

Jews as Survivors: The Meaning of Historical Memory

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Yom Kippur

October 9, 2000/5761

On Rosh Hashana I made passing reference to the surprising popularity of a reality-based television show about people stranded on a desert island, called “Survivor.” In the spirit of this holiday, I must confess and offer a disclosure at the outset: I did not watch a single episode, not even a moment of the show. It simply did not interest me and I really couldn’t care less as to the outcome.

The show obviously did not have any Jewish contestants. We can tell that because when they left, there was no evidence of any Jewish life on the island. There was no synagogue, for as the old joke goes, if there would have been a Jew in the group, there would have been not one, but two shuls – the one he goes to, and the other, of course, the one he would not be caught dead in.

I also thought about one of my other favorite lines about a Jew stranded with others on a desert island. It’s the one about the people who are frantically trying to get word to the outside world so they can be rescued. Everyone is in a panic, except for the one Jewish guy who is calmly enjoying the beach and the ocean. He tells the other people why he is so calm. “Right before I left on this trip I made a big pledge to UJA and my shul. Don’t worry. Believe me, they’ll find us.”

Since neither of these scenarios came to fruition, I knew the show was devoid of any Jewish content or angle.

Or was it?

In certain respects, perhaps the image of a small tribe which has faced seemingly insurmountable challenges, yet which still survives is an appropriate one for us to contemplate. We are the heirs and the last remaining descendants of those individuals who some 3,500 years ago entered into a covenant with God. Our presence here today is testimony to our tenacity and our refusal to surrender to those forces throughout the ages which have tried to triumph over us.

The story of the Jewish people is the story of countless persecutions and instances of oppression and expulsion, with attempts to obliterate both Jews and the Jewish religion from human history. A number of the holidays on our calendar celebrate the miracle of our continued existence, of our survival despite all of these efforts.

So, if ever there was a people who qualify for the title “survivor”, or if there were a sequel to the show, or a show by the same name was to be made by PBS, it would be the story of the Jews.

The story comes to mind of what happened when God summoned the leaders of the three monotheistic faiths to heaven to inform them that in three days he was going to send a

destructive flood which would cover the entire earth. The Pope went on world wide television via satellite and urged everyone to save their souls by accepting the divinity of Jesus. The ayatollah spoke to the world and said that they had three days to accept Mohamad and the truthfulness of Islam. The chief rabbi of Israel was given equal time to share his message, and so he told the world, “we have three days to learn to live under water.”

Yes, we are masters of the art of survival.

How have we succeeded in surviving adversaries and attempts at annihilation?

We have prevailed because we understand that in order to persevere, we must preserve the memory of our experience in various lands. We must cherish the values and messages bequeathed to us by our ancestors. That ability is the key to our survival. We have incorporated the memories of our rich history into rituals, traditions, and texts which are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Recently I read the historical novel The Diary of Hannah Mendes, by Naomi Ragen, which chronicles the extraordinary history of Dona Garcia. In addition to chronicling the extraordinary story of this true heroine, it shows how the reach of Sephardic Jewry stretched across geographical divide and centuries. It rekindled my desire to visit Spain, to see what the Jews had created there and to see the land which at one time was the epicenter of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

This past year while on sabbatical, I had the opportunity to travel to Spain with Symcha, where we were anxious to see what was left of this once glorious past.

I was not sure what we would find there, or what to expect. After all, it was not until the 1980's that the official decree of Expulsion was lifted, and Jews were finally officially allowed back into the country.

We visited the birthplace of the greatest Jewish philosopher of all time, Moses Maimonides, in Cordoba. He fused Jewish rational thought with Aristotelian concepts, wrote an important seminal work codifying the Talmud, presented a systematic, logical explanation and justification for the mitzvot, and is even recognized in the Moslem world as one of the greatest minds of all ages. So how was this great man who also served as a physician to kings honored and remembered? An impressive statue in the town square marks the place of his birth. But beyond that, little of the story of one of the most important philosophers is known by Spaniards of today.

For over three centuries, the Golden Age of Spain coincided with the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. During this time, Jews achieved an unprecedented modicum of success. Hasdai ibn Shaprut was the personal physician and adviser to two caliphs, and held a prestigious high ranking position in the government, while being a deeply committed Jew who used his wealth and influence to support Jewish scholars and schools. Spain was home to some of the greatest Jewish philosophers, poets, and writers, including Solomon ibn Gabirol, Yehuda haLevi, Bahya ibn Pakuda, as well as the great biblical

commentators, ibn Ezra and Don Isaac Abravanel. Some of the piyutim and prayers we recite on the Yamim haNoraim have their origins in this period.

