LEARNING FROM ISAIAH

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Isaiah is generally regarded as the greatest of all the prophetic books of the Bible; as such, it ought to have something to say to us today. I think it most certainly does. But – for several reasons – it is no simple task to determine what that something is.

To begin with, Isaiah is a very hard book to understand. As I can testify from having recently struggled with it in the original, many years after doing so as a student, the Hebrew in which it is written is perhaps exceeded in difficulty only by the language of the book of Job, while in substance the text is often obscure to the point of impenetrability. In this connection there is a story, possibly apocryphal, about a complaint Martin Luther made while at work on his translation of the Bible into German. The prophet Isaiah, he is supposed to have exclaimed with exasperation, seemed to pour forth anything that came into his mind, in any order, so that trying to figure out what he was talking about had driven Luther half-crazy. It was only thanks to the grace of God that all was made plain.

This was long before modern critical scholarship came along with *its* interpretative tools – drawn from philology, archaeology, and other disciplines. Yet even since the grace of these particular tools was vouchsafed to commentators, disagreements have remained as to the meaning of this or that passage, the fixing of chronology, and – most important of all – the authorship of the book.

And there is yet another factor that deepens the problem of discovering what the book of Isaiah has to say to us today. This consists of the selective readings and outright misrepresentations to which the text has been subjected by three different groups to whom Isaiah is a special favorite: Reform Jews, political liberals, and Christians. So influential have the misinterpretations spread by these three groups proved to be that, without getting them out of the way, it is impossible to grasp what the book was saying to its contemporaries, let alone what it may be saying to us.

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Before we can grapple responsibly with that problem, however, we need to go over some historical background and to familiarize ourselves with the central scholarly debates over the book. Not all these debates have been resolved, and they may never be until the end of days. But on the question of authorship, at least, there has emerged a limited consensus. It is that the book of Isaiah was written by at least two different prophets.

Everyone except strict fundamentalists now agrees that chapters one through 36 are by the "first Isaiah," Isaiah the son of Amotz, who lived in Jerusalem in the 8th century BCE and whose career spanned approximately the last 40 years of that century. This was after the northern kingdom of Israel – which eventually became the Ten Lost Tribes – had split off from the southern kingdom of Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem, where Solomon's Temple still stood.

Everyone also agrees that chapters 37 through 39 are *about* the first Isaiah but not written by him. In fact, they are mainly lifted from the second book of Kings to provide a kind of narrative conclusion to the first Isaiah's collection of prophecies.

Finally, everyone agrees that chapters 40 through 55 are by the second or so-called Deutero-Isaiah. This prophet's actual name is unknown, but (as *almost* everyone also agrees) he lived in exile in Babylonia 200 years after the first Isaiah – that is, in the 6th century BCE With him, consequently, we are in a very different world from that of the first Isaiah. The second Isaiah's world is one in which the Jews of Judah have been cast out of their land, in which the Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, and in which they – or at any rate some segment of them – pine for a chance to go back home again.

This longing is what Deutero-Isaiah promises will be fulfilled. He is the great prophet of consolation. In this he differs from the first Isaiah, who mainly though by no means entirely concentrates on harsh and even horrifying denunciations both of his own people and their enemies. But Deutero-Isaiah begins with what understandably became for Jews one of the most beloved chapters in the whole of prophetic literature. Indeed, it is chanted every year in the synagogue on the first Sabbath following the fast of Tisha b'Av, which commemorates the destruction of the Temple. Here in English are the words with which the second Isaiah in effect introduces himself to the exiles in Babylonia:* *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,*

and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

This note of consolation is carried forward in visions of an exodus from Babylonia that will be even more marked by miracles than the one from Egypt in ancient times. There are also visions of a restored Jerusalem that will be more splendid than ever and to which all kings and principalities shall flow, bearing treasure and tribute and seeking the word of the God of Israel, whom they will acknowledge as the God of all.

