THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE OF OPPRESSION AS PORTRAYED IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: LEADERSHIP AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

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This article examines two bargaining (accommodationist) types of leaders, the shtadlan and the court Jew, using Hebrew Bible and post-Biblical stories. Its focus is the notion of obligation as a way of understanding how leadership types can maximize the survival strategies of an oppressed group. Leaders organize, articulate, propose strategies, represent their group to the oppressor, and in general are critical to the survival and identity of the group. Different types of leaders differently affect a group's sense of its identity and sense of efficacy. This difference relates to the way obligation ties between members and between members and leaders are reconfirmed and validated.

The oppression of minorities seems to be an ongoing part of the human experience. Critical stories of Jewish oppression in the Hebrew Bible remind us of this perennial condition. These are, however, paradigmatic stories which powerfully illuminate the ways in which oppressed minorities survive. This essay examines the strategies of oppressed groups using paradigmatic Biblical and post-Biblical stories and focuses on the notion of obligation to understand why some oppressed groups survive. These obligations involve leaders and members of the oppressed group, obligations of members of an oppressed group to one another, and obligations of leaders of an oppressed group to the oppressor government. Indeed, it is the interplay of these multiple obligations which shape the strategies adopted by oppressed groups. Leaders play an especially significant role in interpreting these obligations in terms of organizing and representing their oppressed group, in developing strategies for survival and improving their status.

David Daube has suggested two models, drawn from Hebrew Bible and post-Biblical stories, which illuminate Jewish survival — appeasement and resistance.[1] Yet there is a third model — bargaining. These models are associated with leadership types who use particular strategies of appeasement, bargaining and resistance. These strategies are coherent and compelling to the group in terms of the multiple obligations which define them to each other and to their oppressor. Focusing on leadership types in these Hebrew Bible stories provides us with an understanding of the interrelated obligations which shape these

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strategies and make them effective in maximizing the survival of op-
pressed groups. Paradigmatic Hebrew Bible stories, viewed from the
perspective of a range of survival strategies, also demonstrate the in-
strumentality of an oppressed group which is not associated with state
power.

This viewpoint challenges the notion that group efficacy is actual-
ized in the context of state power and the absence of state power results
in powerlessness. The state power position argues that periods of power
in the Hebrew Bible, illustrated by ancient sovereignty, ended with
the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. This brought on a pe-
riod of powerlessness of Jews, culminating in the Holocaust. However, a
new era of power began with the creation of the State of Israel. Jewish
history, from this perspective, is a history in which the use of power
was abandoned during the diaspora. This author will argue that this
position is inaccurate. Jewish history cannot be divided into distinct
periods of power and powerlessness.

> The key to the Jews' remarkable survival never lay in either one or
> the other of these two polarities, neither of which exists in pure
> form in the real world. The Jews possessed an extraordinary ability
> to maneuver between the extremes of a quest for full sovereignty and
> a state of political passivity. To adopt either of these two strate-
> gies exclusively would have been disastrous and, indeed, nearly
> was in the case of the revolts of ancient times. Yet, the alternative
> to revolt was not a retreat into otherworldliness. Jewish history
> continued to be characterized by a wide spectrum of persistent and
> ongoing political activism.[2]

Today we assume that power means state power and wrongly argue
that power should be defined in these terms. The notion of the
sovereign state is only several hundred years old. "Power in the ancient
Mediterranean world, from the Assyrian through the Roman empires,
was concentrated in the hands of large empires; in a world of imperial-
istic powers, sovereignty for most nations in the modern sense was lim-
ited."[3] Power in the Middle Ages was divided between numerous guilds
and corporations; the state was only one of many sources of power.

