

Jeroboam: A Sinner or a Social Leader and Religious Reformer?¹

Dalia Marx

Jeroboam son of Nebat is remembered in Jewish tradition as a particularly evil and sinful man. From the tribe of Ephraim, Jeroboam was the first king of Israel following the division between the Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom. He is considered one of three kings who do not have a place in the world-to-come (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:2). The Talmud itemizes Jeroboam's sins, focusing on three serious offenses on account of which he lost his place in the world-to-come. All three are presented in the forms of Hebrew word plays on his name:

Our Sages taught: [He is called] Jeroboam for he debased the Jewish people [*riba am*].

Alternatively, Jeroboam for he engendered strife among the people [*meriva ba-am*].

Alternatively, Jeroboam for he engendered strife between the Jewish people [*meriva bein ha-am*] and their Heavenly Father.

(BT *Sanhedrin* 101b)

According to this explanation, Jeroboam was guilty of three sins that are essentially similar to the three sins that are traditionally considered so grave that one should die rather than commit any one of them:² incest, that is to say sexual offenses, since he “debased” the people;³ bloodshed, since he “engendered strife among the people;” and idol worship, since he “engendered strife between the Jewish people and their Heavenly Father.” Jeroboam thus stands accused of the gravest set of sins, each one of which merits death, let alone all three combined. As if this were not enough,

DALIA MARX (C/J02) is the Rabbi Aaron Panken Professor of Liturgy and Mishnah, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem.

the Talmud quotes Rav Nachman later on the same page: “The arrogance that existed in Jeroboam drove him from the World-to-Come” (BT *Sanhedrin* 101b).

However, when we read Jeroboam’s story in the Bible it is difficult to understand why his character has been so savagely maligned. According to the biblical narrative, Jeroboam served as a tool for God’s will, implementing the punishment God had anticipated for Solomon by tearing the kingdom away from Solomon’s descendants. It was Jeroboam who received the dramatic prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, who tore his cloak into twelve pieces, each representing a tribe, symbolizing the disintegration of the kingdom. Ahijah gave ten of these pieces to Jeroboam, promising: “I will give it to you, ten tribes” (I Kings 11:35). At least theoretically, then, we might have expected that Jewish tradition would praise someone who cooperated so thoroughly in realizing the prophecy he had been given.

One explanation of the criticism leveled at Jeroboam is that the Book of Kings was written by Judean circles and tends in general to depict the dynasty of Judah more favorably than the kings of Israel.⁴ An alternative explanation is that Jeroboam represents the division of the people of Israel. The reign of King Solomon was the last period in history when we were united in a single kingdom with a shared history. Although the division is depicted as punishment for the defective leadership of Rehoboam son of Solomon, and of Solomon himself in his latter years, and although Jeroboam merely implemented the prophecy he had been given, he is nevertheless personally identified with the division. This division split Jewish history into two plots, two separate kingdoms that on occasions even fought each other, and ultimately the loss of the ten tribes that comprised the Northern Kingdom.

The establishment of the leadership center in the north was largely an expression against the corruption of Solomon, who showed in his later years more concern for his foreign wives than for his people. Jeroboam’s revolt against the Kingdom of Judah was political, social, and even religious, and unlike other biblical rebellions (such as that of David against Saul) it was nonviolent. In this short essay I will seek to present Jeroboam son of Nebat as a political leader with a social orientation and as a religious reformer.

The Two-State Solution:

Jeroboam as a Political and Social Reformer

Jeroboam was a charismatic leader who refused to submit to the cruel tax system imposed by Solomon and his son and heir Rehoboam. His revolt erupted only after Rehoboam had threatened the already overtaxed people with further impositions: "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (I Kings 12:14). Jeroboam had previously protested publicly to Solomon after Rehoboam used public funds to build a home for Pharaoh's daughter and sealed openings in the city walls so that pilgrims could not enter without paying taxes. Jeroboam initiated the center in the north of the land in order to disengage from the burden of Jerusalem, and he did so in response to the popular rage of "all Israel" (I Kings 12:16), marking their sense of alienation from the ruling dynasty. In response to Rehoboam's threats, the people declared: "What portion have we in David? Neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse. [Return] to your tents, O Israel!" (ibid.).⁵ In this respect, Jeroboam was both just and realistic, and he was able to understand and act in accordance with the spirit of his time.