Alas, only a fragment of this dream was realized. But in the tradition of his predecessor, Isaiah the son of Amotz, Deutero-Isaiah blamed this not on God or on his own failure of foresight. He blamed it on the relapse into the sin of idolatry among the exilic community in Babylonia. At this point, the great prophet of consolation became no less capable than the first Isaiah of ferocious denunciations that can still make one's blood run cold in the reading.

Or was it really Deutero-Isaiah who issued these denunciations? Here again serious disagreement enters among the scholars. Since many of the denunciations occur in the last eleven chapters of the book, 56 through 66, some ascribe them to a third or Trito-Isaiah. *This* Isaiah, a number of scholars speculate, was among the Judean exiles who were allowed to return to Jerusalem in 538 BCE by Cyrus, the Persian king who had by then vanquished the old Babylonian empire. Cyrus also gave the returning exiles permission to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem that (in defiance, by the way, of the prophecies of the first Isaiah) had been destroyed 50 years earlier. But when Cyrus authorized the return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple, and even so the Golden Age did not arrive, Trito-Isaiah, presumably a disciple of Deutero-Isaiah, became bitter: hence the denunciations.

Still other scholars, however (and I am inclined to agree with them), see no good reason to posit a third Isaiah, and assign the last eleven chapters (with the exception of a few passages here and there) to the disappointments of the second.

Yet to darken counsel even further, most scholars take the view that different hands are at work not only in the last eleven chapters but also in various passages throughout the entire book of Isaiah that were interpolated by later editors. One scholar has even described the book as an anthology comprising the oracles of at least six different prophets and/or their disciples.

If, then, we venture to discover what Isaiah has to say to us today, which Isaiah are we talking about?

Fortunately, assistance is to be found in several continuities of theme that unite the two or more Isaiahs, which may well be why they wound up being joined together into a single book. The author, or authors, of the last 26 chapters clearly show familiarity with the author of the first 36. I would even go so far as to claim that both the basic doctrine and the oracular vision the first Isaiah set forth in Jerusalem in the 8th century were being applied by the second and the third (if there was a third) to the radically different historical circumstances that followed the Babylonian exile more than two centuries later. Thanks to this, it becomes possible to look upon Isaiah as a single work, which is precisely what millions upon millions of people have done throughout the ages. And this brings me back to the three groups for whom it is a special favorite.

Let me begin with the Reform movement in Judaism, which was born in Germany in the 19th century and then established itself as, for a time, the most popular Jewish denomination in the United States. Almost from the outset, Reform saw itself as rooted more directly in the prophets, and especially in Isaiah, than in the rabbis of the Talmud (who of course came much later, and out of whom there eventually emerged the traditionalist Judaism against which the 19th-century Reformers were rebelling). In line with the liberal Protestant theologians and biblical scholars of their day, the original Reformers also looked upon the prophetic books – and especially the first Isaiah – as marking an evolutionary advance over the more primitive stage of Judaism reflected in earlier books of the Bible.

In that earlier stage, they held, all the emphasis had been placed on ritual, and in particular on the barbaric and superstitious practice of animal sacrifice as the way to worship God. But then along came a great visionary whose very first oracle contains the following words (once more in the King James Version):

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

And again: *Bring Me no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto Me*. God then goes on to demand through Isaiah that the mistreatment of widows and orphans come to an end, that the grinding of the faces of the poor

cease, that there be no more accumulation of wealth by the rich at the expense of the poor.

In short, in light of this interpretation, we have here a new definition of sin as social oppression rather than neglect of the ritual commandments, and a new definition of the Law as social justice. This idea, expressed in chapter one of the book of Isaiah in relation to sacrifices in the Temple, then reappears in chapter 58 – that is, in Deutero-Isaiah (or Trito-, if there was such a one) – in relation to the new institution of the synagogue first developed in Babylonia as a substitute for the Temple service. In Babylonia, the people complain to God: "Wherefore have we fasted . . . and Thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and Thou takest no knowledge?" But Deutero- (or Trito-) Isaiah answers in the name of God that fasting is not what He demands of them. What God demands is lovingkindness and compassion – the giving of shelter and bread and clothing to the poor. Only by doing these things will they achieve redemption.