The political group, as a focus of analysis, provides us with a more
universal political category, as opposed to city-state, guild, state.
Viewing Jewish history through the notion of a political group enables
us to see Jews continually exercising power in a variety of political con-
texts. Group political power can be defined as the ability of a group of
people to control its interactions with other peoples and political enti-
ties as well as its own internal political, cultural, religious, economic
and social life. Two factors to note about group political power is that
"there are many means other than physical force that political com-
munities can use to control their relations to other communities to

enforce their will internally"; secondly, power is exercised by a political group only when its members recognize its legitimacy (that is to say, that they have mutually defined obligations, some of which involve the way of selecting leaders), and that legitimacy is recognized by others.[4]

Thomas Hobbes describes the critical steps that must take place between individuals in order to form a political group. First, they must mutually covenant with one another to abide by the "laws of nature" which individuals, under the impetus of seeking peace and security, deduce through the use of reason. These laws of nature "have been contracted into one easie sum, intelligible even to the meanest capacity; and that is, Do not that to another, which thou wouldest not have done to thy selfe." They constitute a fundamental moral code of mutual obligations which define and bind the group and involve the performance of covenants, submitting disputes to the judgement of an arbitrator, in short the moral virtues of "justice, gratitude, modesty, equity and mercy."[5] Second, they must agree on the selection of an individual or individuals to facilitate group decisions and represent them. Hobbes tells us this is more than consent, it is a real unity of them all made by covenant of every man with every man:

> When a multitude of men do agree, and covenant, every one with every one, that to whatsoever man, or assembly of men, shall be given by the major part, the right to present the person of them all (that is to say, to be their representative), every one, as well he that voted for it, as he that voted against it, shall authorise all the actions and judgments, of that man or assembly of men, in the same manner, as if they were his own, to the end, to live peacefully amongst themselves, and to be protected against other men.[6]

The paradigmatic story of the covenanting process is in Exodus. "Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances and all the people answered with one voice, and said 'All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do.'"[7]

This covenant is radically inclusive as Deuteronomy describes in even greater detail:

> You stand this day all of you before the Lord your God; the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, both he who hews your wood and he who draws your water, that you may enter into sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God makes with you this day; that he may establish you this day as his people....[8]

Walzer calls this covenant a "founding act" creating a new nation of willing members.[9] At Sinai an entire people committed itself not

through representatives but each individually. With this covenant
the Jews became a political group bound together by strong moral ties.

Hobbes' definition of the establishment of group political power, as
the first necessary step in setting up a commonwealth, reminds us that
group political identity and cohesiveness, which occurs via the
covenanting process, is the first step in setting up a state. A political
group is a proto-state without the enforcement power over all the other
groups that will constitute a commonwealth. Indeed, the covenanting
process of the Jews preceded their territorial control of Israel.

This analysis of group political power is also important in helping
us evaluate the effectiveness of various group leadership modes
adopted by oppressed minorities. It helps explain why the existence or
non-existence of obligation bonds between members of an oppressed
group and their leaders may be the difference between the survival or
demise of an oppressed group. It is these leadership modes and the ex-
istence of group obligations which especially determine the success of
those survival strategies that do not use force or direct confrontational
tactics. They involve strategies that require compromise and accommo-
dation which almost seem to negate the identity of the group.

Biale provides some interesting examples from the First Temple
period to illustrate the effectiveness of different leadership modes.[10]
The highlight of this period, he tells us, was the reigns of David and
Solomon. The rest of this period was a debate between "national-
ists" and "accommodationists" which found concrete expression in the
different ways the Kingdom of Israel and Judah dealt with Assyrian
domination. Biale's iconoclastic view, of this period of Hebrew Bible
politics, is that the most successful policy of survival was undertaken
by King Manasseh, who preserved Judean autonomy for almost fifty
years using a series of accommodations vis-a-vis the Assyrians, includ-
ing adopting some of the Assyrian gods into the Temple ritual. For this
he was reviled by the editors of the Book of Kings.[11] Direct revolt, on
the other hand, resulted in the destruction of the First Temple and the
abolition of Davidic rule. "Thus the final destruction of any form of
Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel came about not because of prior
policies of Assyrian and Babylonia, but because of the victory of the
Jewish party of revolt over the party of accommodation."[12]

