

Does Antisemitism Preserve Judaism?

Introduction

In tractate *Makkot*, in the Talmud, we read the following exchange:

Rav says: I am afraid of this verse [in the Torah, in which God says]:

[If you do not follow My commandments,] you shall perish among the nations ... and the land of your enemies shall consume you ... [Lev. 26:38]

Mar Zutra [comments]: Perhaps [it means] like the consumption of cucumbers and gourds [which are not entirely consumed; what is left can grow into new plants]. [Makkot 24a]

The Maharsha, from 16th-century Poland, explains: When a cucumber falls on the ground, it rots. Yet the very ground which causes it to rot is what is necessary for it to take root and grow and be reborn. So it is with Israel in exile: Although many Jews will die, the very hostile environment of persecution will itself cause their spiritual rebirth. [Maharsha, as quoted by Artscroll]

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?

The message is clear: Antisemitism can preserve Judaism. It can do so in one of two ways:

- (1) For the religious: “Bad things are happening to me because I sinned, so I will sin no more and become more observant.”
- (2) For the secular: “So these guys don't like Jews, eh? I'll SHOW them by being even more Jewish.”

Elsewhere, the Talmud makes this point even more clearly in discussing the story of Purim:

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: [King] Ahashverosh's [approval of Haman's proposal to kill all the Jews] was more effective than the forty-eight prophets and the seven prophetesses who prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people. Indeed, they were all unable to return the Jewish people to the right way, but [the king's agreement to genocide] returned them to the right way. [Megillah 14a]

So Haman did more for the Jews spiritually than all the prophets in the Bible!

Even in the Torah, God makes the following prediction to Abraham:

Know for certain that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land, and will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years. But know with equal certainty that I will judge the nation that enslaved them, and that afterwards they will leave with great substance. [Genesis 15:13-14]

This is not punishment for anything. Evidently God thought slavery was necessary – possibly to build up our identity and community spirit, under the (malevolent) protection of a superpower. We were all in the same boat, followed the same customs, and huddled together to face our oppressors.

The disappearance of idolatry

After the Exodus, a lot of Jews lapsed into idolatry, and clung to it tenaciously and enthusiastically for 1,000 years. When Rav Ashi dreamed of King Menashe, he asked him: If you are so wise, why did you worship idols? King Menashe replied: If you had lived in my time, you would have done the same. You would have lifted the hems of your robes to run behind me to worship idols also. [Sanhedrin 102b]

Then, after the exile in Babylon, idolatry disappeared from Judaism, suddenly and completely, and has remained absent for the next 2,500 years, to this day. What happened?

My explanation: During the 1,000 years of idolatry, the Jews were essentially free and masters of their own house. They felt they could indulge in whatever appealed to them, as free people do. Those who found idolatrous rites colorful and attractive felt free to engage in them. But for the next 2,500 years, the Jews were subjugated and persecuted – by the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians, the Muslims, etc. They felt they HAD to keep their own traditions and not adopt any of the customs of their overlords, as an act of rebellion. They were even willing to die rather than be forced to indulge in idolatry or reject their traditions. The story of Hanukkah is a perfect example.

Here we have the historical evidence that antisemitism preserved Judaism.

If you could remove anti-Judaism, would you be removing Judaism as well?

Is it true that “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger?”

Point made in modern times also

-Spinoza (17th-century Holland): Only thanks to antisemitism do the Jews continue to exist as a separate people. [Theological-Political Treatise]

-Rabbi Hirsch (19th-century Germany): Antisemitism is the tool through which the God of Israel preserves his people. In the Torah, we read about the first instance of antisemitism: How Isaac lived peacefully among his neighbors, then, through hard and honest work, became fabulously wealthy and powerful. So his neighbors envied him, hated him, then harmed him by depriving him of water – the very source of life – and finally expelled him:

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him.

And the man became rich, and gained more and more, until he became very wealthy.

He had possessions of flocks, and possessions of herds, and large numbers of servants. And the Philistines envied him.

And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug, in the days of Abraham his father, and filled them with earth.

And Abimelech [king of the Philistines] said to Isaac, 'Go away from us; because you are much mightier than we are.'

And Isaac departed from there, and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there.

[Genesis 26:12-17]

Hirsch: Had it not been for that jealousy, Isaac would have slid into a life of leisure and forgotten all about his divine mission. Jealousy is “one of the great vehicles of salvation... that warns [the Jews] again and again” against assimilation.

-Bet HaLevi [19th-century Russia] commented on Jacob's prayer in the Torah:

Hatzileni Na MiYad Achi, Miyad Esav

Save me, I beseech you, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau.

