
MAZON AND THE PROPHETS

By Leonard Fein, MAZON founder

It is no accident that American Jews have "rediscovered" the prophets, restored them to a centrality they did not have during the whole of the time the rabbinic tradition dominated the Jewish understanding. Since the Enlightenment, Jews not less than others have been required to develop a new language in which to talk about God and godliness. To the degree to which Jews have been able to meet the challenge, we have done so by reviewing our own sources and selecting from among those the threads that would weave most comfortably, most naturally, into the American fabric.

Those threads, by and large, are found in the prophets. For it was the prophets who most explicitly addressed the contemporary dilemma of America's Jews: how to be "a part of" the larger community and "apart from" it simultaneously. The rabbis were concerned with a very different set of problems. In the centuries during which they wrote, Jews were not invited to be "a part of." It is the prophets who inspire us to insist on both the particularity of Jewish peoplehood and the universality of Jewish ethical insight.

Rabbi Hillel asked rhetorically, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" and "If I am only for myself, what am I?" These two questions frame the tension between particularism and universalism. But the universalism that Hillel himself intended by his second question almost surely did not extend beyond the impenetrable walls of the Jewish community. Today, we have come to understand that second question far more expansively; in effect, we have read Hillel's question with Jonah's eyes. And we are coming, ever so slowly, to understand that what is expected of us is to live where the two questions meet, there where particularism (read: stability, interests) and universalism (read: justice, ethics) intersect. From the prophets we learn how to bridge the gap, to restore the religious connection, to revive the understanding that ethics and politics are not separate.

In October of 1986, a new Jewish organization came into being. Called "MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger" ("mazon" means "sustenance"), it was the product of a startling statistic and a disarmingly simple idea. In the aggregate, American Jews spend many hundreds of millions of dollars each year on catered celebrations. (The original estimate, in the \$500,000,000 range, was based on weddings and bar and bat mitzvah celebrations alone.) Some of these are celebrations of "Goodbye, Columbus" proportions; most are considerably more modest. For years, rabbis have railed against excessive consumption; for years, at virtually every level of income, people have been seized by a "can you top this?" fever. What would be the response if celebrants were encouraged voluntarily to add a three percent surcharge to the cost of such functions, thereby creating a fund with which to make war against hunger?

Out of the statistic and the idea the organization, a grass roots effort, came into being. In its first year, it raised \$163,000; in its second year, \$558,000. Some time towards the end of its third year, it will reach the million dollar a year level, reflecting as many as 50,000 individual contributions. What can we learn from the MAZON experience? We learn first that there are people, in substantial numbers, who continue to care. Indeed, up to half the contributions MAZON receives are accompanied by letters expressing the

thanks of the donor. And we learn that very many people are accessible to the traditional appeal that our bread is to be shared with those in need. MAZON quite specifically avoids asking people to sacrifice for the sake of the poor; its appeal emphasizes, instead, that the joy of the celebrants is enhanced if their celebration includes this act of kindness towards the stranger. More specifically, MAZON makes its argument in classic language: At the Passover seder, we say, holding up the matzah, "This is the bread of affliction; let all who are hungry enter and eat." Citing the verse, MAZON asks whether we can expect the hungry to hear the invitation if we do not seek them out; MAZON proposes that we enable one who is hungry to enter and eat.

Citing Isaiah:58 "Is this the fast I have chosen?" MAZON, through congregational rabbis, asks that on Yom Kippur we turn towards those whose fast will not conclude at day's end, whose fast is not the holy fast of repentance but the scandalous fast of utter poverty.

The language resonates, and the number of contributions grows apace. Once, we left corners of our fields to be gleaned by the poor. Once, in Eastern Europe, it was routine to invite the beggars to join in our wedding celebrations. Today, far from the fields and afraid of the beggars, a new device.

Perhaps, then, things are not so bleak; apparently, people may still be moved by the language of kindness. MAZON speaks to people in a language they understand. It speaks to Jews as Jews.

But why should Jews, as Jews, become involved in helping to feed the hungry, who are overwhelmingly non-Jews? If, as we would hope of a religious folk, the Jews care about human pain and suffering, why should they not send their contributions directly to Oxfam or to any of the myriad other organizations that fight the good fight?

Here we return to the prophets, and to that tension between particularism and universalism that characterizes creative Jewish life. In order for the language of faith to be understood and to elicit a response, there must be a community of faith. In order to repair the breach between "faith" and "everyday life," we must act in the world of everyday life from within the world of faith – or, as I would prefer, the world of faithfulness. In order to preserve that particularity which sustains a faithful community, we must discard the concept of "Jews as Jews." That concept immediately reflects the problem of compartmentalization, for it suggests that sometimes we act as Jews and other times we do not. Religion becomes an object, an activity, rather than a way of life. In a world fully informed by faith, Jews (and, *mutatis mutandis*, others) cannot but act as Jews; that is who and what they are.

