



CSJO NEWSLETTER

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

WINTER 2002-2003

What is the prophetic tradition?

A debate on the message of the Prophets to modern Jews

The CSJO Internet discussion group recently provided a spirited exchange about secular Jews and the prophetic tradition. Since this discussion goes to the heart of the ideology—or to the slogans—that we proclaim, portions of this discussion will be presented in several CSJO Newsletters.

Bennett Muraskin provoked the exchange of opinions about the Prophets in the Bible by claiming that they talked of social justice in a few lines but that in the main they were religious fundamentalists who were interested in allegiance to God and were not interested in reforming society. Bennett went on to maintain that our secular tradition should be drawn from other sources, from various books of the Bible and from folklore. In pursuit of this tradition, Bennett has recently published a book on Jewish folk tales that has been featured in past issues of this newsletter. “I have never seen any evidence that the prophets did more than yap. My book of folklore did not rely on the prophets at all because I am turned off by their ranting and raving. Ranting and raving, even for a good cause, is offensive to me.”

Readers are invited to contribute to this discussion.

JEFF ZOLITOR

Dear Bennett - I think you misread the Prophets. I think their (some!) ideals were secular and humanistic expressed in the vernacular of the day. Look at these examples:

Isaiah 1.10 - 1.17 Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats...Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation- I cannot

endure solemn assemblies with iniquity... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Amos 2.6 -2.7 Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned.

Micah 2.1-2.3 Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds!...They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.

Zechariah 7.4- 8.10 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When



The prophet Micah, by Jan van Eyck (1432). Reproduced in E. Barnavi, A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People (1992), p. 27.

you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves? ...Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Malachi 3.5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

Jeremiah 5.25-5.28 Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have deprived you of good. For scoundrels are

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**CSJO Conference, May 23-26, 2003
Toronto, Ontario**

Secular Jews and the Prophetic Tradition

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Jeff Zolitor

found among my people; they take over the goods of others. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy.

Ezekiel 18.14-18.20 You say, "Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.

...And of course, Jonah!

BENNETT MURASKIN

We Secular Jews also twist the Tanach to extract secular and humanistic threads, at the same time disregarding the religious content. I think it's a good thing.



Bennett Muraskin

Just as the Constitution is interpreted anew in each generation, the Tanach is too. In doing so we get to see the wonderful and enduring qualities of the work and perhaps even begin to understand its great appeal. We also get to extract those messages that touch us and apply them to our everyday lives, making the message a secular one.

If you like I can find you citations from the prophets that are full of intolerance, violence and hatred. It is one thing to rant and rave about justice for the poor, but I have never seen any evidence that the prophets did more than that. In other words they exhorted the ruling elite to care for the widow and orphans etc. but they never actually tried to organize the common people to demand social justice.

We secular Jews criticize religious Jews for twisting and distorting Torah so that it conforms to more modern ideas of freedom and equality, but some of us do the same thing by pretending that the prophets were social activists. Amos was the only prophet who was primarily concerned with social injustice. Jonah is the only prophet who did not claim to be God's mouthpiece and as it

turns out the real mentch in the Jonah story is God himself who forgives the people of Nineveh even though they are pagans. The other prophets spend most of their time accusing their fellow Jews of engaging in pagan practices and calling down on their fellow Jews the most gruesome and horrible punishments.

GERRY KANE

By any definition of the word, the prophets were not "secular." Their condemnation of the rulers of Israel and Judah was primarily based on the willingness of these rulers to tolerate other reli-



Gerry Kane

gions, which they slandered as "idol worshippers." They favored those rulers who followed a policy of religious coercion. They were not opposed to the priesthood as an institution, just those priests who deviated from the straight and narrow.

Religious believers can be committed to social justice too. It is not an exclusively secular value. Lumping all the prophets together is unfair anyway. Isaiah said beat your swords into plowshares. Joel said beat your plowshares into swords. What we really need to do is take the time to look at what specific prophets said and did. Jeremiah, for, example, welcomed the Babylonian invasion and destruction of the First Temple as just punishment for Israel's sins. A *bisl meshuge* (a little crazy), don't you think? So let us study the prophets and then we can all come to our own conclusions.

HERSHL HARTMAN

What has been glaringly missing from this exchange of quotes from the Prophets' writings is an understanding of the Prophetic movement. Both Bennett and Jeff—as well as scholars like Richard E. Friedman [Who Wrote the Bible?—overlook the profound influence of that movement on the entire Bible.



Hershl Hartman

Biblical scholars have identified a Redactor (editor) who pulled together various oral and written traditions and meshed them into the books of the Bible. (Friedman identifies the editor as the priest-scribe Ezra.) But they fail to answer the key question: where did the editor(s) derive the power to accept or reject ancient texts and to crunch often disparate and confusing lines and vers-

es together?