Jeroboam as a Religious Reformer

The Bible describes the festival that Jeroboam instituted—or to use its term "devised of his own heart" (I Kings 12:32)—as a negative initiative. We are told that he made two golden calves, one of which was placed at Beth-El and the other at Dan. The emphasis placed on the golden calves by the biblical narrator cannot be a coincidence; they naturally recall the sin of the Golden Calf—the enormous act of heresy committed by the Jewish people, while receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Jeroboam indeed declares: "You have gone up long enough to Jerusalem; behold your God, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (I Kings 12:28). This formula is reminiscence of the people's response on seeing Aaron's Golden Calf: "This is your God, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 32:4).⁶ Jeroboam ostensibly planned to introduce worship of the calves and to rebel against the God of Israel. However, this is by no means the only way to understand the story.

If we examine this new festival carefully, we find that it need not necessarily be regarded as an act of idol worship. The festival was observed exactly one month after Sukkot, which falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month: "And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month" (I Kings 12:32). The biblical narrator emphasizes that this was "like the feast that is in Judah" (*ibid.*). Accordingly, Jeroboam did not create a new festival, but rather instituted a type of leap year, as it were, thereby placing Sukkot in the following month as a type of Second Sukkot, just as the fourteenth of Iyar was determined in the Torah as a Second Passover for those who had been unable to observe the original festival due to ritual impurity (Num. 9:6–12). Accordingly, while this indeed constitutes a new occasion not mentioned in the Torah, it is grounded in the biblical calendar and its method of innovation is not without a basis.

Some commentators have suggested that Jeroboam reinstated an ancient northern harvest festival celebrated a month later than the occasion marked further south in Judah. The colder climate in the north meant that crops ripened later, thus justifying the setting of a later date for the harvest festival. Be this as it may, Jeroboam's act was crucially important: those who control the calendar control the guiding mechanism of the life of the people. By creating an autonomous calendar for the north, Jeroboam ensured that from this point forward the calendar of Israel—and thus the daily life of her people—would be separate from those of Judah.

Jeroboam's protest was manifested not only in the dimension of time, but also in the place he chose for his festival. By creating an alternative center for worship, he achieved his political goals: to avoid the need for residents of the north to conduct the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to undermine the centralized religious (and hence economic) force of the city. We know little about Jeroboam's religious motivation, but it is clear that he was a bold innovator, as he takes upon himself to lead the worship: "And he went up unto the altar; so did he in Beth-El, to sacrifice unto the calves that he had made; and he placed in Beth-El the priests of the high places that he had made" (I Kings 12:32). Jeroboam also sought to undermine the institution of the priesthood, which the Torah had allocated to the tribe of Levi: "And he made priests from among all the people, that were not of the sons of Levi" (I Kings 12:31). Indeed, he went up himself to the altar to burn incense. While little information

is provided about the ritual, the text states: “Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold” (I Kings 12:28), which may indicate a larger communal decision process.

As mentioned above, the Book of Kings was written by Judean circles, and its author clearly sought to condemn Jeroboam, who challenged the hegemonic rule of Jerusalem. However, his actions could equally be interpreted as a demand for cultural and religious pluralism within the people and a call to decentralize authority and ensure more democratic access to sanctity, rather than as a rejection of monotheism. After all, the Temple in Jerusalem also housed statues—two cherubs above the Ark of the Covenant, which, at least according to some interpretations, had the faces of calves. Evidently something about the calf led it to be perceived as associated with holiness and with God’s chariot. In his vision of the chariot, for example, Ezekiel describes four animals, noting that “the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf’s foot” (Ezek. 1:7).⁷ According to this tradition, the function of these calves was to carry God’s honor, not to embody or represent it. Accordingly, we may assume that Jeroboam sought to witness the Divine Presence and not to engage in idol worship. He positioned the calves at Israel’s borders—one at Dan, his capital, and the other at Beth-El, which is the place where God was revealed to Jacob, a father of the nation. Jeroboam’s act symbolizes a return to the ancient revelation and the primordial foundation of the people, while circumventing the Judean religious authority in Jerusalem.

