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The dangerous Jeremiah syndrome

By G. M. STEINBERG
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Long after the age of prophecy has ended, it is difficult to distinguish between those who have something serious to say and the many false prophets in our midst.

In the final days of the First Temple, with the Babylonian army nearing the city walls, the prophet Jeremiah warned Jerusalemites of destruction and exile if they did not change their ways. The prophet was ridiculed and pursued, with catastrophic results.

Since then, the Jewish people have been plagued by a continuous stream of imitations – self-proclaimed Jeremiahs warning of gloom and doom, but without the prophetic insight or divine license.

With the creation of Israel and the challenges faced by the restored Jewish state, the number of modern day Jeremiahs has grown exponentially. Artists, professors, columnists, bloggers, NGO officials and politicians have assumed the role and adopted the rhetoric, if not the substance, of morality. Indeed, the prophecy of doom 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 24 centuries ago, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and exiled the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Now, long after the age of prophecy has ended, it is 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 fringes of the political, religious, and social spectrum – Left and Right, ultra-religious and fundamentalist-secular – and seek to impose their private views and psychoses. They are usually unable to gain support through the electoral system, and thus hostile to democracy, but have access to large amounts of foreign money which is used 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. From within the country and the from the Diaspora, 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 IDF in defending the country from terror attacks. Otherwise invisible 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.

Many claim, like Jeremiah, to “love Israel” and to possess “the truth.”

Furthermore, Jeremiah delivered his rebukes from Jerusalem, as a Jew, facing the people whom he sought to influence, rather than from a distant and safe observation point, like Babylonia. In contrast, many of today’s Jewish “prophets,” such as Jeremy Ben-Ami (J Street), Daniel Sokatch (New Israel Fund) and intellectuals Tony Judt, Peter Beinart and Naomi Klein, promote simple solutions for the challenges facing Israelis, while living in New York, Washington, Toronto and London. Those self-proclaimed prophets who maintain an Israeli address focus most of their attention on, and receive the money that gives them influence from, these distant power centers.

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 on the Right, the 2005 Gaza withdrawal, and the more recent settlement freeze designed to restart talks with the Palestinians, are portrayed as the equivalent to the destruction of the Temple and exile.

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 predications 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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