My answer has been and remains that it was the Prophetic movement that conferred such power. The most admirable lines in the Bible (aside from the Prophetic writings) are ascribed to the Redactor—and those lines and verses reflect an anti-establishment (royalty, nobility and priesthood) stance that could come only from an ongoing—sometimes, underground—movement. That such a movement could gain the power to edit ancient works is the result of a particular historical period: the return from Babylonian exile at a time when other power-bases were in total ruins. The royal houses and the nobility had been destroyed along with their palaces; the priesthood lost its power with the destruction of the Temple and the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem. Power—

CONGRESS OF SECULAR JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

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Purim - a holiday for all ages

Purim

Music and lyrics courtesy of Judy Seid

1 2 C Dm G7 C 5 Dm G7

The king told Vashti to come and dance without her shirt & without her pants

6 C G7 7 F 8 C G7 9 C G7 C

Vashti wouldn't do it, she just wouldn't go Vashti told Akhashverush no

10 C 11 F 12 C 13 Dm G7

Vashti wouldn't dance Vashti wouldn't dance Vashti wouldn't dance she just wouldn't go

14 C 15 F 16 C 17 G7 C

Vashti wouldn't dance Vashti wouldn't dance Vashti wouldn't dance She just said no.

The king told Vashti to come and dance
Without her shirt and without her pants
Vashti wouldn't do it, she just wouldn't go
Vashti told Akhashverush "no!"

Vashti wouldn't dance (3)
She just wouldn't go
Vashti wouldn't dance (3)
She just said "no!"

Haman told Mordekhai he had to bow
Mordekhai said "no way! nohow!"
Haman told Mordekhai he had to bow low
Mordekhai told Haman "no!"

Mordekhai wouldn't bow (3)
No, he wouldn't bow low
Mordekhai wouldn't bow (3)
He just said "no!"

Esther didn't know what she should do
Akhashverush didn't know that she was a Jew
She could have saved herself, 'cause the king didn't know
But Esther didn't hide, she just said "no!"

Esther didn't hide (3)
Though the king couldn't know
Esther didn't hide (3)
She just said "no!"

The Jews were told they could not fight
To defy the king's command just was not right
They must not answer blow for blow
But the Jews fought back, they just said "no!"

The Jews fought back (3)
Giving blow for blow
The Jews fought back (3)
They just said "no!"

Everyone's equal, everyone's free
You can't change that by law or decree
No one's above and no one's below
If they try to change that, we just say no

You gotta say "no" (4)
No one's above and no one's below
If they try to change that, you just gotta say "no"

More on the Prophets

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to use a modern phrase—was rolling around in the streets. Enter the Prophetic movement, which was not tied to any pre-existing power bases.

It is not an accident that the entire purported history of the early Jewish people is recorded in the second part of the Bible, called in Hebrew nevi'im—Prophets, even though the prophetic writings themselves make up only a part of it.

Note that Roman imperial history, like all ancient histories, relegates the Tribunes—the spokesmen of the commoners—to mere footnotes amid the doings of the Caesars. (Who has heard of the Gracchi?) Yet the Bible includes (I Samuel 8:11-18) a dire “prophetic” warning—obviously written with the wisdom of 20:20 hindsight—about the depredations that a monarchy would impose (or had already imposed, when those verses were written centuries later). Then, too, there is the amazing aspect of the Prophet Nathan’s condemnation of the revered King David (II Kings, Ch. 12). I could go on and on (and do, in The Sholem Community’s Seminars, and did last May, at the CSJO Conference), but I believe that these influences of the Prophetic movement on the Bible as a whole allowed the early Secularists of the 19th Century to see their evolving consciousness as a part of Jewish tradition, rather than a path to ethnic nihilism. These are roots we need to acknowledge and proclaim.

Since Bennett stirred his pot with his remarks, it is appropriate to end this presentation by giving him the last word — though only the last word in the newsletter. The discussion will obviously go on.

Chaver Jeff,

There was nothing totalitarian about Assyria or Babylon. They were pagans, remember, who had a live and let live attitude toward other religions. Besides, Isaiah favored the Assyrian invasion and Jeremiah urged the Jews to willingly submit to Babylonian rule! In the long run, these foreign empires allowed more dissent and freedom to the Jews than the prophets would ever tolerate.