In her historical novel *Kings III*, Yochi Brandes depicts Jeroboam as an enlightened leader with an unusual monotheistic and pluralistic vision. She portrays him making a coronation speech in which he calls to the assembled masses:

My brothers, my beloved, my people . . . I hereby announce the resumption of the ancient festivals of all the tribes of Israel. God loves all our festivals: The rain festival of Ephraim, the fire festival of Menashe, the dairy festival of Benjamin . . . And God loves the harvest festival of Judah, too, just as He loves the festivals of the other tribes—no less, but also no more. We will all continue to celebrate the Festival of Liberty, the Wheat Harvest Festival, and Sukkot—the three central festivals of the people of Israel. But each tribe will celebrate the other festivals separately, as our ancestors did before us. The separate festivals do not harm the unity of the people . . .

I direct my call from the top of Mt. Gerizim to the mountains of Judah: . . . My brothers, my beloved, people of Judah—do not

split yourselves off from us. Return to us and let us all be one people and one kingdom, as God promised to our ancestors.⁸

Brandes's interpretation has been the subject of sharp criticism, and it is certainly true that it is incompatible with the usual reading of the biblical text. But to those willing to take a fresh look at the story, this subversive reading and its model of ritual pluralism in ancient Israel are not unreasonable.

Political Dimensions of Religious Behavior

Any religious behavior and any religious text or ceremony always has political and social dimensions. Jewish prayers are addressed primarily to God, but they have other addressees, too: the fellow worshipers, and even "others" not present in the house of worship. Ceremonies and prayers form the togetherness of the praying community and at the same time distinguish it from others. When the House of Study in first-century Yavne reinstated the "blessing of the apostates" (BT *B'rachot* 28b), which is actually a curse directed at those who appear to be Jews but actually follow other faiths, this step was taken in order to distinguish between worthy worshipers and "others." When the Geonim introduced the reading of the passage "With what may one light" (*Mishnah Shabbat* 2) on Friday evenings, they did so to provoke the Karaites, who opposed the lighting of Sabbath candles.⁹ When Diaspora Jews introduced prayers for the rulers of the countries where they lived, they did so to display their loyalty (although they sometimes included subtle subversive phrases against these rulers that could be understood only by those in the know).¹⁰ With Jeroboam's new festival, too, it is difficult to separate a political and social agenda from authentic religious sentiments. Even in less extreme instances, the search for a sustainable religious experience entails many complex factors.

What makes a ceremony part of the national canon? What authorizes its status as part of the calendar? Jeroboam offers an interesting model: he established a new festival on the basis of existing elements, perhaps drawing from ancient tribal traditions, rather than engaging in ex-nihilo creation. The festival he introduced was eliminated following the loss of the Northern Kingdom. But centuries later, another festival was established in the form of "Second Sukkot," and this festival is celebrated with great splendor to this day

by the Jewish people. I refer to the festival of Chanukah. According to Second Maccabees, Chanukah was introduced after the victory of the Hasmoneans by way of a correction or second chance after the Jews had been unable to celebrate Sukkot in the desecrated Temple:

They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of Sukkot, remembering how not long before, during Sukkot, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals . . . By public decree and vote they prescribed that the whole Jewish nation should celebrate these days every year (II Macc. 10:5–10).

This spontaneous festival marking the Hasmoneans' victory in this particular year became "by public decree" a festival celebrated "every year." Since no particular halachic restrictions apply to the days of this festival, it acquired new and invigorating meaning over the generations. We should add that in the modern Israeli context, a festival has been added in recent years that is celebrated close to the time of Jeroboam's festival: the Sigd, the festival of the Ethiopian Jewish community Beta Israel. The Sigd, which marks the renewal of the covenant between Israel and God, is observed seven weeks after Yom Kippur (just as Shavuot is celebrated seven weeks after Passover). In Ethiopia, the festival marked the longing for Zion. In Israel it has acquired a new form and is celebrated publicly at the promenade by Armon HaNatziv in Jerusalem, bringing together members of the community and numerous guests.¹¹

