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Jeremiah: The Man and the Myth, 1971.

JEREMIAH: THE MAN AND THE MYTH

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

January 31, 1971

This semester at Western Reserve University I am going to teach a new course. It's called "Readings in the Classic Sources of Judaism." Instead of dipping here and there into a few paragraphs, we are going to immerse ourselves in some of the classic texts: Job, Ecclesiastes, The Sayings of the Fathers -- known as the Piske Abot, the Siddur, the traditional prayerbook, Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed. The first of the texts that we are going to use is the Biblical Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. It's a grand scroll. It's a revealing human document in that it shows the conflict that exists in any sensitive soul as it tries to confront the needs and urgencies of life. I am going to try hard to make the students recognize who Jeremiah was as a man of his time, as a man who lived 2,700 years ago in the time middle Eastern kingdom of Judea; as a man who thought his thoughts in his way -- that is in the way of his world -- who thought with the idiom of his time, who thought in the terms of the wisdom, the science, the conventional knowledge of his day, who confronted the problems of the 8th century B. C. E. in terms of an 8th century B. C. E. man. I do this with malice aforethought because if there is any misbegotten notion which disturbs the thought processes of modern man it is the notion of relevance. Everything must somehow be relevant to our lives. What do we mean by relevance? Relevance simply is our willingness to dismiss out of hand any bit of wisdom, any ray of insight which does not confirm what we already believe.



If it doesn't seem to be immediately appropriate, that is, if it doesn't seem to be appropriate to our own set of prejudices and preconceptions, we dismiss it. It's not worthy of thought. It's archaic. It's ancient. It's medieval. All these have become pejorative terms. In no instance is this standard of relevance more apparent than when we come to confront the Hebrew prophets.

19th century man was a social liberatarian. He was impatient with the past, with the feudal order, with mercantilist society. He sensed that he had built a new technology, a new system of economy. He needed new forms of government. He was now ready to challenge the ancient privileges of the castes, the classes in the cause of social justice. 19th century man found in the Biblical prophets their own impatience with the social order, its injustice and its unrighteousness. The prophetic criticism seemed to confirm what he already believed. Someone has said that the Hebrew prophets fueled the great revolutions of modern man and so in fact they did. Everyone looked to Amos, Isriah, Jeremiah and found there a text which he favored. "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue." "Establish righteousness in the gates," the attack on princes and kings who fed their egos by building great palaces with slave labor, the attack on an establishment which closed its eyes to the need of the lower classes and sought only for power, affluence and their own indulgences. "Woe unto them who are at ease in Zion." One could write a history of social reform during the last century and a half which showed how reformer after reformer went back to the Biblical text, to the prophets and found there a motto, a legend, an inspiration for what he had already determined to do.



The prophets were among the great, scathing social critics of all history. They saw right for what it was. They had no illusions. They saw through all the cant, all the white papers, all of the rationalizations, all of the justifications by which their social order and indeed every social order has tried to make itself out to be better than in fact it is. They had no use for the military-industrial establishment of their time. "Everyone", Jeremiah said, "from the little to the great is greedy for gain. The priests, the prophets, all of them are engaged in fraud. They try to salve the fracture of my people with nostrums saying, 'all is well, all is well', when in fact all is not well." Shalom, Shalom V'ayn shalom. And so it has always been with the conventional wisdom which justifies what a society believes to be right, that is, what the privileged in the society assume to be feasible and possible and who then argue: this is all that we can do and we are doing the best that we can. All is well, all is well; but in fact all is not well.

One can read the prophets and find in them a clear eye, daring criticism and uncompromising insistence that we look beyond sham and pretense and see our lives, the establishments and the institutions for what they really are -- something less than desirable, something less than what is possible for the good of all and the hurt of as few as possible. But to turn the prophets of Israel into 1970 type social crusaders is to turn them into something they were not. Jeremiah never manned a barricade. Jeremiah never organized a revolution. Jeremiah never wrote platform resolutions for any political party. He never sat on a committee to write a five year plan for the reconstruction of Judea's social organization. Jeremiah was apolitical, a quietest.



He did not believe as did the social reformers of the last century that one could manage, that one could engineer progress. He lacked that fundamental assumption of modern man -- all men of his day lacked it; that there is social change and such change can be for the better and that man can organize change, channel it for the larger good.

