

**MOSES, ELISHA AND TRANSFERRED SPIRIT:
THE HEIGHT OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY?
PART I**

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One of the most curious narratives in the Torah highlights a Divine commandment to Moses to assemble 70 of Israel's elders so that God might '*draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it on them [in order that] they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone*' (Num. 11:17). How did Moses receive "spirit" [*ruah*] in the first place? The later prophetic literature does make reference to God's bestowing spirit upon the *navi* [prophet], but Moses is never described as having been granted such spirit.¹ So where does it come from? Also, why was Moses provided with so many helpers at that point to assist him with his burdens, and why was it necessary for them to draw upon the spirit in Moses in order to assist him in his good work?

In order to respond to these important questions for the understanding of the biblical narrative and theology, it is necessary to review the events that precipitated this narrative. Within the Book of Numbers, Chapter 11 marks a radical shift in the tone and in the mood of Scripture. Until that point, Moses has received from God, in exquisite detail and in triumphant strokes, the itinerary, formations, implements, ceremonies, passwords, marching orders, codes of conduct and principal players of an orderly, purposeful, dignified and meaningful caravan to the Promised Land.² The stipulations and prescriptions conveyed are worthy of a people being led by their God. But the confident strides mandated by God are blocked and sabotaged by the whining and complaining of the people themselves.

Chapter 11 begins with the discordant notes of the "bitter complaints" of the people that wear away at Moses' patience and even at the forbearance of the Deity. The people berate the blessed gift of the manna, the rich, mysterious food that God provided daily in the wilderness. They are of one desire with the "mixed multitude" who feel a "gluttonous craving" for meat. Their rejection of the manna and glorification of the menu in Egypt (fish, melons, *Elliot B. Gertel is the rabbi of Congregation Rodfei Zedek in Chicago and has served on the editorial boards of Conservative Judaism and Jewish Spectator. He has been film and TV critic for the National Jewish Post and Opinion since 1979.*

leeks, onions and garlic) is tantamount to contempt for God's special and manifest provision for their every physical and spiritual concern. Who should desire meat, fish, et cetera when the manna falls daily? Who should whine about cravings and missed amenities when God has provided pillars of cloud and fire to guide the people in their journeying and camping, filling their lives at all hours with manifestations of Divine concern and sustenance (Num. 9:15-23)?

Such lack of faith and of loyalty, such rebellion and unresponsiveness, cannot go unpunished. Yet the punishment is more startling even than the crime. The people's wish will be granted; they will get meat. But for saying, *'We were better off in Egypt,'* they will get nothing but meat, not for *'... one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Lord who is among you'* (11:18-19).

What is worse, Moses joins in the bitter complaints and shows almost as little faith in the program as the rest of the people. It would seem that the people are punished with too much meat right after Moses' complaint. Moses has the audacity to gripe that God has not shown him favor, despite all the assistance that God has given him, including the pillars of cloud and fire. He even dares to question the Divine wisdom in asking him, Moses, to lead this folk. Moses asks to be killed rather than endure the wretchedness of guiding his ungrateful flock, and is especially exasperated at not being able to provide them with meat (11:11-15).

It is after Moses' complaint that the people are told they will be punished with too much meat, for they have undermined Moses' own trust in God and confidence in the authority given to him. Their punishment will be not only in the form of culinary superabundance; they will be chastened, as well, with a lesson in spiritual excesses. They will be shown in no uncertain terms that they must learn to engender the proper spirit in themselves and their confreres. If not, God will chasten them with a surfeit of spirit that will rile them and plague them.

God bids Moses to summon the 70 elders around the Tent of Meeting, and draws the spirit which is on Moses, placing it on these elders. When that spirit rests upon them, they prophesy or speak in ecstasy [*vayitnabu*] but in a very short-lived manner (11:25). Tellingly, a couple of designated men who

somehow did not make it to the tent with the others, Eldad and Medad by name, are set upon by this spirit and they prophesy or speak in ecstasy in a more sustained manner than do the elders. Their frenzy lasts long enough for a youth to run to alert Moses to the competition, and to strike up a short but significant conversation with Moses about theology.³ The youth tells Moses to restrain the prophets *du jour*, but Moses responds, with seeming magnanimity and egalitarianism: *'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them'* (11:29).

The events that follow do not indicate Divine approval of Moses' nonchalance any more than of the irksome and rebellious whining of the people and of Moses. God starts up a "wind."⁴ It brings up a sickening amount of quail from the sea to the tables of the people and to every other conceivable place. The lesson is lost on the people, who store the quail as if they could eat all of them, and they are afflicted with severe plague because their craving exceeds their capacity to recognize God's chastisement. Moses, too, had been so filled with his own frustration that he could not notice that all the prophesying around him was a study in the excesses of spirituality when Divine authority is challenged by petty gripes and hurts.

