

Identifying a False Prophet

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Rabbi Barry Block

The Torah says it's simple: You can tell that a prophet isn't genuine if he -- or she, I suppose -- suggests that you worship a God other than *Adonai*. We don't have it so easy.

Many 21st Century false prophets worship the same God we do. The difference between us and today's false prophets is that we struggle to know what God truly demands of us. The false prophets in our midst claim they really know.

False prophets in Iran, for example, insist that God demands destruction of the State of Israel -- and, lest we forget, they ultimately seek the downfall of their "Great Satan," the United States of America. The false prophets of ISIS, more extreme even than Iran's Supreme Leader, preach a monotheistic extremism that would have made even Jeremiah shudder. They conquer and murder innocents, certain that they are fulfilling divine command.

An Arkansas State Senator, who would be laughable if he weren't so dangerously powerful, is sustained by his self-righteous certainty. The Senator knows that God considers an embryo to be a person from the moment of conception, and he does everything in his power to make God's will, as he understands it, the law of the State. He has even been known to take the name of Judaism in vain: One member of our Jewish community reports that the Senator has told her that he is the real Jew, sure in his knowledge that only a person who worships Jesus can properly call himself Jewish.

Ugly words, spoken with certainty, are dangerous. As many have said before me, if people proclaim they want to kill Jews, our history has taught us to take them seriously. If a State Senator says that a Jew isn't Jewish, he is willing to take away our right to self-determination, to worship as we see fit. The danger he and his ilk present to the poor and disadvantaged, though, is greater still: Certain that all who require government assistance of any kind are flouting God's command, sure that God demands self-sufficiency no matter a person's circumstances, they would have children starve for lack of food stamps or indigent ill people die for want of funds to pay for their own medical care. If abortion is murder, and God commands death as the penalty for murder, then women's lives become expendable.

Would that I could stop there. Would that I could wax homiletical only about the false prophets of other faiths. Integrity would demand otherwise, even if recent events did not.

Years ago, we learned that the false prophecy of ultra-Orthodox rabbis could be deadly. In our Jewish tradition, as in any rational legal system, if a person is seeking to kill you, in hot, deadly pursuit, you are permitted, even required, to kill that other person instead of letting yourself be murdered.

Two decades ago, after he had signed the Oslo Accords, Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was a controversial figure, like virtually all public office holders. What was different about Rabin was that he led a country where some of the most stringent religious authorities branded him a *rodef*, a potential murderer, in hot pursuit. These ultra-Orthodox rabbis claimed certainty that the creation of a Palestinian state would spell the end of the State of Israel and the death of countless Jewish people. In other words, those rabbis marked the Prime Minister for death. None should be surprised that the young assassin executed his rabbis' death warrant.

Two weeks ago today, on Tu B'Av, the Jewish equivalent of Valentine's Day, two more, similar death warrants were executed.

First, at Jerusalem's Pride Parade, an ultra-Orthodox man stabbed several marchers, successfully murdering one of them, a sixteen year old girl. Later the same day, Jewish terrorists firebombed a Palestinian home, murdering a baby whose father, too, later died from wounds sustained in the attack. Other family members are severely wounded.

Israel's Orthodox establishment treated the incidents as isolated hate crimes perpetrated by individual miscreants. The Chief Rabbi even visited wounded Pride marchers in the hospital, a cynical P.R. move if there ever was one.

Countless ultra-Orthodox rabbis had proclaimed the Pride Parade to be a celebration of *to-*eivah**, an abomination. That's a crime punishable by death. The rabbis -- false prophets, I should say -- don't bear responsibility alone. Israel's famously competent security establishment must be scrutinized, too. The perpetrator had stabbed participants in the very same parade five years earlier. He had been released from imprisonment for that crime just three weeks before this year's parade. Not having eyes on that criminal demonstrates callous disregard for the very lives, apparently expendable, of LGBT Israelis and their supporters.

The attack on the innocent Palestinian family was no less predictable, even if it was more grisly than other recent, similar acts of Jewish terrorism.

False prophets, ultra-Orthodox and ultra-nationalist mainstream Orthodox rabbis among them, constantly proclaim that Palestinians have no legitimate claim to residence in any of the historic Promised Land. In other words, the lives of Palestinian civilians, even babies, entirely unconnected to any act of violence upon Jews, are expendable or worse, as long as they persist in living in Israel or its Occupied Territories. The perpetrators of these attacks call them the "price tag" for terrorist murders of Jews. Suffice it to say that no legitimate reading of Jewish law suggests that being of the same ethnicity as a murderer is a crime, let alone punishable by death.

For whatever reason -- because the two brutal events took place on the same day, because the murdered Palestinian was a baby, because enough is enough -- these events spurred an outcry like none of their predecessors. Israeli President Rivlin frankly acknowledged both the problem and its source. Some, and I emphasize some, Orthodox rabbis offered true prophecy, correctly identifying extremist interpretations of Jewish law and immoderate rabbinic pronouncements as responsible for the murders.

Our Torah portion teaches that we must take no mercy on a false prophet, but wipe him -- or her, I suppose -- from our midst. No, I don't suggest capital punishment for those who utter words that inspire others to murder. I don't pretend that there's a readily available military solution to the false prophecy of Iran and ISIS. And I don't imagine that we can or should impeach an Arkansas State Senator because his deviant perversion of Christianity is potentially harmful to real people, possibly even us.

Still, we must take no mercy. We must drown out the false prophecy that only some people are created in God's image, worthy of life and liberty. We must loudly proclaim the true word of our God, commanding that we love our neighbors, all our neighbors, as ourselves.

As most of you know, I plan to travel to Georgia tomorrow afternoon, to receive a Torah scroll, which I plan to carry Sunday on one leg of its Journey for Justice, from Selma, Alabama to our nation's capitol, representing the Central Conference of American Rabbis in that NAACP endeavor. I'm told that, the occasional protestor with a Confederate flag aside, the principal symbols of this march are the American flag and our holy Torah, representing the promise of America and the word of God.

Since we were young children, each of us was taught to be careful with the American flag, never to drag it on the ground or to display it disrespectfully. All our lives, we have been told to hold a Torah gingerly, not to mar its ink with our fingers or to let it fall from our hands. As cautious as we are with these sacred symbols, let us take even greater care of the values they represent, the promise of America and the word of God. Then, may every cause we pursue be true, pleasing in the sight of God.

Amen.