So far, so good for the Reformers' interpretation. Yet the focus on this aspect of the prophetic message ignores two crucial elements. For a start, it overlooks the second half of chapter 58. There we come upon an equally eloquent denunciation of the people for violating the Sabbath – a sin that also stands in the way of their redemption. And in what does their redemption consist in the prophetic vision of Deutero- (or Trito-) Isaiah? Why, it consists of a return from exile to Jerusalem where the Temple will be rebuilt and the prescribed sacrifices can be resumed: the very sacrifices that, according to the first Isaiah, had become an abomination unto the Lord.

True, chapter one in the first Isaiah contains no balancing passage comparable to the one about the Sabbath in Deutero-Isaiah's chapter 58. Yet we know from other verses in other chapters of the first Isaiah that he regarded the Temple with veneration. We also know that he placed high hopes upon the accession to the throne of King Hezekiah. Though Hezekiah later disappointed him politically, to the first Isaiah (and also as the second book of Kings saw it) the great *religious* merit of this king was to centralize all worship in the Temple in Jerusalem and to abolish all other altars or locales in which sacrifices were offered.

Indeed, the sublime vision of universal peace for which the first Isaiah is most prized and that has helped to earn him a reputation as the greatest of the Hebrew prophets depends for its realization precisely upon the coming of all the nations

of the world to the Temple in Jerusalem where they will acknowledge the God of Israel as God:

> *And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come yet, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

Given this glorification of the Temple in Jerusalem, which existed for the purpose of offering sacrifices, the message of the book of Isaiah is distorted and misrepresented if we take it as a license to reject the ritual aspects of Judaism and concern ourselves only with the moral ones.

I am not denying – how could any reader? – that the Isaiahs attack the notion that the obligations of a Jew begin and end with observance of the ritual commandments. In that sense it is not entirely wrong to argue that the two or three Isaiahs, like such other prophets as Amos and Micah, put more stress on the ethical than on the ritual dimensions of religion. Nevertheless, they also repudiate the notion that Judaism can be entirely summed up by morality alone. When the first Isaiah expresses disgust with sacrifices, he is not proposing that they be abolished: he is declaring that they are of no account unless they are accompanied by actions in the moral sphere. And the same point can be made about the attack by the second (or third) Isaiah on fasting and prayer.

Even more telling evidence can be found in an astonishing passage in chapter 43 of the second Isaiah. Here we have God rebuking the Jews of Babylon for *not* offering sacrifices to Him. So unfair is this rebuke--He Himself had forbidden them to do so outside the Holy Land – that commentators have danced many a fancy exegetical step around it. But the fact remains: the second Isaiah attributes so great a value to the offering of sacrifices that he has God chastising the Jews for failing to perform them even in a situation where doing so would itself have been a sin.

What is more, the third Isaiah (or the second, as the case may be), addressing those among the Babylonians who have converted to Judaism in Babylonia, and the Jews who have forcibly been made into court eunuchs there, promises that they, too, will be permitted to join the rest of the community in its return from exile to Jerusalem – *provided*, that is, that they have kept the Sabbath and not polluted it. And what will they do when they get to Jerusalem? "*Even them*," God declares through the prophet, "*will I bring to My holy mountain, . . . their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon Mine altar."*

These days, we sometimes hear from the newspapers about certain Orthodox Jews who deal dishonestly in business, or are cruel to their families, and yet who evidently imagine that so long as they are punctilious in their observance of the ritual commandments, they are fulfilling their obligations as Jews and have nothing to fear from the wrath of God. If we wish to translate the message of the book of Isaiah into contemporary terms, we can without distortion or misrepresentation read it as chastising such Jews. But we cannot read the prophecies of the Isaiahs – at least not without violence to their words – as a justification for dismissing ritual as archaic or primitive or unworthy of an enlightened modern Jew.

