

“Gazing on Tyrants with a Dazzled Eye”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

The charisma of power is ancient and dangerous. A succession of artists was enchanted as they watched Napoleon turn from a historical world figure into a petulant despot. The sycophancy of intellectuals to the tyrants of the twentieth century — even when outside the tyrant’s orbit of power — is a too familiar story. The communists and fascists had a parade of adoring writers, artists, and musicians worshipping their malign authority. Above the throne of each ruler should be engraved the verse of Wordsworth: "An accursed thing it is to gaze/On prosperous tyrants with a dazzled eye."

How does one keep equilibrium in the face of power? By believing in something greater than human ambition. From Rabbi Akiba teaching Torah in defiance of Rome to Natan Sharansky clinging to the book of Psalms in a Soviet prison camp, power has been diminished by the recognition that transcendence dwarfs fleeting human achievement.

When Moses comes before Pharaoh he sees not the grandeur of the empire but the smallness of the human being. The blessing recited when one sees a ruler blesses not the ruler, but God, "who has given of His power to flesh and blood." Those who appreciate the Source of power will acknowledge human authority without being overwhelmed by it.