Indeed, the question seems to be how can oppressed minorities
maintain a sense of their own identity and integrity and at the same
time accommodate the demands of their oppressors. At times it would
seem that direct confrontation and revolt is the most appropriate way
to respond to an oppressor. However, Biale looks at the consequences of
the Hasmonean revolt of the 160s B.C.E., which initially succeeded
and then resulted in the deterioration of Jewish power, and culminated
in the destruction of the Second Temple (70 A.D.).[13]

The Roman Empire would not permit full Jewish sovereignty. Hence

the Hasmonean policy was doomed from the start. Rome would, how-
ever, allow internal community autonomy in Palestine as well as in the
diaspora communities. "The rabbis developed a Jewish life without a
temple and thereby laid the foundation for a decentralized political
existence under Christianity and Islam."[14] Biale documents an argu-
ment that Jews, far from powerless in the Middle Ages, had communal
autonomy. At times they enjoyed considerable power and at other times
they experienced terror and persecution. But throughout this accommo-
dationist period Jews did play political roles even under the con-
straints of their inferior and alien status.

Let us examine two leadership types associated with bargaining
[*accommodationist*] strategies: the *court Jew* and the *shtadlan*. These
are both predominantly accommodationist (bargaining) leaders. In-
deed, it was in the Middle Ages that these two types of leaders were
labeled, perhaps because the political circumstances would only permit
accommodationist politics. It is, however, in the paradigmatic stories
of the Hebrew Bible that a clearer understanding of these models of
leadership emerge. The *court Jew* is primarily associated with the ex-
ternal political power, the monarch. The ruler would often give the
court Jew political power in the Jewish community. This was, however,
an imposed community power, not traditionally derived. Although
court Jews often interceded on behalf of members of the Jewish commu-
nity at court, their primary political obligations were with the ruler
and severely compromised their position with members of the Jewish
community. That is to say, their role as leaders was not derived from
mutually covenanted obligations with group members.

The *shtadlan*, on the other hand, was a community leader who was
also recognized by the ruler. This individual was an intercessor acting
on behalf of the Jewish community and was the recognized Jewish rep-
resentative to the gentile government. His power was traditionally
derived, and as a consequence there was complementarity between his
service to the Jewish community and to the ruler.[15] The leadership role
evolved from the mutual obligations relating to group membership.

Both these leadership modes have been viewed negatively by
those who want to argue that direct confrontation, force or violent dis-
obedience, is the appropriate response to oppressors. Anything less re-
sults in the moral destruction and the consequent physical destruction of
an oppressed minority group. The moral and physical destruction of an
oppressed group may in fact result from the breakdown in the group's
mutual obligations, or from the group's response to the nonauthorized
actions of group leaders, or as a response to leaders who view their
obligations to the oppressor government as having precedence over
their obligations to their own group. Since an oppressed minority group
gets no external validation, group validation through a sense of the
mutual obligations of members and leaders is critical. Continual

external pressure and the seduction of power can undermine both these
leadership types, particularly the *court Jew*. That is to say, they are
vulnerable to being corrupted into relationships of exploitation and
manipulation of group members for personal aggrandizement that can
threaten the existence of the oppressed group.

Let us first focus on the paradigm of the *court Jew*, examining the
Esther story in the Hebrew Bible and the comments by Josephus, a Jew-
ish post-Biblical historian, on the obligations of group leaders and the
limits on violent resistance. With regard to resistance and violent re-
sistance, the Esther story does not seem to suggest moral limits on the
use of violence directed against the enemy. Esther defines her obliga-
tions to the Jews primarily as an obligation to maximize their survival
and works out a strategy involving bargaining and violent resistance in
which the end justifies the means. The problematic obligations
dilemma of the *court Jew* is also a critical part of the story — Esther, as
a *court Jew*, has obligations to her group and to her king.