Look how the Jewish exiles flourished in Babylon and how another foreign emperor, Cyrus allowed the exiles to return and rebuild the Temple! Now what did the prophets think of Jewish religious dissenters? Here is what Jeremiah said to such a group of Jews in Egypt. (Jer. 44)

“When the Lord could no longer bear your evil practices and the abominations you committed, your land became a desolate ruin and a curse, without inhabitant, as it is still the case. Because you burned incense and sinned against the Lord and did not follow His teachings this disaster has befallen you... All the men of Judah in the land of Egypt will be consumed by sword and by famine until they cease to be. Only few shall survive... My threats of punishment against you will be fulfilled.”

THIS SUMS UP ALL THAT IS WRONG WITH THE PROPHETS. Who should get our sympathy as secular/humanistic Jews? Jeremiah, with his threats of violence, or the Jewish men and women of this Egyptian town who worshipped a female god and refused to give up their beliefs even when confronted with the Jewish God’s own self-proclaimed agent?

I also wonder about the prophets’ appeal to the downtrodden.

I think their (some!) ideals were secular and humanistic expressed in the vernacular of the day. (Jeff)

It is one thing to rant and rave about justice for the poor, but I have never seen any evidence that the prophets did more than that. (Bennett)

The most admirable lines in the Bible...are ascribed to the Redactor—and those lines and verses reflect an anti-establishment (royalty, nobility and priesthood) stance that could come only from an ongoing—sometimes, underground—movement. (Hershl)

Religious believers can be committed to social justice too. It is not an exclusively secular value. (Gerry)

It seems to me that they addressed their message to those in power, not to the poor. Is there any historical evidence that the poor were ever influenced by what they said?

CSJO records social action resolutions

The following resolutions have been adopted by the Congress of Secular Organizations (CSJO) and sent to various Congressional leaders and the White House. CSJO members who agree with any or all of the opinions expressed are urged to send similar statements to Congressmen and other public figures.

1. The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, a coalition of organizations and affiliates from all over the United States and Canada, take the position that any action taken against Iraq should be based on a decision by the United Nations after a careful review of the evidence that Iraq constitutes a threat, and no action should be taken unilaterally by the United States.

If the United Nations determines that Iraq does possess weapons of mass destruction, and constitutes a threat to the world, we should support the United Nations’ demand for the return of weapon inspectors without restrictions or preconditions. If Iraq refuses, then it is up to the United Nations to decide what must be done or whether a military operation is necessary.

2. Since the beginning of the Bush Administration we have seen a dramatic shift in governmental priorities. There seems to be a concerted effort by the Administration and its allies in Congress to put the burden of these new priorities on the backs of the working and middle class strata of society. Evidence for these statements comes from the following facts. The deep dramatic cuts in taxes which have been, in the main, for the benefit of the wealthy corporate segments of society, segments of Congress are trying to make permanent; and we now hear that the government expects a deficit of 100 billion dollars despite the earlier warnings that the tax cuts would be disastrous.

At the same time the government is increasing, by many billions of dollars, the funds for the military, the war on terrorism, the Intelligence budget, waiving loans to countries that support our policies, etc. In the meantime the Bush administration and its allies in Congress are attempting to use Social Security funds, are already reducing the coverage of Medicare, raising the cuts in Social Security supports, have already dismantled the Welfare System, refuse to provide funds for job training and jobs, reduced federal support for the education of our children, cut federal loans to students in the universities, and are doing nothing for the 44 million Americans who have no medical coverage at all. We have also seen the passage of legislation that actually (not possibly) infringes on our rights under the Bill of Rights, and an inhuman policy on war detainees.

The Administration's priorities are shifting the burden for funding of social needs onto the states, many of which are deeply in debt, barely covering their budget, and are generally overtaxed.

We, the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, consisting of organizations and affiliates from all over the United States, urge you in the strongest terms to abandon these priorities and return to those of social compassion and caring, i.e., reestablish and strengthen programs that deal with the needs of the American people.

We need to reinstate the taxes that have been cut, reduce the budget for war and military purposes. We need to return to the judicial and legal system that was established in the Constitution, and use the principles underlying them for protecting the rights of all people under our jurisdiction. The new priorities and policies do not show us or the world that we are a compassionate caring nation.

3. The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, with organizational memberships and affiliates from all over the United States and Canada, is writing to echo the public concern in the United States and Canada, and our particular concern about the exposure of corporate corruption with the misrepresentation and fraud practiced by Enron, the continuing fraud on the part of the executives of the Adelphia Corporation, questions being raised about the practices of AOL, and the rapid increase in the number of other corporations that are being investigated. We feel that this is only the tip of the iceberg. We also feel that if the public is to regain the confidence needed too once again invest in American companies, our government needs to insure the integrity of all companies.

Therefore, we are urging you in the strongest terms to work in Congress now for the immediate appointment of an independent investigator to purge all fraud from the companies and corporations in which citizens are asked to invest.

