A Fanatical Future Awaits Us. Do We Care?



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I recently tried—for the umpteenth time—to stop reading the news.

The accelerated speed at which reports of politicians' corruption or analyses of the Israel-Hamas War streamed into my life felt overbearing. Witnessing terrible things without any recourse to remedy them carries no virtue, just the burden of helplessness. Investing hope in another "take" on why the world burns as it does, only for it to be disproven days later, is exhausting.

So even for a chronic news consumer like myself, this tall order felt needed. But a recent book I read is making me question my approach.

In 2015, the Israeli lawyer and novelist Yishai Sarid published *The Third Temple*, a dystopian novel set in a future, quasi-Messianic period when a Jewish monarchy rules the State of Israel, *korbanot* burn on a rebuilt altar, and Torah law governs the land. All while the Jews inhabit the Land of Israel and Amalekite enemies surround it.

While times appear mystically ripe and eschatologically sound, the land is haunted by omens foretelling looming disaster if the country does not reverse course … from whatever it might be doing. The narrator, Prince Jonathan, son of the King Jehoaz, who inaugurated this period after experiencing direct revelation from God, is the voice of *The Third Temple*, which was translated into English last year by Yardenne Greenspan.

The tepid, often infuriating, naivete of Jonathan is what frames the heart of this novel's beating struggle: Jonathan's negotiation between his allegiance to God and to his father, the King.

The Third Temple is undoubtedly a critique of present-day religious extremism in Israel today (the author himself says as much). But more universally, I see the *Third Temple* as a warning to those who hear the world shredding itself into madness but refuse to listen.

In the short, 300-page novel (large font, small pages), a cagey man purporting to be God's angel trails Jonathan to warn of God's fury at the Kingdom. He torments Jonathan with unrelenting admonishments, which Jonathan fiercely fends away.

"You haven't spoken to your father," he said. … "*He* ordered you to. It isn't too late. Go to the palace now. Your father has already returned."

I plugged my ears with my fingers, "Where are you coming from?" I cried in the darkness. Only the thick walls echoed. "How did you get in my mind? I'll call them to come take you away. You can't torture me like this."

… I sat up in bed. "I never turn to him with mundane affairs," I answered truthfully. "And you expect me to deliver your prophecy of wrath? Who am I, compared to him? An insignificant insect he can crush beneath his heel. He'll think I've gone mad. Worse yet, he might have me arrested for treason."

Jonathan's lucid fears offer a vibrant realism to the exchange, to which the ominous man forcefully rebuffs.

But my words only amused the angel. "These are the kinds of excuses Jonah tried to dismiss me with," he said. "He thought he'd escape by ship and found himself in the belly of a whale. I'm always sent to see awkward, insecure people like yourself. You have no other choice—you must muster up your courage…"

Odorous scents, sacrificed pigs, and national poverty overtake the idyllic life Prince Jonathan knew — and he is compelled to investigate not only these strange circumstances but also his obtuse worldview. And while Amalekite nations inch closer toward Israel's borders, the true villain of Sarid's book is not any nation or treasonous man, but perhaps is the fanaticism that prompted this crisis from the outset.

"A fanatic," Winston Churchill said, "is someone who will not change his mind and refuses to change the subject." Fanaticism is the idolatry of ideology, which demands obsessive submission from its subjects. In *The Third Temple*, the King and his band of sycophants embody this fanaticism, and risk sacrificing the country on the altar of their certainty.

Fanaticism is a culprit in our real world, too. Fueled by an aversion to doubt itself, it ignites political violence, extremism, terrorism, nihilism, and civil strife that burst into flames around the world. As depicted in *The Third Temple* and our news cycle, fanaticism is an epic failure to be surprised, to question, to wonder, to not know, and to be receptive to learning. It builds its foundation upon its necessary truths.

We are all guilty of fanaticism in our own ways. Salivating over surety, reinforcing our dogmas, digging our heels into self-righteousness. Social media, newspapers, table chatter are our forums of defiance. This is the dust of fanaticism.

In *The Third Temple*, the supposed angel of God transmits unwelcome news of divine disappointment that Prince Jonathan fears to accept. The voice of God is drowned out.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook believed God's voice also reverberated in the present time to all people, but it was drowned out by the cacophony of non-divine thoughts, emotions, and desires swirling inside our heads. He writes in *Ma'amrei Hareiyah*:

In the depths of the human soul, the voice of Hashem calls continually, the commotion of life is able to overwhelm the soul, until it cannot hear, in the many times of its life, this calling voice. But by no means are you able to uproot this foundation, the root and the source, of this voice, that is, in truth, the essence of human life. Therefore, we see in all human history, that its waves are always beating in this great sea of the continually calling voice of Hashem.

In violence and uproar, Rav Kook insists God's word will leave a lasting sound.

And also in those trying to flee from it and to silence it, there is no fleeing and silencing, rather the inner connection of the soul to this exalted voice is revealed more, which does not stop from disturbing in their hearts and in the rebellions themselves. Indeed, for vain are all efforts of fleeing from it and all tricks to silence it; the voice of Hashem will not stop, His memory will not end, forever it will thunder upon them, within them and in their inner souls, "the voice of Hashem in power, the voice of Hashem in glory."

If God's voice will find me anyway, as it finds us all, then why must I read the news? Maybe my indifference signals complicity, so I need to be proactive? Or maybe it's something else entirely? I'm not sure.

What God demanded of Prince Jonathan, and what He demands of us all, is the willingness to wait in the desert of confusion for His ludic roar. Fanaticism is an enemy we must all confront. The question is whether we care enough to do so.