

Wisdom and foresight

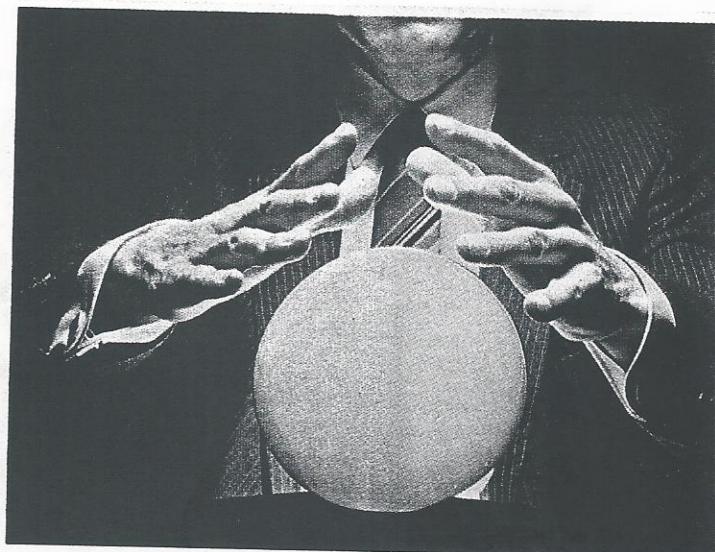
WRITTEN BY
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The Talmud in *Tamid* 32a says, "Who is wise? He who foresees coming events." And in *Baba Bathra* 12a, it further states, "A wise man is superior to a prophet." On the surface this makes sense. Knowledge obtained through prophecy is limited to the extent of the revelation granted. A wise person, on the other hand, by applying reason to existing evidence, can make warranted inferences and projections about the future. Foresight then, is based on insight.

Similar thoughts were voiced by secular writers, as for instance, in the second century BCE, by the Roman dramatist Terence, who said, "True wisdom consists not only in seeing what is before

For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his address to the U.S. Congress on March 1, 1945, called his conference with Stalin "a great success," one that spelled "the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence. . ." Those millenarian words were spoken just before the start of an over forty-year long Cold War, which has brought mankind to the brink of extinction on quite a number of occasions. And these were not the words of some starry-eyed utopian, but of an arch-manipulator of men who had met Stalin personally on several occasions, a man who had at his disposal any number of informers and expert advisors.

Now, of course, some may suggest that politicians do not necessarily actually mean what they say, and perhaps Roosevelt was, in fact, aware of the real situation. There can be no doubt, however, that it is indispensable for military commanders, in whose hands lay the fate of millions, to be able to correctly anticipate the dangers their armies may have to face. Yet at the height of World War I, in 1917, Lord Kitchener, the Commander-In-Chief of the British army, categorically denied that a tank could make any contribution at all to the war effort. And he called the contrap-



tion, "a pretty mechanical toy." What's even more amazing, is that as late as 1939 the most highly respected hero of the previous war, Marshal Petain, declared "As for tanks, which are supposed to bring us a shortening of wars, their incapacity is striking." As will be remembered, within a year of this prophetic assertion, the French army was totally crushed, primarily through damage sustained from German tanks. Similarly insightful predictions were made by celebrated military experts about the efficiency of machine-guns, submarines and military aircraft.

We would probably like to believe that, at the very least, great scientists who live calm, contemplative lives, and whose efforts are dedicated entirely to the relentless search for truth, can be relied upon to issue only the most judicious predictions. Let us then consider some of the pronouncements of the celebrated Lord Kelvin,

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your eyes, but in foreseeing what is to come."

Yet after hearing so many inaccurate prophecies made by world-class experts in particular fields of endeavor, one can't help but be puzzled by their inability to foresee the most conspicuous of developments.

who has been universally acknowledged as one of the greatest scientists of the 19th century. He served as president of the Royal Society and has to his credit such trailblazing discoveries as the absolute zero temperature, in consequence of which they named a temperature scale after him, "The Kelvin Temperature Scale." Yet in 1895 this great man did not hesitate to assure the general public that "heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible." Following the invention of the radio in 1897, he insisted that "Radio has no future." He went even further, in 1895 when he fearlessly rendered the verdict, "X-rays are a hoax."

Many more illustrative examples exist, however, I shall conclude with a single, truly memorable one by the highly respected D. Lardner, Professor of Natural Philosophy and Astronomy at University College, London, who did not believe that much good could come of the steam locomotive. He went so far as to issue a warning "Rail travel at high speed is not possible because passengers, unable to breathe, will die of asphyxiation."

I believe that the solution to this kind of silliness displayed by the exceptionally smart is close at hand. The foolish political, military, scientific and technological predictions cited earlier were made by highly intelligent people. But intelligence on its own does not amount to wisdom, which is precisely what these people lacked—at least at the time they issued these oracular pronouncements.

Anyone acquainted with the book of *Proverbs* is undoubtedly aware that wisdom is not the function of intelligence alone. It is indeed something more precious, for it is the combination of intellect and virtue. In *Proverbs* 8:20 we hear Wisdom speaking:

I walk in the way of righteousness, in the path of justice.

Later in 9:10 we read:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

And once more in 10:31:

The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom.

I was told by a scholar specializing in Oriental intellectual history that there is a Chinese proverb which says, "Wisdom and virtue are like the two wheels of a cart." Interestingly enough, I was also informed that there are numerous Japanese and Chinese maxims which concur with the tra-

ditional Jewish view. (I do not believe however, that this, in any way, explains why there are so many kosher Chinese restaurants!)

Unfortunately, intellectual power tends to corrupt. One of the chief vices of the very smart is an insatiable desire to pontificate; an inability to restrain the desire to make an authoritative pronouncement, regardless of their qualifications.

In the course of one of the most famous trials in history, Socrates was asked if he thought of himself as the wisest person in Athens. Socrates replied, "Yes," and explained that he had responded thus because he was the only Athenian who knew that he knew nothing! The implication of this oft-repeated statement is that it requires an exceptional level of exertion, a level which the vast majority of people find beyond their strength, to acknowledge one's ignorance.

Our Sages exhort, "Teach your

tongue to say, 'I do not know' lest you will be caught speaking falsely" (*Berakhot*, 4). There is also the well known dictum, "Silence is the fence for wisdom" (*Avoth* 3:13).

Regardless of how talented an individual may be, if he is unable to rein in the urge to be heard even when he lacks sufficient grounds to pass judgment, he lacks wisdom. Furthermore, individuals who are not sufficiently in control of their reasoning processes, who, for whatever emotional need, allow themselves to be blinded to reality, will fail to see clearly, not only the future, but also the past. An individual who has a firm grip on reality is likely to have clear hindsight through which he may procure insight to equip himself with foresight.

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