In short, neither the first Isaiah nor the second – nor the third, if he existed – was supplying a warrant for the foundational theology of the Reform movement. But neither were they telling us that all it takes to be a good Jew, or for that matter a good person, is to be a good liberal in the current definition of that term.

It was because this belief became so common among Jews that the American Jewish community was once unkindly – if not altogether inaccurately – described as "the Democratic party at prayer." Yet many of the same arguments I have just advanced in rejecting the Reform movement's interpretation of Isaiah apply here with even greater force. For those who imagine that this book is a kind of fund-raising letter for the Democratic party dictated by God to the prophet are even more mistaken than the Reformers of past generations who sought a grounding in it for their religious philosophy (unless, that is, the funds being solicited are in the form of bullocks and rams and he-goats intended for burnt offerings).

Yes, the Isaiahs do make a great point of some of the ideals that today are the staples of liberal rhetoric. In the real world, however, these ideals are more often than not undermined by the actions such rhetoric engenders, as when certain

efforts designed to help the poor are redoubled even when they demonstrably result in worsening the plight of their intended beneficiaries. Yet even if such efforts were more successful in practice, they would constitute only a necessary and not a sufficient condition of the Isaianic requirement for redemption. I am not suggesting that every time the welfare system is reformed, a he-goat be sacrificed, or even a prayer offered (though the prayer – intoned, naturally, in silence and in secret, out of deference to the liberal construal of the "emanations and penumbras" of the establishment clause of the First Amendment – might not be such a bad idea). Nor am I ascribing a position to the Isaiahs on the specifics of contemporary social policy. But surely they were asking for something more spiritually exalted than ideological posturing or partisan political maneuvers as the driving force of their calls for compassion and lovingkindness.

But if this book is not a religious charter for the Reform movement of the 19th century, and if it is not a liberal political manifesto, neither is it – and now I arrive at the third and most influential group for whom Isaiah is the greatest of all the prophets – a herald of Christianity.

Far be it from me to enter into a dispute with anyone who believes that Jesus was the messiah, that he was the son of God born to a virgin, and that in being crucified he took upon himself, and atoned for, the sins of all mankind – or at least that portion of mankind which accepted all this as true. Though as a Jew I am by definition not among that portion, I have no desire to challenge its faith. What I do feel it necessary to challenge is the view held by pious Christians throughout the past two centuries that the book of Isaiah foretells – and in striking detail – the coming of that faith.

Like the rabbis of the Talmud and strictly Orthodox Jews today, such Christians have always looked upon the book of Isaiah as a unified whole. Careful students of the text could hardly fail to recognize that, beginning with chapter 40, there are references to historical events that occurred some 200 years after the ones mentioned before. But this poses no problem to Orthodox or fundamentalist believers: they simply explain it by Isaiah's power to foresee the future: after all, that is what prophets do. Therefore, the Christological interpretation draws freely and – from a critical-scholarly point of view – indiscriminately from all 66 chapters.

Anyone who has ever read the book of Isaiah itself, or who has read and forgotten it but has listened carefully to Handel's *Messiah*, will recognize what I

am referring to here. For much of the libretto of the *Messiah* is taken from widely scattered parts of Isaiah, and these verses are then juxtaposed with passages from the New Testament that presumably testify to the fulfillment of Isaiah's promises. In this, Handel and his unknown librettist were simply following the traditional Christological interpretation of Isaiah, according to which the book was a major "prooftext" demonstrating that Christianity is not merely the offspring of Judaism but in effect its legitimate heir, with the Christian scheme of things actually being foreshadowed in what to Christians is the Old Testament and to Jews is simply the Bible.

There are many well-known examples. The first is in verse fourteen of chapter seven. As the King James translators render it: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"– a name which Handel correctly glosses as "God with us." Certainly this would seem to foretell the miraculous manner in which Christians – not all, but many – believe that Jesus was born. But the trouble is that *almah*, the word Christians translate as "virgin," does not mean virgin; it means young woman. The Hebrew word for virgin is *betulah*, which, as it happens, is used several times in the book of Isaiah. If the prophet had wanted to say virgin, surely he would have used it here as well.