[Gen. 32:12]

He said:

We are threatened by two kinds of dangers from the nations of the world:

-The physical threat of hatred, expressed as crusade, pogrom and holocaust;

-The spiritual threat of the welcoming arms of acceptance, which turns into the asphyxiating embrace of assimilation.

These two dangers are expressed in Jacob's prayer here:

- "Save me from my brother..." when he behaves with friendship and brotherhood...

- And "from Esau", when he reveals the Jew-hater seeking a final solution.

Of the two threats, history has shown that the spiritual danger of assimilation is more formidable than the physical peril of annihilation, and for this reason, Jacob first prays to overcome the threat of his "brother", then prays to overcome the threat of "Esau".

-Herzl (1896): Totally secular and assimilated, but the Dreyfus trial in France convinced him that antisemitism will not disappear with assimilation. He concluded we need a Jewish state, published "*The Jewish State*" and founded Zionism, leading to the State of Israel.

- That state was founded by secular Jews. They would have totally assimilated and not bothered to think of a Jewish state if they had been allowed to forget they were Jews.

-Freud (1926): "My language is German. My culture, my attainments are German. I considered myself German intellectually, until I noticed the growth of antisemitic prejudice in Germany and German Austria. Since that time, I prefer to call myself a Jew." [Quoted in Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, 1998, p 448.]

-Sartre (1948): Assimilated Jews are not preserved by their faith or their common past, but by "the Christian who suddenly halts the [Jew's] process of assimilation and creates a special role for him." [Anti-Semite and Jew]

-Einstein (1952): "My relationship to the Jewish people has become my strongest human bond, ever since I became fully aware of our precarious situation among the nations of the world." [Letter to Ben Gurion]

-Nachum Goldmann, Zionist leader and former head of World Jewish Congress: Antisemitism is good for Judaism, but bad for the Jews. Lack of antisemitism is good for the Jews, but bad for Judaism.

-Jonathan Tobin (2013), in his *Loving Us to Death: How America's embrace is imperiling American Jewry*. [Commentary Magazine, 25 Oct 2013]

[The recent Pew study shows that] there has been a startling increase over the past quarter century of Jews who say they regard themselves as having "no religion." Intermarriage rates in that group are now at 70%. And ... only 47% [give their children] a Jewish education. Jews are not being driven from Judaism

due to social difficulties. Fewer than 20% claimed to have experienced even a snub in a social setting, let alone an antisemitic epithet, in the last year. Such numbers are not only without precedent in American history; they are without precedent in the millennia-long history of the Jewish people... but the growth of pride to having a Jewish heritage... comes at a heavy cost, it appears. It is now inarguable that American Jewry... is rapidly shrinking, and the demographic trend lines are stark... The ... American Jewish community... now regards Jewish identity as a matter of ancestry and culture almost exclusively... American Jewry is on the brink of a demographic catastrophe. And yet here is the paradox: This catastrophe is also a triumph—a triumph both for American Jews and for the American experiment.

-Alan Dershowitz, Harvard Professor, in his book *The Vanishing Jew* (2017): The absence of antisemitism in the US spells doom for American Jews... “The good times [we experience] may mark the beginning of the end of Jewish life in America as we know it.”

Now that most Jews are free, especially in the US, and not constrained in their spiritual choices, many are abandoning Judaism. “With friends like these, who needs enemies?”

It doesn't always work

Many Jews have said: If such vicious persecution is the price for staying Jewish, it's too high for me. Examples:

-When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, only one third remained Jews and left, among them my own ancestors. Another third converted, and the last third had already converted. Romantic stories abound about the marranos, who practiced Judaism in secret while pretending to be Christians, but the reality is that that was at best a one-generation affair. The next generations were simply Christians, and the overwhelming majority had no intention of changing.

-In the 19th century, a tidal wave of conversion and assimilation swept European Jewry. Conversion was the ticket to acceptance, to opportunities, to universities, to guilds, to jobs, to high society, to coveted positions, and large numbers of Jews willingly and eagerly paid that price.

-Holocaust survivors have covered their Jewish tracks and raised non-Jewish families that are ignorant of their Jewish roots, because they could not bear the possible consequences of being Jewish.

Is the minority that survives slaughter and assimilation sufficient to sustain Judaism? So far, so good...

Collateral questions

Did other civilizations disappear from history because no one tried to suppress them?

Were other peoples also strengthened by hostility towards them? (Armenians?)

Is the State of Israel kept Jewish by the hostility of its neighbors?

Conclusion

A convincing case can be made that antisemitism helps preserve Judaism.

So what should we wish for? Perhaps a carefully calibrated balance:

- When Jewish identity is looking up, wish for less antisemitism.
- When Jewish identity is looking down, wish for, ahem..., more antisemitism (non-lethal variety)!