

THE POPE AND THE HIPPOPOTAMUS

Pope John Paul II did not seem to be a trimmer. That is what impressed a lot of Americans.

Now, there is an important place in this world for trimmers. But that's all we've been seeing lately. A trimmer is someone who sets his sails according to the winds of the moment, which is fine for sailing boats. But in public affairs, a trimmer is someone who adjusts his opinions to accomodate all of the public whims of the moment.

A trimmer is not a leader. He may be in front of the crowd, but only because he is being pushed. A real leader is someone with personal *authority* and *authenticity*. Both words come from "auto," meaning "self," or "on one's own." A person with authority is a person who is able to move people because of his own personal qualities. And he is able to move people on his own because he is authentic; he knows what he stands for, and he stands for it.

Not every authentic person is able to be a leader. But every real leader must be authentic. There's a crisis of such leadership in the world today: in the country, in the world, in Jewish life. Americans caught a whiff of that quality in Pope John Paul II; and it underlined our current poverty.

One obviously does not have to follow a person just because he is an authentic leader. But people do hunger for an authentic leader who will represent their values. The danger always is that, in their hunger, the people will follow a "strong man" in the absence of an authentic leader. The two are not the same. A "strong man" gives the appearance of authenticity, and then imposes authoritarian control before he is found out.

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"The Pope and the Hippopotamus"  
page 2

Authenticity is a simple concept. A hippopotamus is authentic when it munches plants on the river bed. It would not be authentic if it tried to chase gazelles across the African plain. An authentic American political leader, for example, is one who catches the spirit of national authenticity. If the United States is no longer authentic *as a nation*, then, of course, there can be no authentic leader.

But in a world increasingly beset by political oppression and warring factions, historic America has never been more authentic. We just seem to have lost our sense of authenticity -- that is, we seem to have lost the sense of American mission: political freedom and integrated pluralism. Our historic authenticity is there; we have had recently no leaders courageous enough to lead us back to it.

Jewish life is in a similar condition. Jewish life has not lost its authenticity; we have just lost our sense of it. Piety is not authentic enough, as our prophets told us; and neither is sheer survival, not even for a hippopotamus. But in American life and in Jewish life, even those who are capable of showing the way, are too busy trimming, winning office, building organization, and generally staying out of trouble.

Pope John Paul II was not *our* authentic, either as Americans or Jews. But he did have the ring of *an* authentic leader, and that left a wistful feeling across the land.

Perhaps he has read *Exodus Rabbah*, where God said to Moses and Aaron: "My children are obstinate, ill-tempered, troublesome. In assuming leadership over them, expect to be cursed and even stoned by them."

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