There are five major characters in the story — Esther, Mordecai,
King Ahasuerus, Queen Vashti, and Haman — which opens with a
banquet given by the king for all his princes, nobles, army chiefs and
governors. Queen Vashti is summoned by the king to "show the people
and princes her beauty; for she was fair to behold."[16] Queen Vashti re-
fuses to appear. Her notions of propriety, modesty, and queenly behav-
ior take precedence over the command of the king. There appear to be
no political overtones. She does not issue a proclamation on women's
rights; she does not publicly denounce the king on the basis of a higher
law. She is not Antigone. Her actions seem to resemble those of a civil
disobedient, refusing to comply with an order of the king. But she issues
no public statement explaining her actions or confronting the king's im-
moral, illegal order. Perhaps the absence of such actions tells us that
Queen Vashti did not see herself as a member of an oppressed minority.
She saw herself as a royal personage whose dignity was offended —
the sign of majority group membership and identification.

The king, on the advice of his wise men, sends letters to all the
provinces which are to be publicly disseminated that "every man be
lord in his own house."[17] His wise men have advised the king that he
must act quickly, for if this action of the queen becomes known to all
women, they will look with contempt upon their husbands. With re-
gard to the consequences for Queen Vashti, we are told that the king
would choose a new queen among all the beautiful women assembled for
him.

The Jews, under the reign of King Ahasuerus, are an oppressed mi-
nority. Mordecai was among the captives carried away from Jerusalem.
He has raised Esther, the daughter of his uncle, as his daughter. Es-
ther was among the many young women gathered up by the king's men.
Following Mordecai's advice, Esther conceals her Jewish identity. He

urges her to "pass," to disguise her own identity, to augment her chances of being chosen as the new queen. Esther does not protest. Perhaps as a member of an oppressed minority, the conflict with the majority culture is always a potential source of pain. The possibility of relief from this tension might be welcomed. What about her obligations to other oppressed Jews? Does she believe that if she is chosen to become queen she might have power to help her people? Esther has been morally acculturated, as a Jewish woman, to have her obligations defined by men, in this case Mordecai. From the point of view of the narrator of the story, "passing" is not an outrageous request, it is not a betrayal of members of her group. The ruse succeeds and she is chosen as the new queen.

Mordecai overhears two of the king's eunuchs plotting to kill the king, and he gives this information to Queen Esther, which she conveys to the king in Mordecai's name. Queen Esther takes the first step in becoming a *court Jew*. Daube, defining this particular role, occupied by members of oppressed minorities, says the following:

> The court Jew remains faithful to his origins, yet also has sympathy with the — fundamentally hostile — ruling power. Indispensable to the latter by virtue of his extraordinary service, he is in a position to obtain favors for his kindred — not to mention his personal exaltation. All the time, however, he is a full member of neither camp, in fact, both are suspicious of him if not downright out for his blood.[18]

How many *court Jews* initially conceal their identity? They justify this concealment by telling themselves that sufficient services to the ruler will pave the way for an acceptance of their true identity which will permit them to obtain favors for their own people.

Esther's threshold of righteous indignation also appears to be much higher that Mordecai's, as is demonstrated by his refusal to bow down to Haman, the king's prime minister. He states that he is a Jew, meaning that such actions on his part would be a repudiation of his religious commitments. He was in effect asking for dispensation based on his religious beliefs. For Mordecai, this was a critical identity issue, a line crossing of immense personal consequence. But from the perspective of the narrator of the Esther story, "passing," for Esther, does not pose this kind of moral dilemma. Nor does Esther seem concerned that her people will view her actions as a betrayal. Perhaps Esther believes that she will be in a special position to help her people. That is to say, we may admire Antigone and her dramatic confrontation with the oppressor Creon over issues of conscience, but this may not be the most effective strategy for improving the welfare of an oppressed group.

Haman's response to Mordecai's act of civil disobedience is a resolve not only to destroy Mordecai but to eradicate all the Jews

throughout the empire. The language that Haman uses to justify the annihilation of the Jews is the age-old rationalization used by oppressors of minorities.

