelite leaders, empowered by God through Moses, and they begin to take part in the prophetic tradition. As the rabbis of the Talmud later note, Eldad and Medad seemed to have been prophesying about the future leadership of the Israelites, declaring that Joshua will eventually take over from Moses (a correct prediction on their part).

⁷ Numbers 11:26

We'll come back to Eldad and Medad in a moment, but we need to know Moses's response to this situation. While some are alarmed by these two men prophesizing in the camp and want them to stop, Moses is unfazed; in fact, he seems excited about it! Speaking to Joshua, he exclaims: "Would that all of God's people were prophets, that God would place God's spirit upon them."⁸ We began this passage of Torah with Moses crying out for help, and although he is grateful for the Sanhedrin, Moses seems to be saying that he wishes everyone was a prophet! In the words of Bible Scholar Robert Alter, this would amount to "radical spiritual egalitarianism." God would speak directly to everyone, empower everyone, hold everyone to a higher calling, not just Moses; everyone.

⁸ Numbers 11:29

“Would that all of God’s people were prophets...” All of God’s people given the chance to be prophets, to participate in the grand prophetic tradition that stretches back thousands of years, with words that echo far into the future. What would that look like, for each of us here, in this community, to be prophets? To start, we can look to the Hebrew Prophets of our tradition. Across each of their narratives, there are some necessary components: First, each of them had their own special relationship with the Divine, encountering God in their own time and place, often in unexpected ways. Second, each of them called the people to account for their actions, laying out the consequences for the people failing to pursue justice, piety, and goodness. Third, they painted a vision for the future, beautiful prophecies of a world redeemed and where peace reigns throughout. Each of these components are key to the prophetic tradition; however, it is the wisdom of Eldad and Medad, our new prophets from Torah, that provide us with a final lesson on embodying the prophetic tradition.

Our Torah makes note of a small detail concerning Eldad and Medad. Whereas all the other selected leaders made their way toward the Mishkan, these two leaders stayed in the camp with the rest of the people. According to the rabbis of the Talmud, they said:

“We are not fitting for that level of greatness; we are not worthy of being appointed among the Elders. The Holy One, Blessed be God, said: Since you have made yourselves humble, I will add greatness to your greatness.”⁹

It was the humility, the humble nature of Eldad and Medad as they went about prophesizing in the camp that made them special, that made them of note in our Torah. And it is from their example that Moses wishes that everyone would be made a prophet. As we consider the major prophets of our tradition - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and more - we are not usually drawn to them for their humility. But Micah calls upon us to “walk humbly with our God.” And our Torah, through the actions of Eldad and Medad, seems to be pointing us toward a broader, more complicated, more compassionate version of prophecy, one that lifts up humility as a crucial component of the prophetic tradition.

⁹ Sanhedrin 17a:9-10

This month, we will commemorate both Pride and Juneteenth, two celebrations that invite us to remember the individual people and collective movements who embodied the prophetic tradition. They put their lives on the line for freedom and liberation. But just like Eldad and Medad, we don't always know their story because of their humility; because of their pure commitment to the cause; because, many times their actions precipitated the big moments that are featured in the history books. But just as the rabbis of the Talmud lifted up Eldad and Medad centuries later, we can do the same, ensuring these stories aren't lost to history. So amidst the more well-known prophets of Harriett Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Marsha P. Johnson, and Sylvia Rivera, here are some examples of some other prophets to celebrate this month:

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- Susie King Taylor, during the Civil War, became the first Black teacher to openly educate African-Americans in Georgia. ¹⁰
- Clark Polak was arrested and facilitated the protest of Dewey's restaurant in Philadelphia in 1965, ultimately forcing the establishment to serve LGBTQ folks¹¹
- Abraham Galloway was a top spy for the Union Army and led three regiments of the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War¹²
- Barbara Gittings successfully lobbied the American Psychiatric Association to stop labeling homosexuality a mental disorder in the 1970s and helped introduce LGBTQ literature to libraries all around the country¹³
- Bayard Rustin, a Black and gay man, was the architect of the 1963 March on Washington, pacifist activist, and strived for liberation for all people

¹⁰ <https://www.history.com/articles/black-heroes-us-civil-war-tubman-douglass-augusta-smalls-galloway>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clark_Polak

¹² <https://www.history.com/articles/black-heroes-us-civil-war-tubman-douglass-augusta-smalls-galloway>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Gittings

Through their teaching, their organizing, their bravery, their advocacy, and their committed, principled, moral stands, these modern-day prophetic figures demonstrate how to bring the prophetic tradition into our world today. Rabbi Heschel, our insightful observer of the Hebrew Prophets notes: “The prophet is not only a prophet. [They are] also poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, moralist.”¹⁴ The role of the prophet is for each of us. And if we really think about it, we know that. We embody the prophetic tradition every time we reach out a hand to someone in need; volunteer in our community; vote in an election; run ourselves for an elected office; show up to a protest or rally; advocate for a better Brooklyn; support an organization here or around the world; anything and everything that includes us doing justice; spreading loving mercy to others; and walking humbly in the path of the Divine. No matter the time or place or moment, let’s continue the prophetic tradition. It was passed to us from generations before, and we have a responsibility to continue that journey and pass it to the next generations to come. And on and on and on until, we achieve the vision of the Prophets of old, and truly have a world rooted in love, justice, and peace. Shabbat Shalom!

¹⁴ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, Pg. xxii