Not only did Jews do a great deal to advance Jewish writing and thought, they were important contributors to Spanish civilization, and were partially responsible for some of Spain's greatest achievements. The impact of Jews was felt in the world of Spanish art, science, literature, diplomacy, and government.

Their expulsion in 1492, and the forced conversion of tens and perhaps even as many as hundreds of thousands of others left a major imprint on Jewish life which is still felt to this very day. The first Jews to come to America were descendants of Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition. It is appropriate to note, on this day, which coincides with Columbus Day, that some scholars believe that Christopher Columbus may have been a Jew.

According to one theory, the Kol Nidre was first written for the Jews of Spain who, during the Inquisition secretly clung to their religion. Known as Conversos, these Jews outwardly practiced Catholicism, while in the confines of their own home, despite certain execution and torture if they were discovered, practiced Judaism. As a result, the prayer which states that "all vows or promises which we have made, or are yet to make should be considered as null and void" was a means of declaring to God their true feelings. In other words, they should not be bound by the promises or held accountable by God for their actions or public expressions of allegiance to the Church.

It just so happened that we stayed in the small southern coastal town of Tormellinos, and right near our hotel was a small synagogue. The synagogue had no sign on the outside which revealed the nature or purpose of the building. I walked by it several times, before I finally realized that the nondescript white building was what I was looking for. Not unintentionally, it was directly across the street from the police station.

In many respects, it accurately exemplified and typified the attempts to whitewash and downplay the Jewish experience in Spain.

That was where we met Jose, who came to the town from Morocco. He described in detail the village his family had come from before being expelled from Spain. In listening to him talk about life there, it seemed as if they had just left a few months ago, even though his family had not lived there for several hundred years. (This was especially remarkable, because later that night, he could not remember where he had parked his car earlier that evening.)

I could not help but ask myself, how many of us know the traditions and stories of our ancestors – what towns they came from, and what their lives were like, and what things they held dear.

Juxtaposed against the backdrop of what we saw were some interesting conversations we had. An Irishman who was filled with misconceptions about Jews nonchalantly claimed the reason Jews were expelled from Spain was because they must have misbehaved. At another point, we encountered an Englishman who said that Queen Isabella was a

relatively benign ruler. I responded that her record towards Jews was anything but tolerant. His version of history was slightly different than my understanding in another aspect. Although relatively sympathetic to Jews, he said that Jews had moved from city to city in Europe, because after they had taken all the profits they could get from one town, they moved on to the next.

As I listened to these people, I wondered how many other people think like this, and how many Jews would be able to refute this nonsense and these distortions. I realized how important it is for us Jews to know our history and heritage.

During my sabbatical, we also visited another place where Jews dominated the cultural and intellectual life for centuries, Prague, Czechoslovakia. Jews had settled in this region over 1,000 years ago. It once was home to 153 vibrant Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia. The Jewish population now numbers less than 1,000, and was merely hanging on by a thread.

During World War II, the Nazis shipped Jewish ritual objects stolen from throughout the Third Reich to Prague to house them in a museum to an annihilated race. It was the repository of an entire people's culture, and is all that is left attesting to the beauty of their lives. Objects from Jewish homes and synagogues offered an insight into the rich traditions of the community. Judaic treasures stand as symbols of the precious legacy of European Jewry.

We walked in the Old Jewish Quarter, and saw now defunct synagogues and institutions. We visited the cemetery and saw the grave of the famous Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Judah Loew. Respected among Jews and nonJews alike, he was the creator of the legendary Golem of Prague.

Although both of these places were once home to thriving, important Jewish communities, centers of creativity, which enriched both the Jewish and nonJewish worlds, they were now decimated. They were basically empty of any Jewish content. For the most part, it was but a memory, and even then, the historical memory was relatively vacuous.

Symbolic of the situation is the Pinhas Synagogue in Prague. Once a beautiful place of worship, now the only thing in it are the 80,000 names written on its walls, along with the dates that each and every Jew from the area was deported to Aushwitz or Buchenwald.