In any event, Jewish commentators, and the great majority of contemporary scholars of the Bible, whether Jewish or not, think that the son to whom Isaiah is referring here is neither the messiah nor Jesus but the Judean king I mentioned above – King Hezekiah. It is also of King Hezekiah that Isaiah is speaking when, in chapter nine – another central Christian prooftext that also appears in Handel's *Messiah* – he says: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder."

But what has perhaps been even more central to the Christological reading is the figure of the servant of the Lord who appears in various guises not in the first but in the second Isaiah. These four passages (or songs, as the scholars describe them) are among the more obscure in a very obscure book, and therefore lend themselves to imaginative exegeses. But to Jews – and, again, to most modern scholars, both Christian and Jewish – the servant sometimes represents the Jewish people as a whole, sometimes the remnant of it that has remained loyal to God in exile and refused to assimilate to Babylonian paganism, sometimes the prophet speaking either in his own name or in theirs.

Obviously, in the Christological interpretation, the servant is Jesus, and those who accept that interpretation rest heavily on chapter 53. Here it is that the crucial element of the Christological interpretation appears, namely, the idea that the servant suffers for the sins of others: *Surely he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

The most powerful case against the Christological interpretation of this strange verse, and a few others like it, has been made by the late Israeli Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann. With an overwhelming wealth of evidence and argument, Kaufmann demonstrates that the servant in this particular context represents those Jews who remained faithful in exile but were unjustly subjected to the same punishing fate as their fellow Jews who were drawn into the sin of idolatry while living in Babylonia. Now God is about to permit these sinners to return home to Jerusalem, thanks to the merit of those who suffered the same pains of exile without falling into sin.

Be all this as it may, I would also propose that there is nothing remarkable about the fact that the authors of the New Testament – all or most of whom, like Jesus himself, were Jews – should have depended so heavily upon the book of Isaiah. For what they needed to explain, to themselves and to others, was how it happened that Jesus could have been killed before he was able to perform his appointed messianic task of liberating Palestine from the Romans and ushering in a new era when all the world would recognize that the God of Israel was the one true God. Isaiah hinted at a way of understanding so wholly unexpected an outcome; he could even be cited as having prophesied it, or something resembling it.

If, though, the book of Isaiah is not saying what many Reform theologians, political liberals, and Christians imagine, what *is* it saying that is applicable to our circumstances today?

For a start, it is saying that the covenant into which God entered with the Jewish people at Sinai is eternal. "How odd of God to choose the Jews," an anti-Semitic wag once quipped. I agree with him. There definitely *is* something odd about God's decision to appoint a scraggly tribe of nomadic ex-slaves wandering around the desert as the agents through which His truth would be made known to the whole world. But, odd or not, the book of Isaiah affirms and reaffirms that this is precisely what God did.

It also affirms and reaffirms that when the Jews suffer at the hands of other nations, it is because they are being punished for having turned their backs upon the obligations they undertook under that covenant.** Yet the nations at whose hands they suffer – Assyria and Babylonia in the times of the Isaiahs – are acting, though they know it not, as God's instrument: the rods of His wrath, as the first Isaiah puts it. And when these nations have executed God's judgment upon His sinful people – through conquest, killing, and deportation – *their* turn will come to be punished, especially because they are so puffed up with pride that they think they themselves are responsible for their military victories (*Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it?*).

But they will be punished with a difference. No matter how severe the devastation wrought upon the Jewish people, a remnant will always remain. By contrast, the heathen nations and their empires will disappear entirely from the stage of history.

I recently wrote that the doctrine of the Chosen People was regarded as a "scandal" – the "scandal of particularity" – by some Christian theologians. I agree with them, too. For just as there is something odd, something offensive to reason, about the idea that the one true God, the creator of the universe, the God of all, should have selected a single people to carry out His will in history, there is also something theologically outrageous in it.

