

THE PARABLE OF JOTHAM: THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY IN JUDAISM

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The question of authority in Judaism is one of the central themes in its history, ancient and modern.

Our story, the parable of Jotham (Jud. 9:1-6), takes place during that period of Jewish history when internal tensions and external circumstances were leading to three different foci of authority: The prophet, the priest, and the king, all of them under the sovereignty of God.

The tension between what is and what could be (in the reign of the Divine on earth here and now) is a unique contribution of the people of Israel to the family of nations, as is the concept of the equal worth of all human beings that has its roots in the biblical idea that we are created in the Divine image. It is the rejection of the determinism of traditional societies and the acceptance of human responsibility for the state of the world; that is, the possibility of mending the world – what we call *tikkun olam*.

This idea has recently been restated by Thomas Cahill.¹ He was preceded by Max Weber, who believed that the fundamental distinctiveness in the religious orientation of the Occident stemmed originally from ancient Jewish prophecy: "World historical interest in Jewry rests upon this fact."²

THE ARBITERS OF DIVINE AUTHORITY

When the people of Israel accepted the Divine Covenant at Sinai, they also accepted Moses as the arbiter of Divine Authority. Moses is seen as the quintessential prophet to whom God spoke and/or in whom the Divine manifested itself.

Yet, even the authority of Moses was called into question by Korah and his supporters:

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. . . and they gathered themselves together against Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You take too much upon you seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them and the Lord is among them: why then do you raise yourselves up above the congregation of the Lord?' (Num. 16:3).

On the other hand, we have the story of Eldad and Medad in Numbers 11:23- 29:

And there ran a young man and told Moses, and said, 'Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp.' And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses from his youth, answered and said, 'My lord Moses restrain them.' And Moses said to him, 'Enviest thou for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His spirit upon them!' (27-29).

So the ideal, confirmed by Moses himself, would be for all the people of Israel to be invested with the Divine spirit.

JOTHAM AND ABIMELECH

The first time that the question of monarchical dynasty was raised during the period of the Judges was when:

. . . the men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule thou over us, both thou and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.' And Gideon said to them, 'I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you' (Jud. 8:22-23).

Thus, Gideon rejected the idea that he should become king and found a dynasty. Martin Buber concluded that this passage authentically represents, in the period of the Judges, ". . . a will of a religious and political kind in one, historically localizable . . . stage."³

Judges 9:1-6 relates the story of how Abimelech, the illegitimate son of Gideon (here called Jerubbabel), murdered 70 of Gideon's legitimate sons. Only Jotham, the youngest son, hid and escaped. Abimelech sought to do what in a later generation the prophet Elijah accused King Ahab of doing with vineyard of Naboth: *'Hast thou murdered and also taken possession?'* (I Kgs 21:19).

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With the aid of the Shechemites, his mother's kin, Abimelech sought to introduce the foreign idea of centralized monarchical leadership into the agrarian, free, and decentralized Israelite tribes.

When Jotham heard of the murder of his brothers, he went up to Mount Gerizim and uttered the Parable of the Trees and explained its meaning in the context of what Abimelech had done and would still do (Jud. 9:7-21). In the parable, the trees wish to crown a king. They turn to the olive tree, then to the fig tree, and to the vine. The olive, the fig and the vine all refuse. Then the trees propose kingship to the bramble: *And the bramble said unto the trees: 'If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'* The message is clear: It is contempt of monarchy. Abimelech as king would cause a conflagration and, as the bramble, could offer little refuge.

Note that the olive, fig and vine are three of the seven agricultural species with which the Land of Israel is blessed. They were all found in the area of Northern Samaria, where our story takes place: *For the Lord God brings thee into a good land . . . a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey* (Deut. 8:7-8).

However, the bramble – a thorn bush presumably but not certainly a species of the genus *lycium* [Hebrew *atad*] – has no useful function to perform in any case. It is an *ilan srak*, a tree that bears no fruit. At best, it seems useless. At worst, its thorns make it very unfriendly, and when it is dry it is easily inflammable and a potential fire hazard. So here we have a value judgment on Abimelech and the foreign idea of centralized rule.

At the belief level, Jotham represents the theocratic potentially decentralized idea that only God is truly sovereign. All are potentially equal and can be imbued with the holy spirit. It is a pre-democratic democratic idea. The judges are "called," as were Moses, Samuel and the later prophets. This was charismatic leadership called forth by circumstances, as distinct from the later institutionalization of charisma.

