
In Memoriam

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg (1921-2006) *Defender of the Defenseless*

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, who died April 17, was a rare combination of scholar, historian, teacher, religious leader, and political leader—a bold fighter for truth and human rights. What made him special in all his endeavors was his mission to “defend the defenseless,” a mission that he considered to be at the heart of Judaism.

Hertzberg was a man of principle, who did not cater to public opinion, and who had little regard for those who did. He had required of his suburban New Jersey congregation an independent pulpit, where he would not be bound to the interests (and prejudices) of a board of directors or monied patrons of the synagogue, and he used this independence well, speaking out for “unpopular” but righteous causes. His role as a rabbi was not as a decoration, he said, for the congregation, performing at life events and making people feel comfortable, but as a keeper of their conscience.

Over his long career, this conscience-keeping often led him into the center of political controversy. He marched with Martin Luther King in 1963, championed civil rights, and spoke up for Palestinian rights. He was a founding member of Peace Now.

Hertzberg was born in Poland into a Hasidic rabbinical family, where it was expected that he would continue the long tradition. He and his family came to America when he was five, eventually settling in Baltimore. Although he broke with fundamentalism, Hertzberg maintained the tradition of righteousness of his father, an Orthodox rabbi. The elder Hertzberg in 1931 had walked out on his Baltimore congregation when they objected to having a visiting black Rabbi lead the prayers; he walked out with his arm around the black visitor, telling the congregation that they had insulted a human being made in the image of God.

Hertzberg served as president of the American Jewish Policy Foundation and the American Jewish Congress, and vice president of the World Jewish Congress. He worked closely with Nahum Goldmann, and continued in Goldmann’s tradition, despite opposition from more pragmatic Jewish leaders.

Two years ago, Hertzberg intervened on the political situation with an interview in *EIR* in which he stated

bluntly: “Sharon and Bush will fry in hell” for what they had done to retard Mideast peace. When asked about Lyndon LaRouche’s policy of economic development for the Mideast, Hertzberg said: “It’s the only way. . . . We’ve got to create a situation or situations in which Jews and Arabs have a stake together; Israelis and Palestinians, in not tearing up Israel/Palestine. And the only way you’re going to do this, is not quickly by declarations, but slowly, by economic development.”

Hertzberg had often been under attack for his views, and this and a subsequent interview brought him under tremendous pressure from the neo-cons. The Cheney/Bush crowd couldn’t stand to have someone of his stature criticize them publicly, he explained, and so they sent their neo-con wolves against him.

Just before his last illness, the rabbi was organizing a “Committee To Defend the Constitution,” soliciting founders for the group from among his wide circle of acquaintances. He wrote in the organizing statement: “Many people in the United States are increasingly aware, and fearful that the Constitution is in danger. . . . At the very least, Vice President Cheney must be challenged for his attacks on the Constitution in the one forum which the Constitution has provided. He must face a trial of impeachment.”

Among Hertzberg’s legacy are more than a dozen books and scores of articles and commentaries on Jewish history and on contemporary affairs. The most riveting of his works is the story of his own life, *A Jew in America: My Life and a People’s Struggle for Identity*, published in 2002. For Jews and non-Jews alike, this memoir is an absorbing look at what shaped this remarkable man, and what it means to follow principle, and not the crowd. It brings alive the positive values of Hasidic and Orthodox Judaism (both of which are foreign to most assimilated Jews). He also makes clear the wrong-headedness of a Jewry that since the Six Day War has focussed its Jewish identity on the Holocaust, instead of religious values.

Rabbi Hertzberg concluded his Memoir with a traditional prayer whose words are appropriate to mark the end of his life: “The work is concluded, and may it add to peace. All praise to God, Creator of the world.”