Curiously, however, this idea, odd as it seems to reason and scandalous as it is to theology, does make sense as an empirical proposition. After all, what hypothesis better explains the amazing history of the Jews? The empires of both the ancient and the modern worlds that attempted to destroy the Jews by one means or another have themselves all been destroyed. Yet a Jewish remnant remains.

The first lesson the book of Isaiah has to teach us today, then, is that the Jews must not and will not ever disappear. Admittedly, the great visions of peace and harmony in Isaiah embrace not the Jewish people alone, but the whole world. These visions are, to adopt the usual jargon employed in such discussions, universalistic. But paradoxically, they can only be realized through the *particular* agency of the Jews, whose burden and privilege it is to spread the word revealed to them at Sinai. Despite the correlative cost in suffering inflicted upon them by God for their sins – a cost that has led Jews throughout the centuries to pray,

"Dear God, please choose someone else for a change"– a Jewish remnant there will always be.

So we are assured by the book of Isaiah, and so I think we still have good reason to believe. We also have good reason to believe in the corollary of this assurance – namely, that those who set out to destroy the Jews will themselves be utterly destroyed. Let those Arabs who dream of a holy war, a *jihad*, against the state of Israel take heed.

Which leads directly to the second message the book of Isaiah has for us today. If I may be permitted an anachronism that is nevertheless fully consonant with this prophetic text, Isaiah is a *Zionist* book; and I mean Zionist in the full political sense of that term.

Consider: the first Isaiah counsels submission by the relatively weak kingdom of Judah to the seemingly unstoppable power of Assyria and warns against forming an alliance with Egypt against it; he fulminates against Jerusalem and Judah *because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord*; he fumes that *the faithful city* has become a *harlot*. Yet this same Isaiah still insists that Jerusalem must remain under Jewish sovereignty. Only thus – *only* under Jewish sovereignty – will Israel become *a light unto the nations*. *Only* under Jewish sovereignty will the Law go forth out of Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

And then there is the second Isaiah. Though he has prophesied that the Persian king Cyrus, then ruling Babylonia, will allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, he does not feel vindicated when this prophesy is fulfilled. On the contrary, Deutero-Isaiah is sorely disappointed because Jerusalem and Judah have remained a part of the Persian empire and have not achieved the full independence that, to this Isaiah too, is the precondition of their becoming a light unto the nations.

On this matter, those who might take heed are the 300 American rabbis who recently advocated that sovereignty over Jerusalem be shared with the Palestinian Arabs. I would especially advise them to ponder verse twenty of chapter five: *Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*

This marvelous verse carries me straight to the third of the three lessons that we – whether Jews or not – can learn from the book of Isaiah today as we enter the 21st century. I must confess that, unlike most people, I do not locate this

third lesson in the great visions for which the book is most esteemed. These are the verses from the first Isaiah I have already quoted in which he envisages world peace and the end of all violence throughout nature, even among the wild beasts, and the equally famous passage from chapter eleven:

> *The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den.*

Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah delivers himself of a similar oracle in the next-to-last chapter of the whole book, chapter 65, which portrays the creation of *new heavens and a new earth*, when there shall be no more weeping or crying, and when – in an echo of the first Isaiah – *the wolf and the lamb shall feed together*.

In my heterodox and possibly even heretical opinion, these dreams of a world from which all violence is absent and peace reigns among men and beasts alike have proved to be more dangerous than uplifting. Those who have set out to realize such utopian aspirations have often felt justified in murdering as many millions as they thought it would take to bring the age of perfect peace and justice into being.

In addition, as we should have learned from the experience of the 1930's, the pursuit of peace can be the surest path to war. My great fear is that this lesson is being forgotten in relation to the state of Israel today – where, to quote from another of the major prophets, Jeremiah, many cry *peace, peace, when there is no peace.*

But it is not only in the political realm that good and evil, light and dark, bitter and sweet are being confused today. We see the same process at work throughout our culture. There it often appears in the guise of a relativistic philosophy that pretends to discern no basis at all for judging between good and evil, light and dark, bitter and sweet. The same philosophy denies that the moral realm is governed by law just as the physical world is; and it is in this denial that it comes most radically into conflict with the Bible as a whole, and the book of Isaiah in particular.