Perhaps there is the thought that a monarchy will always result in "king worship" (as in the case of Egypt), and hence there will be a danger of idolatry. At a more practical level, the individualistic Israelite agriculturalists were unwilling to forgo their free life.

At a later stage, Samuel warned the Israelites of how a king would exploit them if they insisted on having one (I Sam. 8:11-21). However, such were the geopolitical realities resulting from the confrontations with the Philistines that centralized organization and leadership became necessary.

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, 'No, but we will have a king over us; that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles' (8:19).

God then instructed Samuel to heed the people, and he anointed Saul.

FROM MONARCHY TO HALAKHA OF THE SAGES

From the establishment of monarchy in Israel circa 1050 BCE to the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, the authority of rulership was in the hands of the king exclusively. With the exception of High Priest Jehoiada, who secretly raised Prince Joash (II Kg. 11, II Chron. 22:11, 23), we are not aware of priests exerting any power. However, many prophets intervened significantly in public affairs.⁴

From 586 to the end of the Second Commonwealth in 70 CE, the issue of authority is highly complex. With the beginnings of the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the ruling power of Persia, promoting religious autonomy for the returnees from the Babylonian Exile, vested considerable power, wealth and prestige in the priests. This power, it seems, was balanced by Ezra and Nehemiah, who wished to re-introduce theocracy in Israel, through study of the Bible. Prophecy had stopped altogether with Malachi, around the middle of the Fifth Century.

New tensions are noticeable with the rule of the Hasmoneans, when John Hyrcanus combined the authority of high priest and kingship. A growing opposition came into being with the powerful spiritual influence exerted by the Pharisees, followers of Ezra and Nehemiah.

According to normative Jewish tradition: "On the day when the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages."⁵ For 2,000 years, the accepted dictum in Judaism with regard to authority was "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the prophets, and the prophets committed it to the Men of the Great Assembly."⁶ Note that the priests and the

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kings are **not** mentioned. It is the prestige of the prophets that the Men of the Great Assembly inherit.

The Men of the Great Assembly are seen as the progenitors of the Talmud and the tradition of rabbinic-talmudic authority as expressed in halakha – "the way to go" in terms of Jewish law. For 2,000 years, those who were entrusted with interpreting the sacred word were those in the authorized chain of sage-rabbis. the *hakhamim* [wise ones]. Halakha served as the bond that held the people of Israel together in all of their dispersion.

THE CHALLENGE TO HALAKHA AS AUTHORITY

That "way to go" of halakha was rejected by wide circles within Judaism as a result of the impact of modernity. If this had not happened, it is doubtful if this article could have been published in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly* of The Jewish Bible Association in the sovereign State of Israel.

For much of the Zionist movement, the Hebrew prophet represented the ideal type that it sought to renew in the Jewish State. The 2,000-year-old tradition of rabbinic-halakhic authority was rejected by most in the emerging Zionist movement. Only a minority within Orthodox Judaism sought a synthesis between a commitment to Zionism and halakha.

Significantly, Ahad Ha'am, the founder of what is called Cultural Zionism, quotes the Eldad-Medad episode in his seminal essay, "Priest and Prophet" (1894):

Their [the prophets] national ideal was not a "kingdom of priests," but "would that all the people of the Lord were prophets." They wished the whole people to be a primal force, a force making for righteousness, in the general life of humanity, just as they were themselves in its own particular national life.⁷

For Ahad Ha'am, the purpose of the Jewish-Zionist renaissance, the purpose of the Jewish National Home, was to renew prophecy in Israel by renewing the Divine spirit among many. Only thus could the Jewish people ensure its continued creative survival in the modern age and its continued relevance to the family of nations.

NOTES

1. Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
2. Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber* (New York: Doubleday, 1960) p. 217.
3. Martin Buber, "The Gideon Passage" in *Kingship of God*, 3rd ed. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1967) pp. 59-65.
4. Nathan decided the succession of Solomon, Ahijah of Shiloh instigated the revolt of Jeroboam, Elijah was active in the confrontation with Ahab, Elisha instigated the revolt of Jehu, and Isaiah advised Hezekiah.
5. Actually, there are different traditions regarding the cessation of prophecy and the reasons for it. There is an extensive review of this in *The Encyclopedia Halvrit*, Vol. 24, p. 807.
6. Ethics of the Fathers 1:1
7. "Priest and Prophet," *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'Am*, ed. Leon Simon, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962) p. 135.