

JEWISH PRIDE

Isaiah said: "Surely the people is grass."

And in a George Oppen poem are these words: "...I am of that people the grass... blades touch...and touch in their small distances...."

With how many more words and how much less success have Jewish orators strained to evoke that same image. (In a recent Knesset session about the problem of Israeli bureaucracy, one Knesset member suggested that a government office with too few workers can get a job done better than one with too many workers. There is a piece of wisdom which should be inscribed on our institutional door posts -- but it applies to the use of words as well.)

"The people is grass": the individual blades wither but God is constant, and new blades will spring up. That was Isaiah's meaning.

But the image is also of blades touching. There is a Jewish people as long as San Francisco Jews touch Boston Jews touch Iranian Jews touch Ethiopian Jews touch Argentine Jews, and so on, "in their small distances." The search for identity, for community, is the search for ways in which to touch.

And the main enemy to that search is arrogance. "As for the Torah, humility is her imprint," said our Talmudic Rabbis. "Humility is the greatest of all virtues." One wrote: "Every man who is filled with an arrogant spirit deserves to be hewn down like an idolatrous image." But humility is a difficult prescription; it means that "good Jews" must somehow know that they are "good" without perceiving other Jews as "bad Jews," because they think or behave in a different fashion. Each blade of grass is quite different from the others, but still they touch.

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Group humility may be an even more difficult prescription. "Jewish pride" can be a significant quality -- or it can be a mindless one. Surely we are not proud of our "ancestry," just because it is supposed to represent some fairly constant genetic stream. As Maimonides said to those not of Jewish descent: "Esteem not lightly your pedigree. If we trace ours to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you trace yours to the Creator." Yiddish writers were often more pungent than our scholars. Mendele wrote: "Among horses, pedigree plays an important role."

Jews are enjoined from the puffery of thinking that we are intrinsically better, smarter, more virtuous than other groups. We are not. Our special ancestry is tied to a Covenant, and a special Covenant responsibility. As a people, we are worthy only as long as we fulfill that responsibility.

In connection with that responsibility, when Isaiah spoke of the people as grass, he was not finally referring just to the Jewish people. All the people is grass, blades touching. Leviticus said: "The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born." And the Talmud comments on that section: "Our rabbis have taught: we must support the poor of the Gentiles with the poor of Israel, visit the sick of the Gentiles with the sick of Israel, and give decent burial to the dead of the Gentiles as to the dead of Israel, because of the ways of peace."

In the modern world arena of politics, the prescription for humility also has a hard practical meaning for Jewish survival as it often has had in Jewish tradition. Perhaps more than ever. In biblical times, what happened in China did not affect Israel.

The Jews of America, of Israel, cannot survive by their own efforts alone. What happens to the Jews of the world will depend on what happens to America. What

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happens to America will depend on what happens to the Blacks, Latinos, workers, middle class of America. And what happens to America will depend on what happens in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

Dark shadows seem to be gathering again on the horizon. Much action is called for, unencumbered by the false pride of foolish solitude. George Oppen's fuller line, with reverberations both prayerful and practical, reads: "...help me I am of that people the grass...blades touching..."

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