In the Israeli context, pluralism embodies blessing and joy and should not pose a threat. Alongside the general Jewish and Israeli festivals, communal festivals are also marked, such as the *Mimouna* of Moroccan Jewry at the end of Passover and the *Saharane* of the Kurdish Jews. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union openly celebrate *Novi God* (New Year) on January 1, after a period when they did so in private due to fear of criticism from their Israeli neighbors. Rabbi Naama Kelman, dean of the Jerusalem campus of HUC-JIR, has suggested that Thanksgiving should be marked in Israel, with immigrants from the United States inviting their friends from other communities to celebrate together.

The first lesson I was privileged to hear from our beloved teacher Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D., z"l, was a lecture he gave at the URJ Biennial in Boston in 2002. I remember very well Aaron's erudition, profundity,

and beaming smile. The topic of this lesson was Chanukah as a manifestation of Jewish renewal. In his own life, Aaron provided us with a model of profound loyalty to Jewish tradition along with a commitment to sustain its vibrancy and relevance. Now that he has so tragically been taken from us, we bear an even greater obligation to realize his teaching in all its complexity and to reflect his ways in our own lives. To end on a personal note, words cannot express how privileged and grateful I am to be among the four HUC-JIR scholars chosen to hold a named professorship in memory of Aaron, z"l.

Notes

1. This article is an expanded version of a chapter in Hebrew in my book *About Time: Journeys in the Jewish-Israeli Calendar* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2018), 69–71. I thank Shaul Vardi for translating this essay.
2. See *Tosefta*, *Shabbat* 16:14; *BT Sanhedrin* 74a.
3. Jewish people.” However, this would seem to be a euphemistic interpretation, since the verb *riva* usually appears in the context of sexual relations and procreation. See Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, vol. 13 (Jerusalem, 1952), 6391–94.
4. Mordechai Kogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001).
5. This lyrical retort by the people to Rehoboam’s threats recalls a song the people had sung two generations earlier. At the end of the rebellion launched by Absalom during the period of King David’s weakness, a member of the tribe of Benjamin by the name of Sheba son of Bichri attempted to incite the tribes of Israel to revolt against the king. He employed the same slogan emphasizing the alienation between the tribes of Israel and the king of Judah: “Now there happened to be there a base fellow, whose name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjamite; and he blew the horn, and said: ‘We have no portion in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse; every man to his tents, O Israel!’” (II Sam. 20:1). Ariel Sari-Levy thus suggests that the rift between Judah and the tribes of Israel existed at least two generations before the division in the time of Rehoboam; the disengagement was unsuccessful in David’s time, but was realized under the rule of his grandson Rehoboam. A. Sari-Levy, “Israel Went to Its Tents,” *Culture and Literature supplement, Haaretz*, April 10, 2018 (Hebrew).
6. The analogy between the two stories is also reflected in the names of the sons of their two heroes: Aaron’s sons Nadav and Abihu and Jeroboam’s Nadav and Avijah. Like both of Aaron’s sons, Avijah also died at an early age.

7. Scholars disagree regarding the etymology of the word “cherub.” Some suggest that it comes from the Assyrian *karibu*, a god with a winged human form and the body of an ox. In Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot, one of the animals that carries the vehicle has the form of an ox (Ezek. 1:10). Elsewhere, the word “ox” is replaced by “cherub” (Ezek. 10:14). Accordingly, some have suggested that the cherub has the form of an ox.
8. Yochi Brandes, *Kings III* (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2008), 443–44 (Hebrew).
9. Lawrence A. Hoffman, “Introduction to the Liturgy of Kabbalat Shabbat: Politics, Piety, and Poetry,” *My People’s Prayerbook*, vol. 8 (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 1–20.
10. Dalia Marx, “Particularism and Universalism in the Prayer for the State of Israel,” *All the World: Universalism and Particularism, in the High Holidays (Prayers of Awe)*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2014), 49–76.
11. See Shai Afsai, “The Sigd: from Ethiopia to Israel,” *CCAR Journal* (Fall 2014): 133–48.