The Eternal Dissident

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The Eternal Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman and the Radical Imperative to Think and Act.

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In this Friday evening sermon, Beerman reveals the source of his admiration for the Hebrew prophets, on whom he frequently drew for inspiration throughout his career. Beerman juxtaposed the ethos and mission of the prophets to the ethos and mission of the Five Books of Moses. On his view, the Bible was devoted to the law and to instructing Jews how to observe it. The prophetic writings, by contrast, were dedicated to encouraging responsible moral behavior.

In a sense, Beerman was giving voice to a rather common tenet of Reform Judaism in its classical nineteenth-century form. That is, the essence of Judaism lay not in the laws and ritual prescriptions of the Talmud or Bible, but rather in the ethical dictates and demands of the Israelite prophets. At the same time, his reliance on the prophets drove his deep commitment to social justice, as it did for other notable Jewish thinkers over the course of the twentieth century whom he admired, including Martin Buber, Stephen S. Wise, Judah L. Magnes, and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

In traditional Judaism the five books that make up the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, are considered to be especially holy. We take out the scroll of the Torah, which we keep in a very central place in the sanctuary. We read their sections in order, Shabbat after Shabbat, we read from Genesis to the very final verse of Deuteronomy year after year. But not so with the books of the prophets. We don’t read through all of the prophetic books from beginning to end. For a long time prior to the past few months we have not been reading them at all at Leo Baeck Temple. But even in the traditional synagogues, custom is that only a small part, selected from the prophets, called the Haftarah is read from week to week. They are considered to be holy, but certainly not on the same level as Torah.
Liberal Jews have always considered the prophets much more important than that for our understanding of what Judaism was and continues to be. We have always found in the prophets’ teaching something of our sense of Judaism as a changing, dynamic, growing religion. For liberal Jews the Torah surely provides the basis of Judaism and we certainly have not thought of Torah and the prophets as having completely different teaching, yet there are differences and the differences are as important as the similarities. For the most part the Torah instructs in matters of law, telling us what to do, regularly and for all time. While the prophets speak to a specific situation, frequently criticizing the way the community is behaving, reminding the people of what they should be doing for God.

Much of the law of the Torah deals with the sanctuary, the temple and the ritual that is going on there. The book of Exodus gives elaborate instructions for the construction of the ancient tabernacle. Leviticus is mostly about sacrifices of varying kinds. Large sections of Numbers and Deuteronomy are occupied with the priests and the Levites and their duties. These laws tell us how the ancient Israelites in Bible times believed they should serve God but they do not tell us very much directly about how we should live as Jews. There has been no temple in Jerusalem for about 2,000 years so the laws we read about in the Torah have not been carried out for all those many centuries.

When the prophets lived and taught, the temple was surely the center of the Jewish cult, but curiously enough the prophets do not spend much time talking about that. There are a couple of exceptions (Haggai and part of Ezekiel); instead the prophets were disturbed that the Jews of their time were not serving God in the correct way, were not building a better society. Amos, the first of the literary prophets, complains that they abuse the poor. Isaiah says that their rulers are not doing justice. Habbakuk criticizes the strong, the powerful for taking advantage of the weak. This all sounds very much like what is going on in our time, sounds very much as if it were talking at the things Jews ought to care about and try to help change. 2,500 years after the prophets Jews still believe that God cares how we treat one another and that how we treat one another, individually and collectively, should be an important integral part of our religious duty as Jews.

To God and the ways of God: “[It] hath been told thee what is good, and what God requires of you: to do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with thy god.”

The Torah dealt largely with the Jews’ duty to other Jews: the prophets’ teaching is concerned with Jews and all people and thus has a contemporary relevance. The prophets address our condition of being Jews and yet at the same time being citizens of the larger society. The rituals of Judaism, the synagogue, holidays, and for those who choose the observance of dietary laws, all these are important but these observances have to go hand in hand with the practice of justice, the plurality of peace. The Torah focuses on details; the prophets focus on our goals. The Torah tells us what to do in all of its specifics; the prophets are more concerned about the purpose behind our religious duties. Isaiah and Amos tell us that it is useless to be
observant if at the same time we deal unjustly with our neighbor. Jonah stressed God’s willingness to forgive non-Jews, the great city of Nineveh.

But still more, the Torah teaches us what is always to be done, what is to go on continuously. While it is true that traditional Judaism has ways to help the law change with the passage of time, the main concern of Torah is with what one must observe always. In much that the Torah has taught us we are quite willing to have it continue—observing Shabbat, doing justice, but in some cases the modern age calls for radical change. The prophets suggest to us what the Jewish attitude should be.

The prophets were not wholly admirable men, they were not tolerant, they were in fact quite intolerant. They and we are quite different from one another. We might call it fanaticism, inspiration, a spirit of dedication, idealism, whatever it was it made the prophets recklessly uncompromising. They were not prudent men, at all. They asked, questioned, challenged, reexamined what passed for dogma, they were men of the critical spirit, they irritated, annoyed, disturbed, frightened their contemporaries by making them think. They were blasphemous, heretical, they questioned the sanctity of sacred place, where the covenant between Israel and God was eternal so it must be with us as liberal Jews, reform was once inspired by the spirit of inquiry.

**COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR JACK MILES**

Like England and America, two great nations separated by a common language, Judaism and Christianity are separated by our common scripture. Christians honor Torah as scripture but not as Jews do. Jews honor the prophets as scripture but not as Christians do.

What this means is that a Christian is on shaky ground quoting the prophets to a Jew, but then a Jew doing the same thing to another Jew is on only slightly less shaky ground. T. S. Eliot was once asked if he believed that most editors were failed writers. “Yes,” he replied, “I suppose so, but so are most writers.” It’s a bit like that between Christians and Jews quoting the prophets to each other about, to come to the sticking point, *Israel*. Most Christians fail in the attempt, and so do most Jews.

Beerman lives in my memory as a Jew who succeeded. Whatever his faults, he was touched with the fire of prophecy. I turned to him once for counsel about a critical essay I was trying to write about Israel. I never finished it. If I had, I would never *ever* have dared to go as far as he did in his astonishing last sermon, on Yom Kippur, when he said, “Another Yom Kippur, another 500 children of Gaza killed by the Israel Defense Forces.” Beerman in that moment was like Nathan turning on the guilty King David with the electrifying cry *Attah ha’ish!* An ever kindly but sometimes terrifying voice. Remember him thus.