Jonah's Dilemma

By Michael Oren and Mark Gerson
The Wall Street Journal, September 21, 2007

This year, as on every Yom Kippur, Jews throughout the world will recite the Book of Jonah, one of the Hebrew Bible's shortest and most enigmatic texts. Jonah is the only Israelite prophet to preach to Gentiles, and the only prophet who clearly hates his job. And yet Jews read the book on their holiest day of the year because of its message of atonement and forgiveness. But Jonah also conveys crucial lessons for all Americans as they grapple with crises in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East and yearn for far-sighted leadership.

"Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it," God commands Jonah, explaining that the Assyrians must repent for their sins or face divinely-unleashed destruction. The task seems straightforward, yet Jonah balks. He tries to flee, first to sea and later to the desert. If Nineveh heeds his warnings and is spared, its citizens will later question whether the city was really ever in danger and assail Jonah for forcing them to make needless sacrifices. But if Nineveh ignores his exhortations and is destroyed, then Jonah has failed as a prophet. Either way he loses -- that's the paradox of prophecy. And so he bolts, only to discover that God will not let him out of that bind. Jonah must be swallowed by a big fish before begrudgingly accepting his mission.

Jonah's quandary is routinely encountered by national leaders, especially during crises. Winston Churchill, for example, prophetically warned of the Nazi threat in the 1930s, but if he had convinced his countrymen to strike Germany pre-emptively, would he have been hailed for preventing World War II or condemned for initiating an unnecessary conflict? As president in 1945, Harry Truman predicted that Japan would never surrender and that a quarter of a million GIs would be killed invading it. And so he obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, only to be vilified by many future historians. But what if the atomic bombs were never dropped and the Battle for Japan claimed countless casualties -- would history have judged Truman more leniently?

Recent presidents, in particular, have struggled with such dilemmas while wrestling with the question of terror. Jimmy Carter failed to retaliate for the takeover the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Ronald Reagan pulled the U.S. Marines out of Beirut in 1983 after Islamist bombers destroyed their headquarters, and Bill Clinton remained passive in the face of successive al Qaeda attacks. And yet, had these presidents gone to war, would Americans today credit them with averting a 9/11-type attack or would they have been denounced for overreacting? If American leaders had stood firmly earlier in Iran, Lebanon or Afghanistan, would U.S. troops today be battling in Iraq?

President Bush presents a striking example here. After 9/11, he cautioned that the United States would again be attacked unless it acted pre-emptively in Iraq. But while there is no way of knowing whether terrorists would have struck America if President Bush had refrained from invading Iraq, many Americans now denounce the president for initiating an avoidable, unwinnable war. This is the tragedy of leadership. Policy makers must decide between costly actions and inaction, the price of which, though potentially higher, will ultimately remain unknown -- a truly Jonah-like dilemma.

Unlike presidents, of course, Jonah knew the outcome of his decision: A penitent Nineveh would not be destroyed by God. And yet he so feared the paradox of prophecy that he risked his life to escape it. In the end, the citizens of Nineveh repented and were saved -- and the Book of Jonah was revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

America's leaders, by contrast, are unlikely to replicate Jonah's good fortune. They must decide whether to keep troops in Iraq, incurring untold losses of American lives and resources, or whether to withdraw and project an image of weakness to those who still seek to harm the U.S. If diplomatic

efforts fail to deter Iran from enriching uranium, American policy makers will have to determine whether to stop the Islamic Republic by force or coexist with a highly unstable, nuclear-armed Middle East. They will be reproved for the actions they take to forestall catastrophe, but may receive no credit for averting cataclysms that never occur. For Mr. Bush and his successors, this will remain the tragic dilemma of leadership. It is an onus worth contemplating on this and every Yom Kippur.

Mr. Oren, a senior fellow at the Shalem Center and author of "Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present," is a visiting professor at Yale. Mr. Gerson is co-founder and chairman of the Gerson Lehman Group.

Presented with permission of author.