

With Antisemitism ever present, why stay Jewish?

Introduction

Tisha b'Av is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. A long list of catastrophes befell the Jews on that day, the Ninth of Av. The fact that they all happened on that day is either accidental or intentional, but enough to make us dread the coming of that day every year.

The Mishnah, written 2,000 years ago, recalls five tragedies that occurred on Tisha b'Av up to that time:

- First, the spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report, which demoralized the Israelites.
- Then, the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple in 586 BCE.
- Then, the Romans destroyed the second Temple in 70 CE.
- Then, Bar Kochba failed in his revolt against Rome in 135 CE, when he was killed at Betar.
- Finally, Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Diaspora began. [Ta'anit 4:6]

Then, in the last 2,000 years, many catastrophes also happened on Tisha b'Av:

- In 1095, the Pope began the Crusades, to wrest the Holy Land from the Muslims. But on the way there, the Crusaders slaughtered 30-50% of the Jews of Europe.
- In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds were burned in Paris.
- In 1290, the decree expelling all Jews from England was signed.
- In 1306, the decree expelling all Jews from France was signed.
- In 1492, the decree expelling all Jews from Spain, including my own ancestors, was signed.
- In 1626, Shabtai Tzvi was born. He was a false messiah, and after his apostasy to Islam he dashed the hopes of millions of Jews, one-third of the total, and severely disrupted their lives.
- In 1914, World War I began. It led to World War II and the death of six million Jews in the Holocaust. It also facilitated the Communist Revolution, spelling seventy years of darkness for Soviet Jews.
- In 1941, the Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

As Jews recall all this suffering, mind-boggling in its frequency and intensity, some ask themselves the following question: Why stay Jewish?

This is an understandable question, given all the persecutions unfurled on us, and with antisemitism showing no sign of abating. But before we try to answer the question, let's take a look at the facts.

Have many Jews left Judaism?

The facts are not pretty. Sadly, most Jews in history gave up and left Judaism. In every generation, only a small minority of Jews has quietly ensured the survival of Judaism. The majority did not care, or did not care enough. The miracle is that this tiny minority is always there, in every generation. If it skips even one generation, the light goes out. God Almighty can ensure some of us survive physical assaults, but what can even God do if we willingly abandon Judaism? He gave us free will.

What is absolutely mind-boggling is not so much that we survived against external enemies who wanted to destroy us, but that we survived against apathy and hostility within our own ranks. Our numbers are so small today, not primarily because of the physical destruction of millions of Jews, but because of the self-inflicted spiritual destruction of even more millions of Jews. There are 14 million Jews today. The Roman census of the year 48 recorded 7.5 million Jews in their empire, not counting the large Babylonian community. So our numbers barely went up in 2,000 years, while world population increased by a factor of 30.

Let's review some Jewish history together.

-The Jews were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. But the Midrash [Mechilta, Tanchuma, Beshallah 1] tells us that only 20% followed Moses in the Exodus to the Promised Land. The rest, 80%, had gotten used to their lot in Egypt, assimilated and perished. Whether one believes this story or not is not the point. The point is that the Sages of the Talmud already knew and taught the point I am making: Only a small minority ensured survival.

-And, once out of Egypt, even that small minority complained nonstop and started worshipping a Golden Calf even as Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah. Moses taught them Judaism, but it was rough going. Tales of Torah rejection abound in the Bible. The Bible tells us that in the

three centuries of the Judges, “every man did what was right in his own eyes” [Judges 17:6].

-The Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom and deported its people, and ten out of twelve tribes of Israel assimilated and vanished. Ten out of twelve tribes, consigned to the dustbin of history.

-When the Jews in exile in Babylonia were allowed to go home, the vast majority did not want to go because they had become comfortable where they were. All told, no more than 20% went back.

-Then the Greeks came and won the hearts of millions of Jews with their philosophy. One million Alexandrian Greek Jews assimilated and vanished into history. Then the Romans came, and many Jews adopted their ways. Why not side with the mighty superpower?

-The centuries marched on, each one bringing its own challenges and siren songs that drew large numbers of Jews away: Gnosticism, Christianity, Islam, Karaism, Sabbateanism, Frankism... 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. The majority crumbled under pressure. Some practiced Judaism in secret, but their children did not. They were simply Christians and had no intention of changing.

-Then the Emancipation came in the 19th century and 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.

-When Zionism came, only five percent of *post*-Holocaust Jewry was in Israel in 1948 to start the state: 600,000 Jews out of 12 million worldwide. Even with the Holocaust at their backs, 95% of the surviving Jews were too comfortable to physically join in this epic rebirth.

-Then communism came and took millions of Jews along with it, blinded by the promise of a utopian society. It is gone now, but the losses it caused are irreversible.

-And in the last few decades, in the West, lax observance, assimilation and loss of identity are progressing at a rapid pace, producing a steady decline in numbers. Tens of thousands of Jews are eager and willing to explore every “ism” under the sun, except Judaism. The many cults that have sprung up in the 60s and 70s -- the Hare Krishna and the Moonies and the Scientologists and what have you -- had huge numbers of Jews in their ranks – 30% according to professional estimates. 30% from a group that is only 2.5% of the population. More than half the Buddhists born in the United States are Jews. Jews for Jesus and Hebrew Christians and Messianic Jews are bombarding us with the message that “Christianity is the only way to become a completed Jew”. Some 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.