> There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's law, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed.[19]

Haman's proposal to destroy all the Jews and plunder their goods is accepted by the king. When Mordecai gets news of this plan, he sends word to Esther, entreating her to supplicate the king to revoke his edict. Esther tells him that she risks death if she attempts to see the king without being summoned. Mordecai reminds Esther of her vulnerability should her identity be revealed. "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews." She is the queen but she is in fact a *court Jew*.

The role of the *court Jew* in this story is further complicated by the king's remembering that he did not bestow any honors on Mordecai for his good deed in saving his life. What are the king's obligations to Mordecai, an announced enemy? His obligation, the king decides, will be met by a public acknowledgement by Haman of Mordecai's service to the king. This further intensifies Haman's resolve to destroy all Jews, particularly Mordecai, who does not have any status at court at this juncture, but is seen by Haman as a potential threat to his position.

It is, however, Esther's plan which leads to Haman's downfall and the reversal of the king's edict. She prepares two special banquets for the king and Haman. Direct action, as Esther assesses the situation, will not yield the results she seeks. After it is clear that the first banquet has pleased the king and taken Haman off his guard, she tells the king that she will present her petition after the second banquet. At the conclusion of this second successful dinner, she reveals her Jewish identity to the king and Haman and pleads for her life and the lives of her people, emphasizing the economic loss to the king should the Jews be annihilated. Is she demonstrating her obligations to the king by her concern for these potential economic losses, or is this a clever appeal motivated by obligations to her people? The king responds by ordering Haman's death, giving his house to Esther and elevating Mordecai to Haman's position.

Mordecai issues a counter edict allowing Jews to slay their enemies and plunder their goods. "So the Jews smote all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them."[20] Over 83,000 enemies of the Jews are slain. These are preemptory actions, which suggests that moral limits are non-existent on the amount of violence employed by oppressed

minorities against their oppressors. This, of course, is the nightmare of oppressors. Restraint is exercised only with regard to plunder. They took no plunder, perhaps in recognition that their present leverage was temporary and their long-range economic contribution provided a more compelling protection. It is also a revenge story that is quite rare for oppressed minorities and clearly related to the high positions occupied by Esther and Mordecai, two unusual positions for *court Jews*. The intercessions of *court Jews* on behalf of their people do not become institutionalized. As a consequence, an oppressed minority is always aware that its good fortune is precarious.

The story ends praising Mordecai: "and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people."[21] This flattering portrait of *court Jews* could only have been written by someone single mindedly sympathetic to *court Jews*. The more complex side of the Esther-Mordecai portraits is found in the writings of Josephus.

Josephus was a Jewish general who surrendered his forces and defected to the Romans during the Jewish war with Rome in 67 C.E. He developed a close relationship with two Roman emperors, was given Roman citizenship, and resided in Rome where he wrote a history of the Jewish war with Rome. His claimed service to his people after his surrender consisted in saving the lives of some 60 Jews, including his brother. The events of his surrender involve a severing of his obligations to his community and a justification for his shift in allegiance. Josephus described himself as a courageous, inventive Jewish general. He commanded a small group of Jewish soldiers willing to give up their lives in what to him had clearly become a lost war. The Romans offered Josephus sanctuary which he wanted to accept:

> Inasmuch as it pleaseth Thee to visit Thy wrath on the Jewish people whom thou didst create, and all the prosperity hath passed to the Romans, and because Thou didst choose my spirit to make known the things to come, I yield myself willingly to the Romans that I may live, but I solemnly declare that I go, not as a traitor, but as Thy servant.[22]