Jeremiah lived in a static society. Life was constant, unchanging. One lived as one's great grandfather and great-great-great-grandfather had lived. One lived in a community which had not changed its borders for 100 years. One lived in the home where one's grandparents had been born and worked his land with his tools. One lived in a society where it was obvious that the poor would always be among us, that slavery was required by the social order. A time such as we live in now when the great psychic threat comes from the pace of change itself -- future shock -- could not be imagined, there was no future shock, only more of the same. The future would be as the present was, as the past had been. These men had no concept of progress for there was no reality called change. Yes, there could be change but if change came, it would not come because man had engineered progress, or built better machines, or expanded his potential to dominate nature. Not at all. It would come because God would intervene to change the terms of human existence. God was the only force which ancient man could conceive of as powerful enough to change the terms of his existence. So ancient man was predisposed to be a messianist. Such hope as he had rested in the expectation that through his devotion he might so appeal to God that God would be moved to create a better order of men, men who had a new spirit, a new heart, a better breed and that this better breed of men might live



in such a way that the usual indignities, the familiar indecencies, the familiar ugliness of society would no longer be omnipresent. The end of days would be a gentle, quiet, more peaceful time. So it is that the prophets of Israel were not social crusaders but essentially revivalists, men who called their society back, back to God, back to concern with one's self, back to themselves. Men who said: "Mend your ways and your doings." Change yourself. Discipline yourself. Regiment yourself. "Then perhaps God will have mercy upon you and upon your people."

It is late in the day for anyone to feel it necessary to preach on the danger of those who rush out to change. Among the social reformers, for all of their visionary idealism, there were innumerable men who simply projected their unresolved conflicts out onto the society, who use idealism as a cloak for their own need for power; who sought social change not only for socially necessary benefit but because they were the ones who would benefit by the reversal of existing privileges. So the great workers paradise has become a tyranny and so it is that on the left and on the right among all those who champion change and those who despise change there are those who justify any means to achieve their end, any indignity, any violation of the rights of others in order to achieve what they believe to be right -- capital "R".

When one reads Jeremiah without 20th century preconceptions, one finds not a revolutionary but a revivalist. "Stand in the way and ask after the good way. It is the old way, and walk therein for therein shalt thou find peace of mind." When we read Jeremiah without the need for relevance, one finds a prophet who says to twentieth century man, "To thine own self be true," or rather "to thy God be true.



Then thou canst not be false to man. " Before you lead the crusade, before you fight the injustice out there, fight it in here. Fight down your selfishness. Recognize how you are using the words freedom, liberalism, justice to justify some not very pretty private needs and ambitions.

To understand the prophets we must understand them as they were and not in terms of what we might be if we confronted the problems which they faced. What would we do, you and I, if suddenly someone in this room would stand up and say, "The Lord has said unto me, say it unto thy people thus and thus . . ." We would engage them in conversation while we looked around for an usher and signaled to him to get to a telephone to call the police, an ambulance and a psychiatrist. But that's precisely what Jeremiah said during the Temple service in Jerusalem. Jeremiah got up; he interrupted the service and said, "Thus saith the Lord." How shall we accept this. We view prophecy purely in modern terms. We must label it as a psychiatric phenomena and discuss prophecy as an aberration. It certainly wasn't that. We have, of course, all kinds of labels for the activity of the unconscious. We have taken the word revelation - God's speaking to man - and we have naturalized, neutralized it to the word inspiration. We have created words like "para-psychology" or "meta-psychology" which explain how, when we are not quite awake, the levels of repression in the conscious mind are lowered and much of the shadowed thinking, the symbolic thinking of the mind, comes to the fore. We sound knowledgeable and condescending as we scalpel these anacronistic styles of the past.

We say we understand. What do we understand? when we have labeled prophecy as a psychiatric phenomena. There were prophets who divined and there were



prophets who spoke directly to God. Do I understand? I understand what makes one message a piece of commercial trash and another a classic. Can I dismiss this concept that God somehow speaks through man so quickly, so glibly, so scientifically? Read Jeremiah before you analyze his psychic makeup. What is he saying? He says in the first instance "I'm different. I'm lonely. I don't see life as most of my friends and my neighbors do." He uses a cunning image. He describes himself as a bird of speckled plumage from a flock of birds who are otherwise all colored the same way. They attack him. He's different. What makes him different? He doesn't understand. God has spoken to him. He knows that his fellows have set out to make out, have accepted the conventional worldly wisdom while he cannot accept the world which they say is the real world because to him it seems to be the masquerade world, the never-never world of all the semblance. He wonders at all these people he sees sweating, groaning, working, speaking -- to what purpose? What are they achieving? One generation is like the next. There is no security. Ten years of war, two years of peace, another period of war, never enough peace or food; always the poor among us; always the injustice; always slavery and abuse. Is this what life is meant to be? He sees life as misshapen and he knows he's not seeing it as most people are seeing it; but yet this is what he sees and his spirit is shadowed by unhappy thoughts. He looks at man, sweating, bleeding, struggling; he says to them "Look, your life is pointless; it's aimless. You are working to get to the top of the pole. But why? Where does the pole go? How high does it really get, 20 ft., 30ft.?" "Let not the wealthy man boast of his wealth; let not the strong



