

ON PROPHETS AND LOSSES

Frequently these days, I find myself driving down the street and hearing radio personalities expounding on all kinds of subjects, from family values to the day's news. Some of them are certainly bright, and all of them are glib. Is it all a form of air pollution, or can they really help us form better opinions? One and all, they speak with the voice of a prophet. Are they?

A prophet, we are told, can predict the future, reveal the truth, and interpret the word of G-d. Trouble is, how do you tell a real prophet from a bogus one? Even the rabbis of the Talmud gave up on that. They declared that true prophecy -- based on direct Divine communication -- ended with Malachi, the last Biblical prophet.

Still, humans feel a need for mystical revelation. Gurus, swamis, fakirs – and TV pundits and radio talk-show hosts. Not so mystical, some of them. But they all offer a voice of authority, selected for some unknown qualifications, to validate or correct their followers' thoughts and feelings.

Czar Nicholas had Rasputin.

American presidents had personal prophets too, from Bernard Baruch to Billy Graham.

For the rest of us, over the past couple of generations, there were those who caught people's imagination and stimulated faith in their messages. Remember Kahlil Ghibran? Eric Hoffer? Martin Luther King? Mary Baker Eddy? Rev. Moon? All different, and all influential.

How about today? Can the word of G-d be found somewhere between Keith Olbermann and Rush Limbaugh? Or do we need to dig deeper? Perhaps, dare we say it, think for ourselves?

Revolutionary though that suggestion may be, let's try it. The Torah gives us some criteria for selecting prophets and ascertaining truth. These standards require some thought and judgment, but they just might work. Give them a try:

"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams rises up among you and gives you a sign -- and the sign comes true...and he says 'you see, I am right; now let's go and worship strange gods'...don't listen to him. That's just a test of your faith. And if your brother, your son, your daughter, your beloved wife, or your best friend should entice you to violate your principles, don't humor them...don't even show mercy to them..." That's in the 13th Chapter of Deuteronomy. (Abridged, but that's the jist of it.) Maybe these "prophets" predictions were fulfilled. Maybe they appeared to work miracles. But as Rabbi Joshua said in the Gemorra, "We don't rely on miracles." We judge truth by a different standard.

What should that standard be in our world? Simple, really. Not Four Questions, just three: *Is it reasonable? Is it just? Is it me?*

I venture to say that non-Jews can use this same list of questions.

Being Jewish, however, requires one more yardstick of value: Does an idea -- our own, or our friend's or some media prophet's -- measure up to our Jewish heritage?

Yes, I'm saying "is it good for the Jews?" But there's a lot more to it. The question is also: "Is it Jewish for the good?" Does it fit the absolute standards of our Torah as we have learned it over the long pull?

The Hebrew word *nov-vi* is usually translated "prophet." It can also be a verb: "we will bring," or "let's bring." The Psalmist's prayer *v'nov-vi l'vav khokhma* is generally rendered "Get us a heart of wisdom." Reconsidered, it could be a worthwhile definition of prophecy. *Novi*, the prophet, is one who makes us say "let's bring wisdom to our heart." Let's educate our feelings.

Each from our own viewpoint, we have some absolute standards that can clear some of the smog out of all the pseudo-prophecies around us. Above all, each of us has a duty -- not just a right but a duty -- to think for ourselves.

Don't wait to hear your opinion from your favorite radio or TV prophet. Could be a prophet. Could be a loss. Chances are, you have as good a brain, as good a sense of right and wrong, and a better sense of who you are than any of them.

Use it.