



The Prophetic Tradition: Is It Ours?

by Bennett Muraskin

MORRIS U. SCHAPPES WAS of the long-time editor Jewish Currents and an American Jewish historian. A progressive secular Jew from the old school of Jewish communists and socialists who came of age before World War Two, he once wrote about the prophetic tradition:

There are... two traditions in Jewish life and history. There is the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and the tradition of those who stoned the prophets... We progressive Jewish secularists lay claim to the Prophetic tradition of challenging tyranny, poverty, oppression and war. Secularism without social action... is too thin for survival. We see this social action as based on, its broadest terms, on the social program of the Prophets, whom we abandon at our peril.

Schappes' views were and still are, in fact, shared by a wide variety of Jewish liberals and leftists, including the leadership of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. Irving Howe, the Jewish socialist who edited Dissent magazine, was one of the few who struck a skeptical note when he wrote in his World of Our Fathers:

During the 1960s, some Jewish leftists tried to ground their politics in the “prophetic tradition” with the hope of thereby staking out a claim to Jewish legitimacy. These efforts ignored the complex diversity of Jewish history since the Diaspora, as indeed before then. With enough wrenching one could find “ancestors” in the Jewish past for almost any opinion.

Well, who was right?

The Prophets were definitely not revolutionaries. They did not seek to overturn the ruling class of their day, the monarchy or the priesthood. (The prophet Ezekiel was himself a priest.) They specialized in exhorting kings and priests and others among the Jewish elite to be “righteous,” but they were not community organizers. They did not preach among the poor or call for social protest. Were they at least reformers? Not that either, because reformers by nature appeal to the public for support to achieve

change. The Prophets appealed only to the ruling and upper classes. As political philosopher Michael Walzer observes, "They are not agitators in the modern sense. They don't aim to create a political or social movement; they make no effort to organize their audience."

Unlike revolutionaries and reformers, the Prophets also lacked a coherent program for a better society. They condemned excessive concentration of wealth and the oppression of the poor, to be sure, but it was in the name of a mythical past where every man lived beneath his vine and fig tree as subsistence farmers or shepherds. Cities and the social and commercial activities that typically develop within urban centers were depicted as the source of corruption in the prophetic literature.

PROPHETIC THINKING is not rational. Convinced that they were instruments of God's will, the Prophets declaimed and proclaimed without explanation. They left no room for disagreement or debate. In most cases, it was strictly "my way or the highway." Furthermore, the consequences for not following their edicts are a host of harsh collective punishments, including war, famine, devastation, death, and ultimately the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, foreign conquest, and exile.

The only exception I have found comes from Ezekiel 18, where God thoroughly explains why He no longer holds that sins of the father are to be visited upon the son.

In Jeremiah 44, the prophet confronts a community of Egyptian Jews with unorthodox religious beliefs involving the worship of a goddess. Despite Jeremiah's dire threats of reprisal, this feisty group of Diaspora Jews stands its ground and sends him packing. Of course, this episode is presented to show Jeremiah's worth as a prophet of God, but I am using it to shed light on those who defied him.

In the end, Jeremiah probably got what he deserved. He prophesized against what he considered pagan religious practices within the Kingdom of Judah. He was hated by the priests for this and punished and nearly killed by kings for predicting and then welcoming the Babylonian invasion, which destroyed the Temple and the city of Jerusalem and carried off thousands of Jews into exile. After the conquest, Jeremiah preached submission to Babylonian rule and actively collaborated with the occupying power. It is hardly surprising that he was reviled by the populace for his traitorous conduct.

AT BEST, the Prophets should be recognized for "speaking truth to power." But their "truth" is not primarily the message of social justice, but of religious conformity. The great majority of the prophetic writings are directed against the perceived threat of pagan religions or, in Biblical language, "worshipping other gods" and practicing "idolatry." In other words, the Prophets railed against what today we would consider religious pluralism. Their call for social justice comes in a distant second.

Only for the prophet Amos is social justice a top priority. God orders him to leave his native land in the southern kingdom of Judah to spread the word in the northern Kingdom of Israel. Why Israelites would be receptive to an outsider who comes to castigate them is not explained. Be that as it may, it is from Amos that we derive the poetic phrase, "Let justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty

stream," which was adopted by Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders. Amos is also the only prophet who declares that Jews may not be any better than any other people in God's eyes, and that He will punish Jews and non-Jews alike for their transgressions, including secular crimes such as wars of aggression. However, Amos does not hold out any hope that the Israelites will repent. Rather, he predicts that God will send a foreign nation to exact His judgment by destroying the kingdom of Israel. For this reason (not his attacks on social injustice), the Israelite high priest orders Amos to leave the country and return home. If that was the extent of his punishment, Amos got off easy. Nothing further is known of his fate.

