



# ON BEING A JEWISH LEADER

Arthur Green

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Some twenty-four centuries ago, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God in the Temple. He saw the Holy One "seated on a high and mighty throne" and heard the angels calling out to one another. The vision called to him to go speak words of warning and chastisement to the people Israel. Isaiah was overcome by a feeling of inadequacy. "Woe is me," he said, "for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts!"

Centuries later, the rabbis criticized the prophet Isaiah. Of himself, they said, he had a right to speak ill. Any person may say that his own lips or his own life is unclean. But what of Israel? What right did Isaiah have to say of his people that "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips?" Was that not somehow betraying his love for the Jewish people? Does one have a right to be a prophet without a relentless love and willingness to forgive those to whom one speaks?

These are troubling questions and they cannot be dismissed easily. How much outrage and how much compassion? How do we balance the two? Even God, we are told, struggles to keep justice and mercy in proper balance. The truth is that the prophet and the rabbis lived in very different times. Isaiah spoke to an Israel that he considered a corrupt kingdom. Though weakened by the split between north and south, the nation was still, in his eyes, responsible for the ills that were going to befall it. His religious duty, he felt, was to speak against it without mercy. To this task he

felt inadequate. His people were not pure enough to hear such a message and, just as important, he was not pure enough to deliver it. The rabbis spoke in a time when Israel was powerless and suffering. The Jewish people had been victimized by great and powerful enemies: Persians, Romans, Christians. Their misfortune was not of their making. They were righteous sufferers, and the only way to approach them was with compassion. No one who lacked in unending compassion for the sufferings of Israel had any right to call himself a prophet or a Jewish leader.

A corrupt but powerful ancient Israel needed a tough prophetic voice, but one that was absolutely pure in motivation. Such voices are hard to find in any age. Even such as the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah were reluctant and cautious about assuming the mantle of prophet. None of them felt himself righteous enough for the role. A time of Jewish oppression required a gentler and more reassuring leadership, one that could support the people through its own pain and doubt. Such leaders, consolers of Israel, are easier to find. But they too can easily be corrupted. It is easy to give people a message they want to hear.

Which of these leaders is needed in our day? On the face of things, it would seem that this is an age that calls for the prophet. The Jewish people is in possession of its land once again. After many centuries of political impotence, we have returned to the scene of history and moral action. We have power, like it or not, over a significant non-Jewish population that is not content



with our rule. Corruption and misconduct have not been lacking in the halls of Jewish leadership, either in Israel or in our diaspora communities. This might be the time when a prophet's voice could be of help.

But this picture of Jewish empowerment in our day tells only half of the story, or perhaps even less. The Jewish people exists in a weakened and traumatized state. The generation that witnessed the greatest calamity in the long history of our existence, indeed the greatest national calamity to befall any people on earth, is still in our midst. They and we are still haunted by dreams of annihilation. We still find Nazis under our beds, and wake up prepared to fight them. A trauma of the magnitude of the Holocaust is not overcome quickly. In fact, it took us until 1967 to begin facing what the Holocaust had done to the Jewish psyche, to Jewish faith, and to our body politic. Only in the past twenty years have many of the best minds among our people, ranging from therapists to theologians, begun to deal with the effects of the Holocaust. It is far too soon to expect us to forget, or to expect the people Israel to conduct its national life without being haunted by the specter of annihilation. This is certainly true of the Jewish people in Israel, which has faced an enemy that, until recently, played openly on these fears in using the language and threat of total destruction. But it is also true of us in America, when we see in anyone who passes an anti-Semitic remark a potential killer at Treblinka.

A Jewish leader for such a time must be possessed of infinite pa-

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tience and compassion. Such a leader must be willing both to instruct and to forgive, when those who hear it are still too frightened to do what both the leader and the people may know is right. Surely no leader has a right, in times like these, to make moral demands of Jews that will put them at risk, unless that leader fully shares the risk with them.

I believe, as a committed member of the "peace camp" among Jews, that American rabbis and other leaders have both the right and the obligation to preach peace and "risks for peace" to Jews here in our own country. We and our people here face the same degree of risk. For us leaders, whose commitment to Jewish life is presumably greater, the risks may be somewhat greater and therefore our moral voice is serious and appropriate. The leader who wishes to take on Israel must live in Israel and share the infinitely greater dangers of moral pronouncement and "risks for peace" in that setting. It is hard for me, as I know it is for my Israeli friends, to look with favor on moralizing pronouncements about Israel and its conduct issued from the safety of distant America. We may and should speak out, but primarily with the goal of shaping opinion in our own communities. In delivering the message to Israel, I think it wisest that we seek out groups of Israeli citizens who best represent our views, and support those views through them.

The Jewish people has much on its conscience at this time. Though we do not consider ourselves entirely responsible, the fact remains that hundreds of people, many of them children, are dead, killed by bullets fired by Israeli soldiers with our support. Though we are frustrated by the lateness and stinginess of Arab pronouncements that they might just possibly be willing to live alongside Israel, we are still occupying a population that hates us and whose hatred will only grow more violent if something is not done. The Jewish people did not succeed in the year 5749 in finding a way out of a terrible moral and political situation that is costing us dearly in many ways. The call of conscience that came to us from the shofar's sound at the outset of the New Year 5750 should be a call to our leaders and to those in Israel whose views we support to act more strenuously and more boldly in the search for peace. At the same time, those of us who live here must continue to examine our own conscience, asking whether we have been unrealistic in our demands, self-righteous in our protestations, or just too impatient with a Jewish people that is after all just beginning to recover from its greatest trauma. Let us be careful that we do not judge others before we come to their place, as the rabbis warned, or that we do not rush to proclaim anybody's lips unclean but our own. ■