Because Moses fails to recognize that he is on notice here to be zealous of his own authority (at least as zealous as the well-meaning youth was on his behalf), he will soon lose the privilege of any authority or even presence in the Promised Land. His downfall will be his failure to give orders to a rock in the presence of the people. He forfeits the opportunity to redirect the attention of the water-craving folk (and of his own mind) to God's wonders and favors, not the least among them being the religious authority and leadership given to Moses and also to Aaron (20:8-12).⁵

Indeed, in the very next chapter after Moses' statement that he would rather that all the people were prophets, his brother and sister speak against him, claiming that God has *'spoken also with us'* (12:2). Could Scripture be telling us that Moses' indifferent approach to the effects of his own spirit has led to revolt and suffering in his own family?

What was the spirit given to Moses? It would seem that it was a spirit put upon Moses, as it were. Or, could it have been a spirit already within him, a God-given charisma or mark of personality or of special receptivity?⁶ Or,

could it be simply a positive manifestation of spirit in general that was distinctive in Moses due to his personality and experiences?⁷

Given the use of the word "spirit" [*ruah*] in the Book of Numbers itself, these questions cry out to be addressed. If a "spirit of jealousy" (5:14, 5:30) can enter a man to the extent that he might falsely accuse his wife of the capital offense of adultery, then surely spirit is not always a good thing. Maybe it is often, or almost always, a bad thing. Caleb is credited with having a "different spirit" [*ruah aheret*] from the cowardly scouts who, after seeing God's wondrous deeds, nevertheless defamed the Promised Land (14:24).

Obviously, loyalty and faithfulness are of another sort of spirit, implying that more positive manifestations of spirit are not the rule. Some people, like Joshua, just seem to fall into the category of having spirit within themselves [*ish asher ruah bo*]; "inspired" as the Jewish Publication Society translation puts it (27:18). Whatever the turn of spirit, whether it be benign or malevolent, the Lord is God of the *spirits of all flesh* [*Elohe ha-ruhot l'chol basar*]. This appellation for the Deity is repeated twice in the Book of Numbers. Moses formulates it while reminding God that even Korah and his rebellious followers possess spirits that ultimately come from God (16:22). Moses invokes the phrase again in pleading to God to appoint a leader who can guide a people of such diverse personalities and spiritual bents (27:16).

In order to understand better the perplexing narrative about Moses, spirit and the elders, it will, I believe, prove helpful to look at a parallel account of the transfer of prophetic authority in the amazing story of the transfer of spirit from Elijah to Elisha (II Kg. 2). Elijah is called "a man of God" [*ish elohim*].⁸ His powers are demonstrated when he brings fire from Heaven upon the soldiers of the paganizing King Ahaziah (Ch. 1). In Chapter 2, Elijah, sensing that his death is imminent, that God is about to *take him up to heaven in a whirlwind*, bids Elisha to remain behind. But the latter will not let go. The Disciples of the Prophets [*b'nai neviim*] know that the Lord is about to take away Elisha's master. Elisha indicates that he is aware of this, but will not leave Elijah, though Disciples of the Prophets remind him at every turn that Elijah is about to pass away. The Disciples of the Prophets persist in witnessing whatever will take place between Elijah and Elisha. Perhaps they want definitive proof of succession. As if sensing that, Elijah asks Elisha: '*What can I do for you before I am taken from you?*' In the famous passage that fol-

lows, Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2:9).⁹

Here, again, we find reference to a "spirit" which is handed over and received and thus appears to differ from the spirit from God of the later, classic prophetic writings or even the accounts of Judges such as Samson. The text is all the more confusing when it persists in quoting those ever-present Disciples of the Prophets to the effect that *'the spirit of Elijah [of Elijah, not of God] has settled on Elisha'* (2:15). As if to acknowledge a strange (almost physical) authority that has come over Elisha, these self-same Disciples of the Prophets bow low to the ground before him.

If these Disciples of the Prophets were to be compared to a Greek chorus, they would have to be characterized as a rather annoying one. They give Elisha no privacy and show no restraint. They have all the subtlety of modern-day tabloid reporters. They offer him a party of 50 to go searching for the departed Elijah, speculating that the "spirit of the Lord" [*ruah Adonai*] '. . . has carried him off and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley' (2:16) Yet Elisha is adamant that he wants no search party. Finally, they press him to allow them to seek Elijah, and II Kings 2 ends with Elisha's "I told you so" in wake of their fruitless search.

What is the role of these Disciples of the Prophets in the narrative? Could they represent a biblical caveat that "spirit" handed from prophet to prophet (or, in the instance of Moses, from prophet to elders) is questionable even if dramatic as transferal of religious authority? If, as in other biblical narratives, even the "spirit from God" can sometimes be a menacing and testing one (I Kg. 22:19-23), what can one say of a spirit that does not appear to be directly from God, but is at least once removed? There is no doubt that Elisha will go to any lengths to demonstrate his own authority. He shows that he can purify bad water, but also that he can bring bears to devour smart-aleck children who call him "baldy" (II Kg. 2:19-25).¹⁰ Yet, if anything, Elisha is even more aloof from his confrères after the spirit transfer, and the Disciples of the Prophets are not anyway portrayed here in the most worthy light.

