

Sparks

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Prophecy 101: Ego is a Non-Prophet Venture

This week we begin to read from the fourth of the five books of Moses. Although this book is referred to in English as the Book of Numbers, in Hebrew it is referred to as *Bamidbar* because of the opening verse; "And the Lord spoke to Moses *in the wilderness (Bamidbar) of Sinai ...*"

The Midrash, Jewish Oral Tradition, derives a somewhat puzzling insight from the fact that G-d spoke to Moses in the wilderness :

Unless one makes himself *hefker* (open and ownerless) like a wilderness he cannot acquire wisdom and Torah. (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:7)

In other words, to be receptive to the revelatory word of G-d you must be like the wilderness completely open and ownerless – in a state of humility and surrender. Moses heard the word of G-d not only in the physical location of the wilderness but also because he was in a “wilderness” state of mind.

Edging G-d Out

The creative experience reflects in some small measure the dynamics of prophecy. Indeed, all genuine artists have experienced God as the source of their creativity, whether or not they identified Him as such. The humble sense of being an open channel for a creative force that flows through the artist is a hint to prophecy.

Sometimes I write songs. Once I was sitting at my piano and started to play a beautiful song I had never heard before. I actually felt possessed; my fingers were moving without my telling them where to go. My wife walked into the room and asked, “What is this song?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’m just trying to stay out of the way and surrender.”

Great artists have confided to friends that they have looked at their own works and wondered, "Where did this come from?" In such creative acts, the artist experiences that the painting or the song is coming through them, but not from them. They know that the power within them is not of them. The true source is somehow beyond them and they must surrender to be worthy. They may feel as if they are possessed and paint spontaneously for hours, feeling every stroke was not their own, feeling guided by a higher power. Hours go by and yet feel like minutes. And finally, they sit and stare with utter awe at the masterpiece before them. At such times they will feel joyously overwhelmed with humbleness and simply can't sign their name to this work, because they know that indeed they didn't create it. They were simply G-d's paintbrush or pen. In such moments of illumination we experience G-d as the Source and Soul of our souls.

Bob Dylan was asked "How do you write your music?" And he said, "I just sit down to write and I know it is going to be alright." In other words, something else beside the self seems to be at work in the creative process, and the artist becomes a vehicle for a greater creative spirit, an "I" beyond their own self. If you are self-conscious (which really means ego-conscious) and try to impose your ego on the creative process, you can't create. In the Kabbalah, ego consciousness is a state called *klipah*, literally meaning "hard shell." You become encased in a hard shell that separates you from the Divine. For example, if you are a pianist who is ego-conscious and you have a feeling when you are on stage --- "there is the audience, there is me, this is *my* piano, these are *my* talents and this is *my* music" then it will never come together. You have to crack open that shell, let go and let G-d in. You have to become the music and let the Great Musician---G-d play through you, whether you admit it publicly or not. So the joy, the ecstasy of a person in a creative moment is really this strange kind of "G-d-consciousness," rather than ego-consciousness. This experience hints to what the Kabbalah refers to as becoming a *merkava*, which literally means "chariot." You feel like a vehicle for a higher spirit and you are humbled and grateful, not haughty or arrogant.

I asked a musician friend of mine why the use of alcohol and drugs seems to be so rampant in his world, even amongst the greatest stars. He explained it to me like this: When these great musicians are playing, they feel like they are their music. Something higher is playing through them and this gives them a feeling of sheer ecstasy and profound humbleness. But offstage, people claw and clamor for their autographs as if they were gods. "In my experience with all the people I have played with," my friend said, "I felt what drove them nuts was they knew it wasn't really them playing, but they wanted to believe it really was them. And this caused them a lot of inner turmoil and torment about their identity and self-worth."

I understood the problem. If people become encased in their ego shells that are as thick as a brick, how can they break out and connect with G-d? They can't. So something has to give. Something has got to loosen them up, and they think that drugs or alcohol can perhaps do that -- a couple of drinks at first, then a couple of dozen drinks, to take away that ego-consciousness onstage. But that's not connecting to the Great "I" --G-d. That's just an ego getting drunk.

How to become a Prophet

In ancient times there were thousands of people who learned the Kabbalistic meditative techniques for entering higher states of consciousness and channeling prophetic visions or messages. An aspiring prophet, after rigorous ethical and spiritual preparations, would apprentice with an experienced prophet who would guide him step by step through the levels of consciousness. However, before a person could even begin to consider learning prophecy he would have to transcend his ego. One indication of this was the ability to hear both praise and insult equally without taking it personally. Such a person would show complete objectivity about his character. That is why a person in a state of prophecy would speak of himself in the third person, as if about someone else. Therefore, when Jacob called his sons to share his prophecy, he said, "Come together, and I will tell you what will happen in the course of time. Come and listen, sons of Jacob: listen to your father, Israel." Moses would say, "And G-d spoke to Moses." And Ezekiel starts with, "And the word of G-d came to Ezekiel."

The Torah considers Moses to be the greatest of all the prophets. It quotes G-d as saying of Moses: "If there shall be prophets among you, in a vision shall I, G-d, make Myself known to him, in a dream shall I speak with him. Not so My servant Moses, in my entire household he is the trusted one. Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles."

Moses sometimes reached such prophetic peaks that G-d would speak out of his very mouth. This is apparent in a number of places in the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses talks about G-d in the third person and then suddenly reverts to the first person. Here is one such example: “It will be if you hearken to My commandments that I commanded you today, to love G-d, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I shall provide rain for your land in its proper time... I will provide grass in your fields for your cattle and you will eat and you will be satisfied.” Obviously it is not Moses who will provide rain. At this point the G-d –the “Ultimate I” is speaking through him.

What was it about Moses that enabled him to reach such prophetic levels? The Torah tells us that “Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.” This was made clear after he was wrongly criticized by his sister, Miriam, and brother, Aaron, and yet he did not react or become defensive. Although Moses had the ability to confront the pharaoh of Egypt, rebuke the entire nation of Israel, and even challenge G-d’s judgment of Israel, he kept silent when the issue was his own honor. Moses transcended his ego. He didn’t take insults personally and become defensive. He was not offended even when Eldad and Medad predicted that he would never see the Promised Land and would die in the desert. Joshua was infuriated by the disrespect of these men toward their leader, but Moses took the news calmly.

Joshua said, “My master Moses, imprison them!”

Moses replied, “I only wish that all of G-d’s people would have the gift of prophecy! Let G-d grant His spirit to them all!”

In fact, G-d is always speaking to us but are we willing to make ourselves like a wilderness –surrender our egos to be open? Are we ready to realize our ownership and acknowledging that everything we thought we own we really owe to Him?

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