

The Gods That Failed

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About forty years ago, Arthur Koestler wrote a book entitled, "The God That Failed". Koestler, who had a brilliant mind and was highly educated, had been for many years of his life a communist. Like many disillusioned capitalists who had witnessed the great depression in 1929 and the ensuing misery, Koestler felt that communism offered a better alternative. Like many idealists Koestler took seriously the marvelous socialist slogan, "From Each According To His Ability, To Each According To His Need." He imagined that the greatest degree of justice would emerge from a form of government in which the workers would actually control both industry itself and the administration of government.

Koestler and the many good people who thought like him had not reckoned on the excesses of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, and, in time, Koestler realized that the means employed by the new Russian tyrants, cruel and excessive as they were, had completely altered the goals and progress of the communist revolution. It is particularly interesting that Koestler titled his book which describes the failure of communism, "The God That Failed", for Russian communism has made of religion one of its special foes and had, in effect, substituted the will of the state for God's will.

About twenty years ago, in the 60's, a less brilliant and less educated man wrote a book called, "Do It!". Jerry Rubin was no less a radical than Arthur Koestler, but instead of advocating a new kind of economic and political system, Jerry Rubin advocated the absence of government and the casting aside of all publicly recognized restraints. Jerry Rubin was an advocate of complete individual freedom. For him, any attempt by society or the government to limit individual expression was an evil. In the communist view, the State is divine. In the view of Rubin and his anarchist followers, the individual was divine. The will of the individual was supreme and was to be honored no matter how anti-social it might be.

Thus it was that Jerry Rubin led the rioters in the Chicago Federal District Court in 1969 during the highly publicized trial. Rubin and his cohorts did everything possible to make the trial into a farce. Now, whether the defendants were guilty or not, no democracy can possibly succeed unless the procedures of the court room can be conducted with discipline and respect. Rubin understood that it was his prophetic task to tear down established institutions and to give individual freedom full rein.

It is not for us to decide here whether or not some of the causes Rubin espoused were important causes. Other people like Rubin were opposed to the Viet-Nam War, for example, but they managed to express their opposition through legitimate channels. The interesting point for us to consider now is that two decades after his war against society, Jerry Rubin has surrendered and is now a member of the establishment. Mr. Rubin is in business in New York and is preaching a different kind of philosophy. Tens of thousands of young people followed Mr. Rubin twenty years ago and risked their future on his seemingly idealistic pronouncements. Many of these youngsters gave up their college education, abandoned their pursuit of professions, and either wound up as ne'er do wells or in positions of less stature than they would otherwise have been able to achieve. Mr. Rubin, the prophet, however, has recently announced that his old God is dead, and now he seems to agree with many of us that some kind of compromise must be reached between individual and societal rights. Mr. Rubin has been able to refashion his personal life successfully, but many of those who were his trusty disciples have had irreparable harm done their life and don't seem able to reverse their path.

Just decades ago, another would be prophet achieved great success amongst our young people. His name was Timothy O'Leary. Professor O'Leary was the advocate of something called mind expansion, and the technique he advocated was the use of drugs, especially LSD. "Follow

me", called out Professor O'Leary, "and we will climb to the stars. Follow me, and you will experience sensations never known to human beings before. Follow me, and you will experience ideas the human brain has never before encountered. "We are," said Dr. O'Leary, "on the verge of a new age. Just as humans have accomplished more scientifically in the last 50 years than they have in the previous million years, so with drug induced mind expansion we can learn more in the next few years than mankind has learned in all the years which have come before".# Hundreds of thousands of our best young people heeded the siren call of Dr. O'Leary and followed him into his mystical world. Some turned back before it was too late. Tragically, many were unable to turn back. I remember speaking to one of our most brilliant youngsters who had been permanently scarred by his use of drugs for mind expansion purposes. "I think sometimes", this young man said to me, "that I am God". "Remember what God said to Moses", I replied, "when God appeared to Moses in the form of the burning bush. God said,"Do not come too close". This young man came too close. He lives in a world not our own.

So often our young people are trapped by their very idealism, by their impulse to travel to new ground, to reach up to new heights. It is not easy for inexperienced youngsters to separate the true prophets from the false ones. Especially in modern times, there is a tendency to look for dramatic new solutions and for exotic new religions. In our time, there is a prejudice against that which is old. If a body of knowledge is more than fifty years old, the assumption is that the teaching is tainted and without validity. Throughout human history, it has been assumed that wisdom lies with those who have had the greatest experience. In modern times, there has developed a prejudice against those who speak for the tested tradition.

We must admit that there is a certain fascination in the call of new prophets. Many of us sitting in this Sanctuary, for example, have been attracted to the teaching of those who preach the religion of the body beautiful. With the marvelous advancements of medical procedures, some of us have set as our chief goal in life not spiritual values but longevity and the preservation of youth. Some of us undertake extreme diets. Some have surgery on their face, others have the fat sucked out of their body. Many mothers spend noticeably less time taking care of their children and more time on the tennis court. Fathers will spend a crowded day at the office and then come home to force themselves through a grueling running session. Students will spend less time on their studies and more time in the body building rooms. The young man who lives across the street from me has in the last several months been transformed from a nice strapping young man to a gorilla. He has been pumping iron.

One of the best known gurus of the reigning health fad is Jim Fixx who wrote the book recognized as the bible of runners, "The Complete Book of Running". A few months ago, Mr. Fixx was found dead along a lonely roadside in Vermont, after suffering a massive heart attack while running. He was 52 years old. Mr Fixx's death certainly does not mean that running per se hastens death, but it surely means that running does not prolong life for everybody. Mr. Fixx came from a family with congenital heart problems, but unfortunately he relied on his running rather than on medical investigation to determine what might be the best way of handling the family problem. He thought that exercise was a cure all.

