

The Hebrew Corner

Philippians 4:4 states:

“Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.”

This is not so easy for men and women of God to do, as men and women of God to do, as is evident in the pages of the Tanach. We are told of prophets that were driven to despair by the situations they faced. As an example of this, let's first look at Numbers 11:10-17, which describes the reaction of Moses to the complaints of the Israelites about the food they were given to eat:

“Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent: and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly; Moses also was displeased. And Moses said unto the LORD, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers? Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they weep unto me, saying, Give us flesh, that we may eat. I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness. And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and

bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.”

Likely from the stress of repeated clashes with the strong wills of the people of Israel, Moses had lapsed into a state of depression, so much so that he asked God to kill him at once. The Hebrew word translated as kill here is harag (הרג, hah-RAHG), which is a word often used to describe a warrior slaying an enemy in battle. Another revealing choice of words in this passage is the Hebrew word translated as heavy, which is cavade (כבד, kah-VAYD). This word is also used as a verb in the Tanach, meaning be heavy, weighty, burdensome, or honored. Closely related is the noun kavode (כבוד, kah-VOHD), also based on the same root, and meaning glory. (As a side note, used as a noun, cavade means liver, the heaviest organ of the body). One can infer from this that Moses is saying the responsibility, even the honor, is too much for him. He is asking God to take it off his hands. Moses' direct and candid talk with God, was apparently what God sought, as he provided a solution to his problem, in giving the Holy Spirit to seventy elders of the Israelites, to help him govern the people. The Hebrew word for seven is sheva (שבע, SHEH-vah), and the plural form of this word is shiveem (שבעים, shihv-EEM), which means seventy. So in Hebrew, the plural form of a word may have a different meaning than simply two of the word pluralized.

Elijah the prophet faced a similar period of depression. This happened after he had a triumphal encounter against 450 prophets

of Baal, because of his close relationship with and faith in God, who showed him favor. Even after witnessing the tangible presence and power of God in this encounter, he quickly comes to a point of despair, as described in 1 Kings 19:1-18:

“And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the

LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. And the LORD said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”

God first comforts him, by sending him an angel to provide food and water for him before he set out for Mount Horeb. Then, after he had hid in a cave, God spoke directly with him. As in the previous passage involving Moses, Elijah spoke directly with God, and told him how he was feeling and the situation as he saw it, that he was the only prophet of God remaining. He showed, however, that even a prophet of God, being mortal, has limited vision. God responded

that he had left seven thousand prophets in Samaria that were not Baal worshippers. Seven thousand in Hebrew is sheva elef (שבע אלף, SHEH-vah EH-lehf), elef meaning one thousand. Like Moses, God did not leave the sole burden of leadership on the shoulders of one man, but distributed the responsibility among many, in this case seven thousand.

These two stories of the Tanach are important lessons for all of us. Even as believers in Jesus, we will go through valleys in our lives, but as long as we keep seeking out God, and be honest and direct with him, he will answer us. As in the cases of Moses and Elijah, he will be ready with a multitude of help for us, and we will never be alone. Blessings and shalom to you on this Shabbat.