What rescues that emphasis on particularism from becoming a narcissistic preoccupation with self-interest is precisely the prophetic tradition. We are anchored by our language, and liberated by it. We nurture both the particular structure and the universal ideology that is the prophetic mandate and, if we so will it, legacy.

Comes the question: Can we move from the language of kindness to the language of justice? Can we move from philanthropic sensibility to political commitment? In the context of a serious inquiry into the



possibility of economic justice, into the religious mandate for economic justice, MAZON remains a device with important and instructive limitations. First, we learn, as we come closer to the facts of hunger (especially in the United States) that hunger is not so much a tragedy as it is a scandal (there being, in fact, enough food for all). And because that is so, the problem of hunger is not a problem that can readily be solved by charity. Hunger exists not because food is lacking, but because the will to justice is lacking.

Why then emphasize an endeavor that is essentially a way to encourage kindness?

Because, the work of justice cannot proceed outside the context of community. The story of MAZON comes to teach how the latent sense of community can be energized, how, that is, Jews can be joined with other Jews in the work of repair and redemption, and how a largely affluent Jewish community can be joined to the communities of largely non-Jewish poor people in an extended family of humankind.

The interplay between the efforts of private citizens, through their diverse associations, and the polity, through the government, is a subject of enormous complexity. The classic Jewish texts of the rabbinic tradition assume a fundamental estrangement between the Jewish community and the polity. "The laws of the kingdom are the laws"; Jews did not presume to propose public policy for the states in which they dwelt. Instead, they made "communal" policy for what were, in very large measure, self-governing communities. There was a radical disjunction between society (read: community) and state, rather than the intricate network we have since come to experience and to prize. Now, however, there is a growing understanding that in our time, God's call must rise through the sounds of the cash registers and the lottery wheels, the self-help hucksters and the religious quacks, the juke boxes and the jacuzzis, through the sounds of silence and the sounds of indifference. It is not enough to "prove" that the authentic textual mandate is to clothe the naked and feed the hungry; the proof may be convincing, but it must be heard in order for it to convince.

God asks, always, "Where are you?" But the question is not in the wind and not in the earthquake and not in the fire; it is in the still small voice. The claims of justice do not thunder; they whisper, and will not be heard above the bedlam. Here and there, from the pulpit and the polling booth, there will be an answering "Here I am." One person and then another will understand life as a response. But most – Jews, Catholics, others – will savor their daily cake, and here's a penny for the alms box now and then to clean up the scattered crumbs of guilt.

Unless we build the needed communities that are tuned to the call, each in its own language. And then the bridges that connect politics to ethics and charity and justice. On one reading, then, MAZON provides its participants cheap grace, a relief from the anxieties of lavish spending on self. On a more subtle second reading, MAZON begins the work of building community. It joins Jews to one another through language and through works; it joins those who have to those who want through acts of kindness. True, it does not yet directly respond to the question of justice, which remains a far more complex and disturbing question. Indeed, it might be argued (in fact, it has been) that by focusing citizens' attention on voluntary charitable efforts, we relieve the polity of the burden for policy reform, that by emphasizing kindness, we run the risk of postponing justice, of depressing the necessary sense of urgency that justice requires.

MAZON is therefore only a step. It moves us from indifference to charity, but the question is whether we can then be moved from charity to advocacy, thence to policy.

But a first step is, after all, a step, and in the right direction. It is a step that helps heal pain. And it helps, as well, answer the pressing question of this generation of America's Jews: Was there truth in Jewish self-advertising? Are we the good and kind and caring people we have claimed to be? Now that we have the ability to set our own course, is it the course we have for so long announced, or were our claims to decency only the self-serving consolation of a persecuted people?

A millennium ago, when we recited the words, "Let all who are hungry enter and eat," we knew the names of the hungry; we could open our doors and invite them in. Today, as likely as not, we live in hermetically sealed condominiums, and know not even the names of our next-door neighbors, let alone the names of those who wander the streets below. This Pesach, when, all across the land, thousands upon thousands of Jewish families gather to recite the ancient words, can we go beyond their recitation, infuse those words with current meaning by opening our hearts to the hungry – specifically, by contributing to MAZON the amount of money it would have taken to feed just one more guest?

If so, we will be accomplishing two things: We will, of course, be helping repair a genuine scandal. And we will also be asserting our readiness to convert ancient and appealing formulas into current and responsible behavior. We will be doing, not merely saying, the prophetic tradition.