Now, since I am very much a sports enthusiast and participant, I don't want anyone saying that the Rabbi is against physical recreation. What the Rabbi is saying is that there are no magical panaceas; beware of new gurus; don't buy anything that is offered as the ultimate solution to all problems.

As we can see, in recent decades in America, we have been besieged by would-be prophets

This author's paraphrase

speaking of alien faiths and Gods. The Hebrew prophets of biblical times, whose wisdom is the more validated with the passage of time, dealt with many of the same problems which have currently been addressed by these modern visionaries. Arthur Koestler and the communists have spoken of the need to overthrow the existing government and to institute an entirely new system to affect social justice. The prophets, such as Isaiah and Amos, spoke of the need to reform the government in the service of the poor and the disinherited. Jerry Rubin spoke of the priority of individual freedom above all else. The prophets, such as Micah and Hosea, spoke of the need to grant individuals as much freedom as possible, but within the bounds of a society which was law-centered. Professor O'Leary spoke of dangerous techniques to expand the mind. Our prophets, such as Jeremiah, spoke of the need to expand and alter the human heart so that humans could care more deeply for one another and act more justly towards each other. Jim Fixx wrote about improving body health. The prophets, like Ezekiel, wrote about improving the health of the family and the community. There was something in the message of the Hebrew prophet which has stood the test of time and which has continued to inspire human beings down through the centuries. This something is the difference between a false prophet and a true one. It is difficult to sort out that difference, but we would be wise to try to discern it.

One of the differences, it seems to me, is between a one-sided and a many sided philosophy. Koestler, as a disciple of Karl Marx, would have us believe that if we only changed the economic and political system, ideal justice would ensue. The lesson of history, as graphically illustrated in the French Revolution, for example, is that even a revolution with high goals can become as bad as or worse than the tyranny it seeks to replace. Khoumani in modern Iran claims that he represents the people. Still his revolution has killed more people and is far more repressive than the Shah's regime. The Hebrew prophets were surely right when they claimed that revolution alone is not a cure-all for society's ills. There is, they taught, a higher law which must guide the revolution and serve as a restraint on it.

The communists and the anarchists, like Rubin, tell us that in the effort to achieve their supposedly higher goal, normal conventions and normal decency can be bypassed and what otherwise might be considered a crime can be committed in the name of the cause. Not so, taught the prophets like Elijah, the rights established by law earned over centuries of human struggle must not be abandoned even temporarily if the structure of civilization is to remain secure.

The goal, taught the prophets, is obtained through righteousness. The goal, the harmonization of personal and communal needs, is both the technique and the result, the procedure and the achievement. How you act in the attempt to obtain your goal significantly determines the nature of the attainment. The prophets put their teaching into three words, "Shalom s'char tz'dakah, peace is the reward of righteousness." Shalom s'char tz'dakah.

Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, comes from a verb meaning to complete, to harmonize. The word implies that peace is not to be found by running off in one extreme direction without intergrating factors that operate in other directions. Peace is the result of a harmonization, of an inclusion. A just economic society is one factor in the pursuit of harmony, but it is not the only factor; so political activism is important, but it isn't the only thing that is important. A healthy body is one factor in the achievement of an inner shalom, but it obviously must be coordinated with a healthy mind and soul. The freedom of the individual is tremendously important to the shalom of a democratic society, but such freedom must be qualified by other needs like respect for those laws which provide the very foundation for freedom. So the prophets, teachers of Judaism's rich historic legacy, would have us understand that peace is achieved only when we

integrate various kinds of truths into a balanced whole. What makes Khoumani a fanatic is that his passionate idealism is confined to a limited area of truth. In seeking only the fulfillment of his limited vision with disregard or animosity for everything else, Khoumani becomes satanic rather than saintly to most people.

Study the Hebrew prophets in our Bible and you will learn that human problems are not solved by resorting to tricks and palliatives like mind drugs and athletic endurance. Solutions come from a total way of life which is integrated into everything we do. Solutions come from a perspective and a set of values which find their expression in the little things as well as in the big things. Shalom is found in the way we treat our spouse, in the way we treat our children and parents. Shalom is found in the way we relate to our neighbors, to our business competitors, and to the stranger. Solutions are the more lasting when there is a respect for one's opponent and his/her different opinion. Solutions comes when there is a sense of responsibility between weak and strong, between those in power and those who submit to that power.

The philosophy of our prophets and of the Rabbis who succeeded them includes a respect for all human striving and learning. The Talmud reads, "All things taught with integrity in the search for truth add to the content of the truth". In our tradition, the lessons of the past are to be cherished and used as models, while at the same time the yearnings of the young for new things are to be respected and encouraged. In our tradition, the veterans in power are not free to use their power to stifle new ideas and trends, while the young rebels are not free to be able to harm themselves and society. The goal and the way is shalom-inclusion and harmonization, freedom and restraint.

Would be prophets like Koestler, Rubin and O'Leary usually turn up in a society which already has a considerable amount of freedom. When people speak less of family responsibility, they talk more of the need for individual expression. When people think less of community responsibility, they think more of mind expansion and body perfection. Such was the case during the decline of the Roman Empire which had won considerable freedom for its citizens. In time, the Roman citizens began to coddle themselves so much that Rome was unable to defend itself against the invading Barbarians.

We can continue to expect exotic prophets to flash across the American scene, so long as we have a vast army of isolated individuals who do not find their identity in family and community life. The sharp decline of once highly successful prophets, like Rubin and O'Leary, ought to cause Americans to stop and think and to go searching for a more rounded and deeply rooted way of life. The founding fathers of this nation went to the Jewish Bible for a model to follow. Present day Americans would be wise to do the same.