He counseled mass surrender, which was viewed by his comrades as a betrayal of the Jewish community. They countered with the solution of mass suicide, which Josephus ostensibly accepts, drawing lots and killing each other in turn, as a way of preserving their honor. "Without hesitation each man in turn offered his throat for the next man to cut, in the belief that a moment later his commander would die too."[23] Josephus was left with one other man. He used persuasion, they made a pact, and both remained alive. When Jews in Jerusalem found out about his surrender, "they reviled him as a coward, some as a traitor; the City seethed with indignation and nothing was too bad to

say about him." Their reverses and disasters added fuel to the flames
and they sought revenge on Josephus.[24] This is a side of the portrait of a
court Jew that we did not see in the Esther story. The group disap-
proved his decision to serve the Romans. It represented to them a pri-
mary shift in political and moral obligations. He is viewed by the
Jewish community, unlike Esther and Mordecai, as self-serving. Com-
munity approval for the *court Jew* is based on implementing successful
survival strategies, which Esther and Mordecai have temporarily
done. However, the basic flaw of *court Jews*, which taints Josephus as
well as Esther and Mordecai, is that their primary political obligation
is to the oppressor.

Let us now examine another type of accommodationist leader, the
shtadlan, a community validated leader. A paradigmatic *shtadlan*, in
the Hebrew Bible, is the wise woman of Abel in the Sheba story, who
has to deal with the threatened destruction of her entire community.[25]
Sheba, a soldier in the service of David, urges the men of Israel to
withdraw their allegiance to King David. This is an act of insurrec-
tion, with the potential of civil war. King David dispatches Joab, his
general, to end the rebellion. Sheba and his kinsmen seek shelter in
Abel of Betmaacah. Joab and his troops begin the siege of the city. A
wise woman from the city reminds Joab that she as well as the other
inhabitants of the city are among the peaceful and faithful in Israel,
and that the community has a reputation for negotiating complex is-
sues. Joab tells her that he does not want to destroy the community. If
they give up Sheba he will withdraw the siege.

> And the woman said to Joab, "Behold his head shall be thrown to
> you over the wall." Then the woman went to all the people in her
> wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba, the son of Bichri, and
> threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet, and they dispersed
> from the city, every man to his home. And Joab returned to
> Jerusalem to the king.[26]

The commentary on this story is extensive because it deals with an
issue that severely tests group obligations. What is the proper response
of a group if the oppressor presents two alternatives — handing over a
single member for killing or killing all the members of the community?
The statement in Deuteronomy is viewed as the original teaching on
this question:

> If a man is found stealing one of his brethren, the people of Israel,
> and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall
> die; so you shall purge the evil from the midst of you.[27]

They shall not give up a single individual from Israel. This
Deuteronomic law, in relationship to an unnamed individual, is still

the teaching today. The request for a named person is more problematic, particularly if the threat comes from a government which is likely to endanger a larger number of people. It is also viewed as less arbitrary. The case of Sheba would seem to illustrate this distinction, that is, Joab calls for the surrender of Sheba, a dangerous rebel. Another point is that a named person does not involve the community in the guilt of selection which results in the arbitrary shattering of community obligations.

However, these arguments in favor of surrendering a named person, according to David Daube, met with considerable opposition. Daube focuses on the conflict between two rabbis on this issue that emerged in the middle of the second century A.D. during the Hadriatic persecution. The "inside" and "outside" distinction was developed by one of these rabbis from the story of Sheba. "Inside" signifies at the mercy of the oppressor there is no chance to survive; "outside" is the case where the community is threatened but has the chance to escape. With the "outside" case the demand must be declined; with the "inside" case community survival mandates compliance. The woman of Abel is referred to as wise because she makes this "inside-outside" distinction: the group and the named individual are trapped "inside." The rabbi underlines the Biblical story line that "she went to all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba...and threw it out to Joab."[28] The named individual, threatening the existence of the community, had to be sacrificed.

