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Beware the Jeremiah syndrome

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Ever since the prophet Jeremiah warned Jerusalemites of destruction and exile if they didn't change their ways, the Jewish people have been plagued by a continuous stream of imitations.

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With the creation of Israel and the challenges faced by the restored Jewish state, the number of Jeremiah “wannabes” seems to have grown. Politicians, professors, columnists and bloggers have assumed this role, and a few have even taken the name “Jeremiah” as a pseudonym. Predicting doom and gloom, and berating others – particularly those with less extreme visions – for alleged moral infractions, has become a major industry.

But a great deal of caution needs to be exercised in drawing analogies between our times and the events from 26 centuries ago, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and exiled the tribes of Judea and Benjamin.

Now, long after the age of prophecy has ended, it is more difficult to distinguish between those who have something serious to say and the many false prophets in our midst. Self-appointed and self-promoting messengers come from the far ends of the political and social spectrum – left and right, haredi and fundamentalist-secular – and seek to impose their private views and psychoses. They are usually hostile to democracy, and unable to gain support through the ballot box, they use access to money and power to impose their agendas. This is far from Jeremiah's model.

A close reading of the biblical text shows that the original Jeremiah clearly did not want the job (like his professional colleague Jonah) and frequently pleaded to be released from this extremely unpleasant task. In contrast, modern, self-appointed prophets have huge egos. They desperately seek the attention accompanying warnings of the imminent demise of Israel or the disappearance of the Jewish people. These are not people who dislike the limelight and argue with God to avert the forthcoming punishment.

In recent years, the Jeremiah industry has flourished by claiming moral infractions by the Israeli military in defending the country from terror attacks. Otherwise insignificant individuals – including failed politicians – have gained a huge amount of attention and funding from those eager to spread allegations of Israeli abuses, regardless of whether or not they are backed by serious evidence.

In the spirit of gender equality, female aspirants to prophesy are also taking this route, including journalist Naomi Klein and New Israel Fund president Naomi Chazan. (The biblical Naomi from the Book of Ruth was an embittered woman, at least until the happy ending.)

Other Israel-focused gloom-mongers greatly exaggerate the political and military threats, warning that any sign of flexibility or closing down of outposts will bring instant destruction. For some Jeremiahs in this group, U.S. President Barack Obama and his advisers are portrayed as the personification of evil, eager to sacrifice the Jewish people to reach their goals.

Iran is also a popular topic for the prophets of imminent disaster. While the dangers are real, the painters of these black scenarios understate Israel's power and resilience. What is needed in response to such threats is a careful assessment of the situation and best options, and not obsessive panic pumped up by headline writers and bloggers with little understanding of the details.

Turning inward, we have the constant warnings that the Jewish people are on the verge of disappearance due to

religious fanaticism, on one side of the scale, or religious pluralism and ignorance of the sources on the other. Jews have survived and evolved under adverse conditions for more than 4,000 years, and predictions of the end of “Jewish history” are also exaggerated.

None of this should be confused with a call for complacency. The Jewish people have suffered a number of massive tragedies after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and exile, including the expulsion from Spain and the Nazi Holocaust. Pollyanna-ish predictions of instant and painless peace agreements, or of Jewish continuity without education, are no better than nightmarish prophecy.

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