In the next installment of our exploration of the Bible's ironic approach to spirit, which is particularly compelling in Numbers 11 and in the Elisha narratives in II Kings, we shall see that the remaining chapters of the Elisha cycle highlight even more a biblical distrust of *ruah*, at least as a guiding force for biblical prophecy and for the piety of rank-and-file Israelites.

NOTES

1. Baruch Levine suggests that the Pillar of Cloud may have been the "setting for the conferral of the Divine spirit of prophecy" upon Moses as upon the elders. See *Numbers 1-20: The Anchor Bible* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1993) p. 339. In fact, right after this very incident, the Torah as much as says that Moses required no such mantic preparation because God communicates with him in a way unlike that of any prophet who might arise; namely, "mouth to mouth" (Num. 12:8), meaning in direct dialogue. The same type of revelation is described as "face to face" communication. (Ex. 33:11; Deut. 34:10.). See Jacob Milgrom's commentary in *The Tanakh* (Phila.: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. 96.
2. See Benjamin E. Scolnic, *Theme and Context in Biblical Lists* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).
3. Levine sees in this some "charismatic principle," but he is more complimentary of it than the text seems to be.
4. Levine (pp. 340-42) and Milgrom (p. 383) regard this incident as one-time Divine ratification of the leaders whom Moses has deputized. Yet the disruption by the "outside" prophesizers suggests that the transference of spirit is not without snags. Levine notes that the verb *hitnabbe* could as easily be used to describe the fits of the cult prophets of Baal (I Kgs 18:29). He contrasts the temporary resting of the spirit upon these elders with the more permanent transfer of spirit from Elijah to Elisha. (II Kgs 2:1). This may be due, as Levine suggests, to a differentiation between the qualities of spiritual transfer in royal office and prophetic discipleship, but the narratives, as I shall contend, disapprove of spirit-transfer in *both* domains.
5. This would throw into question the observation of the usually helpful and insightful H. Wheeler Robinson that the theme here is the "spirit of the lawgiver" which is "thought to rest on those who succeed him, to operate through them." See, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946) p. 210. Rabbi Akiba sensed the ironies of the biblical text when he associated Moses' punishment at Meribah with doubts that God could ever satisfy the complaining people (Sifre 95). Benjamin Somers cleverly notes these ironies in "Reflecting on Moses: The Redaction of Numbers 11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1999), as well as the ironies of the excess of spirit. But he does not follow through on the theological implications. Instead, he bows to current literary preoccupations with "ambiguity" and "determinacy" and transfers them onto the biblical narrative, concluding that Numbers 11 is a "collage" of "contexts" that "demands" to be read from "many angles"!
6. Ze'ev Weisman correctly regards the spirit described here as "an internal entity in man," akin to "heart," and rightly links the Numbers narrative with the Elijah/Elisha texts. Such spirit, he sagely notes, is "attributed to Moses and not to the Lord." Yet Weisman regards the narratives as complementing each other on the theme of investiture of religious authority. See, "The Personal Spirit as Imparting Authority," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1981), pp. 225-34. My argument will be that the texts point to the unreliability of such spirit in bestowing religious authority.
7. Martin Buber unconvincingly describes the biblical text as referring to a receptiveness to spirit-in-general. See, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1949) p. 64.
8. On the expression, *ish elohim*, see Raphael Hallevy's thorough study "Man of God," in *The Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (October 1958) pp. 237-244. Hallevy points out that the

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meaning of the expression evolved from "diviner of the future . . . whose predictions come true" ("regardless of whether . . . propitious or not") to various post-Exilic connotations of "special nearness to the Godhead" (reflected in Deuteronomy 33:1, et al.). Hallevy does note discontent with the status of *ish elohim* in the silence of the narrators, both in the Elisha chapters and in Jeremiah 35:4.

9. Some scholars argue that Elisha may have more modestly asked for "two-thirds" of Elijah's spirit, based on an expression in Zechariah 13:8. The request was most likely for the double portion that signifies the firstborn's rights in family law (Deut. 21:17). R.P. Carroll cleverly finds here a parallel to the reference to Israel as God's "firstborn." See, "The Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel," *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1967) p. 405, n.5. Some talmudic authorities regarded Elisha as requesting to perform twice as many miracles as Elijah did. See Sanhedrin 47a, Hullin 7b and the comments of Albo, *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, Book IV, Chapter 19.

10. Mordecai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor note the dark side of this narrative, but conclude that his effective imprecation in the name of God is presented as confirmation "by a sure sign" that Elisha was "father" to the Sons (Disciples) of the Prophets. See, *The Anchor Bible, Kings Two* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) p. 39. Some talmudic rabbis try to mitigate the narrative's harshness by either raising the age of the punished youths or by concluding that the offenses, not the people, were punished (Sotah 46b).

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