Perhaps the most interesting commentary on the wise woman of Abel story is provided by a fifth century A.D. rabbi. The interpretation emphasizes her role as a *shtadlan* and provides an analysis of how a community leader develops survival strategies involving the community's acceptance of a reinterpretation of communal obligations. According to this commentary, the wise woman of Abel has obtained from Joab the assurance that if Sheba is turned over the city would be spared. She knows that the community will raise the Deuteronomic restriction on handing over a Jew for killing, so she begins by telling the citizens that the general demanded 1,000 persons. The citizens tried to figure out how this might be worked out in terms of households. She then pretended to carry out further negotiations with Joab and reports back that he is willing to reduce it to 500. There followed further reductions to 100 and then 10. In the end she told them that the general would accept one, Sheba, who was not even a member of the community of Abel. It is at this point that the community executes Sheba and his head is thrown over the wall.[29]

The *shtadlan*, the wise woman of Abel, fulfills the role of community representative. Her authority is traditionally rooted, her wisdom is recognized, but she needs to develop the people's approval for her

plan to save the community. Consultation and authorization are essential for this leader to keep her standing with the community and the government.

An even more powerful instance of the *shtadlan* is found in the account written by Philo, a Jewish philosopher, of the response of the Jewish community to the edict issued by the Roman Emperor Gaius in 40 A.D. Gaius ordered Petronius, the Roman viceroy of Syria, to place a gigantic statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem. Philo's description of the mobilization of the Jewish community is compelling.

> While they were thus lamenting, the inhabitants of the holy city and the rest of the country hearing what was afoot marshalled themselves as if at a single signal, the signal which their common situation gave them, and issued forth in a body leaving cities, villages and houses empty and in one onrush sped to Phoenicia where Petronius chanced to be....They were divided into six companies, old men, young men, boys, and again in their turn old women, grown women, maidens.[30]

Petronius summoned the groups to approach him. Then the body of elders, *shtudt*, came forward and spoke. They reassured Petronius that they were non-violent:

> We are unarmed as you see, though some accuse us of having come as enemies at war...(we) present our bodies as an easy target for the missiles of those who wish to kill us.[31]

They will willingly turn over all their possessions to the Emperor. In return they ask only that no changes be made to the Temple. If they cannot persuade Petronius to make an appeal to the Emperor, they are prepared to commit a mass act of suicide. "When we are dead let the prescript be carried out; not God himself could blame us who had a twofold motive, respectful fear of the emperor and loyalty to the consecrated laws." The elders ask Petronius for a delay in placing the statue "so that we may choose a body of envoys and send them to seek an interview with our lord."[32] Petronius is powerfully moved and postpones the action.

The *shtadlan* in this instance is a committee of elders, *shtudt*, authorized by the Jewish community in Palestine to speak for them. The elders use authorized language in their plea to Petronius. They are an extension of the group. Their mass suicide pact could only be arrived at through a process of mutual promising. It is a way for the community to meet their political obligations to the emperor and their moral obligations to each other and God.

The *shtudt*, unlike the *court Jew*, is initially legitimized by the community. They are integral members of the group and are authorized by the group to act as their agents to the external world. Their shared

obligations with community members reinforce their ongoing authority within the group, which is the basis of their recognition by the oppressor government.

The *court Jew*, on the other hand, is initially legitimized by the oppressor government. It is his particular expertise, needed by the government, that provides the Jew with his entree into court. With this connection in hand, it then becomes possible for the *court Jew* to use his influence to help members of the community. His authority in the community is important only insofar as it is helpful to the government's business. The *court Jew*, as a consequence of the priority of the government connection, is much more vulnerable to corruption, in the sense of focusing on his personal interests rather than community concerns. His obligations tend to be primarily tied to the ruler. The case of Esther illustrates this. She must be reminded and threatened by Mordecai to focus on the plight of her community. And the solution that she develops is one that maintains her primary political obligation to the king. She manages also to save her people, but it is an imposed solution, one which underlines her and Mordecai's position as *court Jews* as the critical elements in their rescue.

Josephus' efforts to discourage the mutual suicide pacts of his comrades is another case in point. Josephus has accepted the defeat of the Jews and is convinced that his own surrender is the only appropriate response. He has already been made an offer of service by the Romans if he surrenders. His fellow soldiers have not been given this guarantee and his own survival strategy takes precedence over his obligations to his comrades. He saves himself but betrays their trust.