Secular Jewish thinkers write books where they dazzle their readers with their vast knowledge by quoting from every culture the Earth has produced, but don't look there for a quote from the Talmud. They don't have time for it, by studious avoidance no doubt. When Jews reach positions of prominence, many quickly bend over backwards to prove they are not partial to Jews or Judaism, and end up hurting Jews in the process. The phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred rears its ugly head, frequently manifesting itself in relentless criticism of the State of Israel, coupled with hostile activism, unbalanced by any praise or approval, let alone expression of love or, yes, gratitude.

Reasons to stay Jewish

So what do we answer all these people? Why stay Jewish? Here are some reasons.

-Pride and obligation. You should be proud. You are part of an unbroken chain dating back thousands of years. You are part of history. You have been chosen by God for a mission. There are obligations that come with how you were born.

-Guilt. The Jewish people needs you. They are harassed and vilified. Don't be a coward; don't become a turncoat; don't abandon your people while they are in distress.

-Difference. Don't you want to be different, rather than being lost in a crowd of millions of people like you?

-Spite. Your reaction to antisemitism should be to be even more Jewish. Note that after 1,000 years of idolatry, the Jews gave it up when they returned from Babylonia because gentiles tried to force it on them (read story of Hanukkah). The philosopher Emil Fackenheim came up with his 614th commandment: Do not hand Hitler a posthumous victory. It is an obligation. How much do you know about Judaism? If you learn more, you'll come to appreciate it.

-Judaism is more than the sum of its parts. You ask: "What's in Judaism for me? I didn't choose to be Jewish. Why shouldn't I be like the majority around me? The ethical teachings of Judaism are universal at this point, *thanks to Judaism*, so no need to be Jewish *now* to follow them. As for the ritual commandments, I am not religious."

Two answers. First, at Sinai, God made a covenant with *all* Jews, present and future:

וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי כָרַת אֶת־הַבְרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֵּאת:
כִּי אֶת־אַשְׁרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עָמְדוּ עִמָּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנו פֹּה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:
I make this covenant... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day. [Deut. 29:14]

Second, there is a Jewish way of thinking that is unique and produces original ideas. It goes beyond ethical behavior:

-The teaching that "God is One" forces a spirit of synthesis, allows one to see hidden connections between dissimilar things.

-The teaching against idolatry produces attitudes that are iconoclastic, argumentative, and do not easily accept authority (as they say: 2 Jews 3 opinions). This allows fresh thinking. In the Bible, after God makes terrible things descend on Job, he tells his wife:

Yea, though [God] slay me, still will I trust in Him. But I will argue my ways before Him. [Job 13:15]

The second part, "But I will argue my ways before Him", is usually omitted, but it is the most Jewish part. Faith does not have to be unquestioning or fatalistic. Job has no "floormat" relationship with God. He will "argue his ways before God".

This Jewish way of thinking ensured that Jews, while being only 1/5 of 1% of humanity, got 1/3 of the Nobel prizes – a rate 150 times higher than their meager numbers would suggest. The Jews have done great things. It's an honor to be one of them.

-It won't work. Antisemites will harass you whether or not you leave Judaism, because of your Jewish ancestry. For racial antisemites like Hitler, it is not enough to convert to another religion or deny Judaism. Joke:

Two men, one upright and one a hunchback, walk past a synagogue. The upright man says, "I used to be a Jew, you know". And the hunchback responds, "Yes, and I used to be a hunchback."

It's impossible for a Jew to really assimilate. Non-Jews will remind him of who he is. Rav Yisrael Salanter, 19th-century Lithuanian sage, said:

If a Jew doesn't make Kiddush, then a gentile will make Havdalah for him.

Havdalah means separation. This means that even if we distance ourselves from Judaism (by not making Kiddush), non-Jews will nevertheless separate us from them (Havdalah) by treating us differently. So we have no choice and might as well remain Jewish.

Conclusion

That some Jews should seek an exit from Judaism was foreseen in biblical days. The first reference to that is when God tells them through the prophet Ezekiel:

What is in your mind shall never happen, namely the thought: "Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone." As I live, declares the Lord God, I will reign over you. [Ezekiel 20:32-33]

God even makes a flat (if back-handed) promise that He will never allow Judaism to vanish from the earth, through the prophet Amos:

הִנֵּה עֵינַי אֲדַגֵּי יְהוָה בַּמַּמְלָכָה הַחַטָּאָה וְהַשְּׂמֵדָתִי אֶתָּה מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה אֲפֹס כִּי לֹא הַשְּׂמִיד אֲשַׁמֵּיד אֶת־בֵּית יִעֲקֹב בְּנֵאֻם־יְהוָה:

Behold, the eyes of the Lord God Are upon that sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth. But I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the Lord. [Amos 9:8]

Other nations will be "destroyed from off the face of the earth", but the House of Jacob will never be "utterly destroyed". Sadly, the wording could imply: "but most of the House of Jacob *will* be destroyed".

Let us give the last word to the prayer in the siddur:

שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל! שְׁמֹר שְׁעָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאַל יֹאבֵד יִשְׂרָאֵל, הָאוֹמְרִים: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Shomer Yisrael! Sh'mor sh'erit Yisrael, V'al yovad Yisrael, Ha-om'rim Sh'ma Yisrael

O Guardian of Israel!
Protect the remnant of Israel,
And do not allow the death of Israel,
Of those who say "Hear, O Israel!"

Have a meaningful fast and may Tisha B'Av never bring us another catastrophe.