Donations

General Fund

Joan Kurtz, NY

Gerry Revzin Scholarship fund

Ed Klein, NY to in honor of Gerry's many dedicated years as treasurer of the Leadership Conference.

Secular Jews lead the way to a more positive community

Sue Feder makes her case to the public

Recently the Baltimore *Jewish Times* printed an op-ed piece in which the author basically put forth the proposition that the Jewish community is "wasting valuable resources" in trying to "reclaim" unaffiliated Jews. Here is my unedited response to that letter. The letter was printed, but edited:

Dave Gordon believes that the Jewish community should "give up" on unaffiliated Jews ("Confirming Judaism," 12/27/02) on the theory that the Jewish community is wasting precious resources trying to reclaim people who simply aren't interested. After all, he says, "You can lead a Jew to Torah, but you can't make him pray." Perhaps the problem is not whether unaffiliated Jews can be reclaimed—that is, apparently, made to pray—but rather that the Jewish community needs to take a long, hard look at how it defines itself.

Many Jews feel an affinity with Jewish culture and millennia of Jewish history, but find no welcome in the mainstream Jewish community because they find no personal relevance in halacha, because at best they are ambivalent about a supernatural creator. I felt that way once. I identified myself as Jewish, and yet was "nicht aheen, nicht aherr" [neither fish nor fowl] because I was also a Secularist. There was no place for me in the Judaism of my parents and grandparents—the only Judaism I knew—and nobody to tell me of any meaningful alternative. I was lost to my Jewishness, and apparently Mr. Gordon would say "good riddance."

I was well into my fifth decade of life before I discovered that there are many Jews like me, who desire a connection to our history without the religious element. I discovered the Secular Jewish movement, ably served in the Baltimore area by the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah. I now study Jewish history, its traditions, myths, legends, folklore, literature, music, foods, humor—everything that has contributed to making the Jews a unique people for four millennia. I celebrate Shabbat by giving thanks to the countless unknown, unseen people who bring the wine and bread I consume while remembering loved ones—those present and those gone—and engaging in meaningful discussions about Jewish issues. I celebrate holidays by examining the real historical events underlying them, or the human connections they symbolize.

The Jews may be a unique people, but I find it hard to believe I am a unique Jew. I can't help but believe that there are many like me, who would willingly and happily re-establish their connection with their Jewishness if they but knew there is a personally meaningful alternative.

"Our people has come to its crisis, its inner and outer slavery has passed all bounds, and it now stands one step from spiritual

and material annihilation. ...[A] new life must arise, broader in scope and different in condition from what has been. ...[T]he resurrection of the people...cannot even be indulgent to its tradition. ... The Jews [have become] secondary to Judaism. ... Our young people [are] made to believe that spiritual attachment to the Jewish people necessarily [means] faith in a fixed and parochial outlook, so they [turn] away and [leave] us.... [T]he resurrection of Israel depends on a revolution—the Jews must come first, before Judaism—the living man, before the legacy of his ances-

tors,” said Micah Berdichevsky (1865-1921), and his plea has only become truer with the passage of time.

Sue Feder, Towson, MD

To join the CSJO online discussion group on the Internet

1. Go to www.yahoogle.com
2. In the search box, type in, “CSJO.”
3. The next window will give you two CSJO discussion groups to choose from: one is only for educators (“CSJO-EDU”) and the other is the one you want to join (“CSJO”). Click on “CSJO.”
4. Complete the form and hit the “Send” button on the bottom.

This discussion group is not moderated, but you will need to be cleared before being allowed to post material. Joan Kurtz, who monitors this group, will send you an email, asking you to identify who you are and with which group you are affiliated. If you are an associate member, just say so in your response and if you are a paid-up member, you will be approved as well.

Fundraising for CSJO

CSJO relies on membership dues and donations to its various funds to promote programs of educational, cultural, and social activity. The funds are:

- **The Gerry Revzin Scholarship Fund:** offered to those members who take courses in Jewish Studies. The scholarship is NOT limited to the International Institute of Secular Humanistic Judaism and may be used for Jewish studies abroad.
- **The Max Rosenfeld Publications Fund:** assists in publishing material on secular Jewishness prepared by our members.
- **The Harold Gales Community Development Fund:** supports staff activity for affiliate groups and potential affiliates in an attempt to encourage new membership.
- **The CSJO General Fund:** covers our administrative and general expenses.

Please send contributions to CSJO, 320 Claymore Blvd., Richmond Heights, OH 44143. Undesignated funds will be deposited into the General Fund. Your generous donations are appreciated and will be acknowledged in our quarterly newsletter.

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