This essay has examined two bargaining (accommodationist) types of leaders, the shtadlan and the *court Jew*, using Hebrew Bible and post-Biblical stories. Its focus has been the notion of obligation as a way of understanding how leadership types can maximize the survival strategies of an oppressed group.

Leaders are clearly significant in the life of oppressed political groups, as these stories illustrate. They organize, articulate, propose strategies, represent their group to the oppressor, and in general are critical to the survival and identity of their group. Different types of leaders differently affect a group's sense of its identity and sense of efficacy. This difference relates to the way obligation ties between members and between members and leaders are reconfirmed and validated.

The Esther story, on the surface, is a story of a successful survival strategy orchestrated by a *court Jew*. But in fact emphasizes the reliance of the group's survival on the political obligations that bind Esther to the king. The people are made more aware of their helplessness, their dependence on non-controllable factors external to the group, i.e., the relationship between Esther and the king. The group is not

internally empowered, which can only occur when survival strategies are forged on the basis of confirming and validating group obligations.

The Josephus story gives us a more detailed view of how Josephus became a *court Jew*. The process involved severing moral and political obligations with a defeated, oppressed group and transferring them to the powerful oppressor. The mutual suicide pact of his comrades is a dramatic example of a last attempt by a political group to maintain control of its fate as a group — a symbol of empowerment which is betrayed by Josephus and made to seem futile in the eyes of the Romans. The threat of mutual suicide presented by Josephus to the Romans might have played out differently if Josephus represented himself to the Romans as a leader of a group of Jews who were ready to die at their own hands rather than accept the dishonor of enslavement. The impact of this kind of group empowerment, created by mutual covenanting, can have a profound effect on an oppressor as we saw in the statue of Gaius story.

The *shtudt*, in the statue of Gauis story, are authorized group agents whose role is to develop strategies that involve strengthening the group's mutually shared obligations and sense of identity. They restate these to Petronius. This is a group empowering process. The *shtadlan*, the wise woman of Abel, fashions a solution in which the group must reexamine its mutual obligations and arrive at a restatement of these obligations. It is a reconfirming and empowering process in which the group rearticulates its identity and reasserts control over its destiny as a group. In both stories the *shtadlan* reinforces the group's mutual obligations which is the substance of the group's sense of identity and the basis for survival as an oppressed minority.

Notes

1. David Daube, *Appeasement or Resistance, and Other Essays in New Testament Judaism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

2. David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 6.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), p. 214.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-229.

7. *Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments*, revised standard edition (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1982), Exodus 19:8, p. 65.

8. *Ibid.*, Deuteronomy 29:10, p. 183.

9. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 76.

10. The building of the First Temple is dated 960 B.C.E. by *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), I Kings 6:16, p. 367, fn. 6a.

11. *The Jerusalem Bible* dates the reign of King Manasseh as 687-642 B.C.E.

12. Biale, p. 17; the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, is dated 589 B.C.E., who responded to the rebellion of King Zedekiah, *The Jerusalem Bible*, II Kings 24:12, p. 424. The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah describes the rebuilding of the Second Temple, 1:11, which *The Jerusalem Bible* dates as 538 to 515 B.C.E., p. 426.

13. See the Chronological Table for critical events in Palestine 66 to 70 A.D. in Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Tr. G.A. Williamson, notes E. Mary Smallwood (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), pp. 479-482.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

16. *Holy Bible*, The Book of Esther, pp. 444-447.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 440-441.

18. David Daube, "Typology in Josephus," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. XXXI (Spring 1980): 33.

19. *Holy Bible*, The Book of Esther, p. 442.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 445.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 447.

22. *The Jewish War*, p. 217.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

25. *Holy Bible*, II Samuel 20.

26. *Ibid.*, 20:21-22, p. 292.

27. *Ibid.*, Deuteronomy 24:7, p. 177.

28. David Daube, *Collaboration with Tyranny in Rabbinic Law* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 29.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

30. Philo, X *The Embassy to Gauis*, Tr. F.H. Colson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1971), p. 117.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-125.