man boast of his might; let not the wise man boast of his wisdom. " Well then, what shall a man do? What's the real point of life? Here Jeremiah offers a totally unrealistic answer: "Let him that would boast, boast of this - that he knows and understands me, that I am God, that I do justice and the right and that in these things do I rejoice. "

The true goal of life lies in the spiritual realm rather than in physical possession or power. Grace enters life when one understands what it is that God demands of us; that it is not that we achieve power or status, or fame, or provide in a certain measure for our family; but it is that we achieve an understanding of what is right, what is just, what God truly wills us to do and that we do it. Jeremiah did not understand how it is that other people don't see this basic truth. Why they didn't recognize that they stood on quicksand, that they ran but made no progress, worked to weariness to no avail -- for what? Why? He is frustrated when he tries to instruct his community. They listen but they do not hear, and like so many who have tried to shake his people awake, to make others hear, Jeremiah finds he must constantly escalate his language, find a more dramatic way of demonstrating what he really feels. So he says to his people, I have tried to explain to you that you are working to weariness and that what you are doing is pointless. My words did not penetrate, so watch. I have in my hand a clay vessel and now, see, I smash it and this is the Acts meaning: "Thus says the Lord God. Even as Jeremiah smashed this vessel of clay so that it cannot be put together, so will I smash my people and displace Jerusalem so that it can never be put together. " He tries to force them to



listen, to recognize that all the energy which they call policy and governmental planning is hapless, unless they are willing to live as God would have them live. If they continue to be deaf, God will no longer protect them. The city will be destroyed. The country will be razed for they have done that which is evil in the sight of God.

They still do not listen to him. Or he thinks he is not being listened to. One day a prophet named Hananiah appears in the court of the king while a debated rages whether Judea should enter into alliance with Egypt against the rising power of the Babylonians. Hananiah hears the voice of God command him to say to the king, "Join the alliance, go and be well." Jeremiah suddenly appears before the assembly. His hands are held rigid by a yoke across his shoulder, the kind of yoke with which the hands of prisoners were tied as they were marched off into captivity. "This is your fate if you follow the bad advice which Hananiah has given to you. Hananiah was not one to give up easily, "This is only a yoke of wood," and being a strong man he walked up to Jeremiah and snatched the yoke right off his back. "Thus shall the yoke which this fool talks about be snapped. God has intended this people be free and this is the way to freedom." Jeremiah was silent, but a few hours later he returned to the assembly and now his hands are bound in a yoke of iron: "Because you would not listen your slavery will be an iron slavery, hard and cold, bitter. Nothing will break it." But deep down, Jeremiah knew that the people would not listen.

One day Jeremiah rose in the great central sanctuary of ancient Israel, the Temple in Jerusalem - a place which the people then believed to be sacrosanct,



inviolable. A hundred or so some odd years before a Syrian emperor, Sargon, had come down against Jerusalem and besieged the city and then suddenly in the middle of the night his troops had vanished. The city had found itself relieved. There had been a surge of relief. God had miraculously protected His Temple. In fact, Sargon had been called back to the capital by a palace revolution; but the legend grew that the Temple was inviolable, that Jerusalem would never fall. But Jeremiah rose in that sacred place: "Trust ye not in lying words which say the Temple of the Lord is inviolable. It can never be captured. It can never be taken, as long as Israel worships here. Not so. The Temple will be secure only if and when the nation obeys God's laws. Let there be a change of heart. Only if you become a different and better society than you are now will God protect you and grant you security and peace."