To a certain degree, the paucity of evidence of the great Jewish communities that once were is not so surprising. After all, Jews were primarily builders not of monuments, cathedrals, or palaces, but of words and works of literature.

On this Yom Kippur, I cannot help but ask you to reflect upon how much of the sacred texts Jews have created and held sacred live on in our lives. How many of the beautiful customs of our ancestors do we still observe? I cannot help but think that too many of us are like the cities I visited ---mere shells which offer but a hint or glimpse of the Jewish life that once inhabited their walls. They are like bodies, without souls. And all too often, so are we.

This then, is part of our obligation on this Yom Kippur, to see to it that Judaism lives on, in us, and is a part of our lives. We must not be like the vacant Jewish quarters which dot the map of Europe. The historical memory must not end with us.

I contrast what I felt in Europe with the experience I had in Israel, where I joined college students who came from the United States for the first time and who were the first participants in a program called "Birthright." This is a program designed to ensure that every American Jew will visit Israel and feel a sense of pride after they see a vibrant Jewish community.

Young American Jews, most of whom had no previous connection to being Jewish, were exposed for the first time, to Jewish history. Most of these young people were basically devoid of any historical memory. The impact the trip had on them was amazing. They felt challenged to learn more about this wonderful people they are a part of, but about which they know so little. Equally amazing was the impact it had on Israelis. One young man said that he saw his country in an entirely different way. For the first time, he appreciated that he is not just an Israeli, but a Jew, and that is what connects him to the young people who were visiting from America.

Indeed, without any historical memory of the past, we have no future.

Today, we join with Jews around the world, who among other things, affirm by our mere presence, that we are here, that we belong to a people who defy all attempts to annihilate it and which clings to life.

As I saw how little of the Jewish presence in Spain still exists, and how little mention was made by the guides of the major role Jews played in making Spain what it was, I realized how incumbent it is upon us to tell our story, to preserve our memory. I thought about the commandment in the Torah, "v'shinantam l'vanacha: and you shall teach these words unto your children." And I thought how much I wanted to share this message with you upon my return, during these high holy days.

For, without our memory, what are we? On this Yom Kippur, let us each reflect upon what we do to preserve the historical memory of our tradition and heritage.

In a lecture I attended in Jerusalem, Professor Eli Pollak cautioned a group of rabbis that we cannot be "nowists", individuals who think only of now, without any vision of the past, or of the future. It is spiritually empty. Without our obligation to the Jewish people, and a recognition that we are part of 3,000 year continuum of Jewish history, we have no right to be here, in Israel, he said.

This ultimately, is the challenge which confronts each Jew on this sacred day. Where will we take our place in the history of our people's destiny?

I recently came across a list of questions developed by a colleague which I have adapted for us to ponder at this time of year. In light of what I have tried to convey this morning, I urge you to take its message to heart.

Your children have seen you dance to music. Have they seen you pray?
They have seen you play golf. Have they seen you make shabbat?
Your children have seen you lift a cocktail glass. Have they seen you lift a kiddush cup?
They have seen you read the newspaper or the latest novel. Have they ever seen you read the Torah or a Jewish text?
Your children have seen you wear costumes on Halloween, green on St. Patrick's Day, red on Valentine's Day, and party hats on New Year's Eve. Have they seen you wear a tallis and tefillin?
They have seen you celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Have they seen you take off of work to go to shul on a Jewish holiday?
Your children have seen you shop. Have they seen you give tzedekah?
They have heard you discuss politics and gossip about others. Have they heard from you what values you hold dear?

These are the questions we should consider on Yom Kippur.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in *The Earth is the Lord's* words which resonate today. "In this hour, we, the living, are 'the people of Israel'. The tasks begun by the patriarchs and prophets and continued by their descendants are now entrusted to us. We are either the last Jews or those who will hand over the entire past to generations to come. We will either forfeit or enrich the legacy of ages."

So what will it be? Shall we be the last Jews, the last survivors, or shall we be transmitters and bequeath our beautiful heritage to those who follow us.

The Book of Proverbs advises: "shma beni musar aveecha: Hear, my child, the teaching of your father. V'al titosh torat eemecha: and do not forsake the teaching of your mother, for they are an adornment of grace for your head..."

Indeed, the teachings of our ancestors and the messages of those who came before us are precious adornments. May we be worthy of the sacred traditions entrusted to us. May we preserve them so they live on through us, and through eternity.

Amen

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