THERE ARE NOT many cases in which the Prophets directly confront kings or priests over their abuse of power. The two best-known instances do not come from any of the Prophetic books, but are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 11, Nathan reprimands King David for sending off Uriah the Hittite to be killed in battle so that he can take his wife Bathsheba. In 1 Kings 21, Elijah rebukes King Ahab for having a landowner killed so he can seize his property. These are indeed remarkable instances of speaking truth to power in a just cause. But Elijah, in particular, has a much darker side. He is responsible for the massacre of 450 priests of the god Baal (1 Kings 18:22-40) and 102 Moabite soldiers (2 Kings 1:10-14).

Isaiah may be the most appealing prophetic book, even if scholars tell us that it had two or three authors. Here is the oft-quoted chapter 58: 5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? 6 Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? 7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? 8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward. 9 Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; 10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: 11 And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. 12 And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. 13 If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: 14 Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

Only in Isaiah do we hear of the great day when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid; and the calf with the young lion (11:6). Isaiah 2:4 is also where swords are famously

beat into plowshares so that “nation will not lift up sword against nation and never again will they learn war” (2:4.) The same message of universal, lasting peace is repeated in Micah 4:3. Micah is also the source of another lofty passage: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

But what they don't reveal in Hebrew or Jewish school is Joel 4:10, which celebrates war. Plowshares are beaten into swords so the weak will say “I am a mighty man.”

Isaiah is also capable of making blood curdling threats. Chapter 9:7-21 states:

The Lord has sent a message against Jacob; it will fall on Israel. “ 9 All the people will know it—

Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria— who say with pride and arrogance of heart, 10 “The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with dressed stone; the fig trees have been felled, but we will replace them with cedars.” 11 But the Lord has strengthened Rezin's foes against them and has spurred their enemies on. 12 Arameans from the east and Philistines from the west have devoured Israel with open mouth. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised. 13 But the people have not returned to him who struck them, nor have they sought the Lord Almighty. 14 So the Lord will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm branch and reed in a single day; 15 the elders and dignitaries are the head, the prophets who teach lies are the tail. 16 Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray. 17 Therefore the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and widows, for everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks folly.”

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.18 Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke. 19 By the wrath of the Lord Almighty the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire; they will not spare one another. 20 On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of their own offspring[b]: 21 Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh; together they will turn against Judah. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

The rhetoric is grand but the message is gruesome.

PROPHETS WERE NOT were not practical men, and Isaiah's diplomatic skills left much to be desired. With Jerusalem besieged by Assyria, he counseled against seeking help from Egypt on the grounds that only God could save the day.

In fact most prophets were isolationists, fearing any foreign alliances or influences. As Israeli political philosopher Avishai Margalit has written, The prophets... condemned Israel's defense treaties with Egypt and Assyria, both superpowers at the time, by which the Jews... bought defense in return for accepting political subjugation and paying taxes. For the prophets, such treaties sinfully violated the true exclusivity of God, who must be the sole source of providing protection to Israel. Women do not fare well in the Jewish Bible, although there are exceptions like Deborah, Miriam, Esther, and Naomi.

However none of them are in the Prophetic literature. When women are mentioned at all, it is metaphorically: To quote Avisahi Margalit again, “God the husband is betrayed by Israel, the adulterous wife, whose lover is a strange god.”

Many on the Jewish left never tire of invoking the Prophets as advocates for social justice, yet a careful analysis shows that the Prophets do not challenge the ruling elite. Their targets are those individuals within the elite for acting unjustly toward the poor. If only the rich and powerful would stop committing these evil deeds, all would be well. If not, the Prophets do not foresee social unrest or civil war, but divine wrath that will indiscriminately strike the entire society, including the oppressed. Micah declared in no uncertain terms that because of the sins of the high and mighty, “Zion shall be plowed as a field and Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins” (Micah 3:12). As Michael Walzer asserts, “[The Prophets] seem to accept... that Zion being plowed under and Jerusalem in ruins represent a just response to oppression and corruption.”

With this attitude, if any Prophets were stoned, it was likely the common people that were throwing the stones, but I cannot, in fact, find any such examples in the Jewish Bible. Schappes must have confused it with the New Testament, in which Jews are accused of stoning Jesus and certain Christian Prophets!

There are superior examples of “speaking truth to power” in the Bible. Abraham at Sodom challenges God not to “sweep away the innocent along with the guilty” (Gen. 18-23). Moses, after the Golden Calf incident, convinces God not to wipe out the entire Jewish people (Ex. 32:10-14). The Book of Job is essentially a searing indictment of God's injustice. (Only one Prophetic book, Habakkuk, carries the same message. He is the only Prophet who questions God's conduct and demands that He act justly, yet Habakkuk is never cited by progressive Jews.) These figures rise head and shoulders over the Prophets in “speaking truth to power” because they do so in defense of human dignity.

Bennett Muraskin is a contributing writer to Jewish Currents and the author of several foundational books for the secular Jewish community.