Jeremiah was a man who somehow lives, thinks, sees only on the spiritual plane. The practical world, the so-called real world does not intrude upon his consciousness. He sees clearly that man is an awkward being, full of appetites and passions, that man wishes somehow to redeem himself but has uncertain courage, and not enough willpower or discipline to do so. He despairs of honest repentance, that man will truly have a change of heart. His words are words of gloom and of doom. His thoughts are shadowed because if man does not transform himself, God will surely punish. The end is near because the nation has failed God. What hope is there? Only that when the punishment comes, God will somehow have mercy again upon his people and create a new and better breed of men for the world, whose hearts are aware and sensitive, in whose hearts God has placed the Torah itself so that they thing instinctively in righteous terms.



Jeremiah did not read his community's reaction correctly. Many a prophet has felt that he was being turned off - "tuned out" is the modern word. Men were listening, but they were helpless. One of the fascinating things about Jeremiah is that whenever he was caught by the police for alleged treasonable behavior someone in the establishment came and saw that he was set free. Recall how Jeremiah broke the earthen vessel, which to us does not seem a frightening thing, but, in fact, was an act of treason because when a prophet acted he did so with God's authority and the act could not be undone. In effect, he was condemning the community. For this act the local J. Edgar Hoover hauled Jeremiah off to prison; but a number of noble men from the court interceded with the king and engineered Jeremiah's release. When Jeremiah preached this blasphemous Temple sermon, again he was clapped into the jail and again he was freed. Who freed him? Men of power, lawyers from the court who cited to the judge effective precedent. There are in every age, men, powerful men, realistic men who listen to those whose eyes scan the spiritual plane and who seek to protect the men of vision, but who are helpless to carry out the truth that they hear. We want to do but what can we do? "Yes, Jeremiah, what you say is true; but how does your advice solve the problems of the day? Here we are, counselors to the king. Here's our problem. Egypt says, 'Unless you enter into an alliance with me, I will conquer you.' Babylonia says, 'Unless you ally yourself with me, I will conquer you.' We have got to make some alliance. You can't say to us: 'It doesn't matter. Repent, become saintly people. That's your salvation.' The enemies are at the gates. We must do something. We can't put them off and say, we are having a great revival meeting. You have got to wait until our nation is



purged of its sin. You say to us Jeremiah, 'Amend your ways and your doings.' Find. We're decent people. We'll try to be better; but you know we have a land to protect and our people here are far freer than the great slave populations of Egypt and of Babylon. We have fields to seed. We have schools to run. We have hospitals to manage. We have a society to organize. What are you telling us? Not to be caught up in the conventions and the compromises of our institutions? How can we avoid them? Give us some practical advice Jeremiah. We are willing to listen. We know that you speak the truth as you see it, perhaps the truth as God reveals it to you; but it's not a truth which we can apply. Help us."

Jeremiah here was helpless. His world dealt with matters spiritual. These men dealt with bread and butter problems and these planes seemed not to touch -- the spiritual with the earthly; the heavenly with the divine. This is the tragic gap in human history. There is truth here. There is responsibility there -- how do we match one to the other? How do we mesh them together? Jeremiah was right. Judah was doomed. Jeremiah was inadequate because there were men in his time who would have responded could he have given them some practical counsel.

Am I wrong that there is a parallel here to our own situation? God forbid I should be relevant. Aren't there those who say things which we understand instinctively to be true but which we have no way of effecting? And aren't there programs put forward to us which are obviously right but impossible? If we disbanded our armies we endanger hard won freedoms. We need the Jeremiahs. We return and we read them. We need men who have lived in this world and struggled manfully with



its problems and who are yet sensitive to the Jeremiahs. Most of all I suspect that given this tragic gap, we need faith. Faith that somehow the gap will lessen. Somehow the God will have mercy and will be gracious. Somehow we will become a gentler breed of beasts.

Jeremiah was a tragic man who lived through a tragic period. The truths that he proclaimed were glorious and tragic. Tragic because even those who wished could not abide them. Faced with this irresolvable contradiction is not Jeremiah's messianic faith a saving grace?





The semester 2 would be teaching a new course at CWRU - Reckoning  
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EVERYONE'S GROWING FOR GAIN

FROM PROPHET ON TO PRIEST

EVERYONE PRACTICES FRAUD

THEY MENT MY PEOPLE'S FRACTURE

WITH NOSTRUM - AND CRY

"IT IS WELL, IT IS WELL, BUT IT IS NOT WELL

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entirely of power & build a building which will  
it possible for us to believe in a time made to power need  
not be every day - The spirit of Hebrew prophets  
is the heart beat of world now - power -  
but we know that it is the only way to do good -  
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WRHS

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