From the perspective of the "multiculturalism" that prevails in our educational system, for example, there are no criteria for judging any culture as superior to

any other (except that ours is probably worse than all others). If certain peoples are induced by their own cultural imperatives to practice cannibalism or child sacrifice, who are we to say them nay?: "different strokes for different folks." Or, in the view of many feminists, the Bible is wrong in telling us that "male and female created He them": the only differences between men and women, they proclaim, are created not by God or nature but by society. Or, in the eyes of the deconstructionist school of thought that prevails in our universities, there is no objective reality at all, and therefore it makes no sense even to speak of the confusions lamented and decried by the first Isaiah.

So corrosive is the relativism that ties these disparate phenomena together, and so dangerous is it, that the warning found in the verse I have just quoted from the first Isaiah about confusing good and evil seems to me to have become far more urgent to heed than his vision of swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Concerning that vision, moreover, I would say this: if one believes in God, one can assuredly accept that it is in His power to bring about such a miraculous transformation at the end of days. But, again if one believes in God, one must also accept that it is *only* in His power to perform these miracles, and not in the power of mere mortals like us.

In fact, the pride in self, reflected in the delusion that we humans possess the power to create a perfect world, is what the book of Isaiah, in *all* its parts, identifies as the source and fount of idolatry. In the Isaianic concept, making graven images and bowing down to them as gods is a form of self-deification through which man worships the work of his own hands, which is to say himself. By contrast, what *does* lie within our power, according to the book of Isaiah in all its parts, is the ability to perceive the difference between good and evil, to do the one and shun the other.

It was through the exercise of this power that the Jewish people in the times of the Isaiahs were supposed to resist and fight the paganism and the idolatry all around them. And it was through this power that they were enjoined to fulfill their divinely appointed mission as carriers of the monotheistic faith they had accepted at Sinai – the faith that there was only one God, that before Him there were no others, and most particularly not the works of our own hands, and that at the end of days all men would finally come to acknowledge Him. Who would have thought that the apparently obvious, and even banal, assertion that there is a difference between good and evil, and that we humans have the power to dis-

cern it, would emerge nearly 4,000 years after the birth of monotheism, and nearly 2,000 after its triumph over much of the paganism and the idolatry of the ancient world, as today perhaps the element most relevant to us – and again I speak both of Jews and non-Jews – in what so many people consider the greatest of the prophetic books of the Bible?

And yet to me it seems that this is indeed the case, because as we begin the journey through yet another millennium we find ourselves confronted with contemporary mutations of the paganism and the idolatry of the ancient world. Two such I have already alluded to. One is what the late social critic Christopher Lasch called "the culture of narcissism." Narcissism: the very word (from the Greek, of course, not the Hebrew) connotes worship of oneself. The second is revolutionary utopianism – or what the Talmud characterizes as the sin of "forcing the end" of history. But there are many others.

The war of monotheism against paganism and idolatry is the main unifying theme of the entire book of Isaiah. Reading it today, we – and yet again I speak of Jews and non-Jews alike – can hear ourselves called upon to go on fighting that same war, and in exactly the spirit in which we are commanded by a different book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, *to love the Lord our God: with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our might.*

NOTES

* After much pondering, I have decided in quoting to use the 17th-century King James Version. Even though it contains many errors, it is by far the most beautiful translation ever made of the Bible, and to my ear it almost miraculously succeeds in capturing the rhythms and locutions of the Hebrew.

I should note that the Reform movement has itself been moving away from this view and has begun to encourage a greater degree of ritual practice than the more radical founders and shapers of the movement probably would have liked.

** Despite the logical implications of this conception, I would like to think that Isaiah would not have extended it to the Holocaust.