

The secrets of Jewish survival

Tish'a B'Av

Saddest day on Jewish calendar. History full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on Tish'a B'Av (accidentally or intentionally):

-From Mishnah [Ta'anit 4:6]:

- The spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report which demoralized the Israelites,
- Both Temples destroyed (586 BCE and 70 CE),
- The Bar Kochba revolt against Rome failed in 135 CE when he was killed and the city of Betar was destroyed, and
- Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Exile began.

-Since then...

- 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 burned in Paris
- In 1290, Jews expelled from England
- In 1306, Jews expelled from France
- In 1492, Jews expelled from Spain, including my own ancestors
- In 1626, Shabtai Tzvi was born. He was a false messiah, and after his apostasy 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 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, and facilitated Communist Revolution, spelling 70 years of darkness for Soviet Jews.
- In 1941, Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

-To console us, Talmud says Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av.

[Y Berachot 2:4]

Question

Each of these tragedies, by itself, could have led to the disappearance of Judaism. But none did. Why? What made us

survive as a people, as the same continuous community, when so many other ancient (or even modern!) groups and civilizations have disappeared into the dustbin of history? As Mark Twain put it in 1898:

The Jews constitute [less than] one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. [Yet]...his contributions to... literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are... way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it.

The Egyptian, the Babylonian and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains.

What is the secret of his immortality? [Mark Twain, Concerning The Jews, Harper's Magazine, March 1898]

Our obituary was written many times -- prematurely. First recorded was the Stele of Merneptah, Egyptian pharaoh: a large slab of black granite:

-It reads "Israel is laid waste. Her seed is no more."

-It is from 13th century BCE, two centuries after the Exodus!

-It is in the Cairo Museum today. (Also oldest reference to Israel outside the Bible.)

Seven possible answers

1-Faith made us survive

On Tish'a B'av, we read *Echah*, the Book of Lamentations, and recall the sufferings of the Jews. The Midrash on Lamentations gives examples, concluding each with:

'Al elleh ani vokiya. For these things I weep. [Lam. 1:16]

Let's examine one such example, which ends with the question:

All the peoples of the world cried out and said, "What does the God of these [people] do for them, that they are [willing to be] killed for His sake at all times?..." [Lam. R. 1:50]

The "Emperor" in the story was Hadrian [Tanna DeVei Eliyahu Rabbah, a Midrash]. He ruled 117-138 CE, quashed the second Jewish revolt, and banned all teaching and practice of Judaism, killed many rabbis [see: 10 martyrs].

It is related of Miriam, the daughter of the baker, that she was captured [by the Romans] with her seven sons. The Emperor took them and placed them in the innermost of seven rooms.

-He had the eldest son brought and said to him, "Prostrate yourself before [this] idol."

-He answered, "*Chas v'shalom* -- Heaven forbid! I will not bow before an idol."

- "Why?" asked the emperor.

- "Because it is written in our Torah:

I am the Lord your God." [Exod. 20:2].

- [The Emperor] immediately had him taken out and killed.

-He had the second son brought and said to him, "Prostrate yourself before the idol."

-He answered, "*Chas v'shalom* -- Heaven forbid! My brother did not bow and I [too] will not bow."

- "Why?" asked the emperor.

-He replied, "Because it is written in our Torah:

You shall have no other gods before Me." [Exod. 20:3]

-He immediately ordered him killed.

-He had the third son brought and said to him, "Prostrate yourself before the idol."

-He answered, "I will not bow."

- "Why?" asked the emperor.

- "Because it is written in the Torah:

For you shall not bow down to another god." [Ex. 34:14]

-He immediately ordered him killed.

-He had the fourth son brought, who quoted:

He who brings offerings to the gods shall be utterly destroyed. [Ex. 22:19],

and he was ordered killed.

-He had the fifth brought, who quoted:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. [Deut. 6:4],

and he was immediately ordered killed.

-He had the sixth son brought, who likewise quoted:

For the Lord your God is among you, a great and awesome God.

[Ex. 7:21],

and he was ordered killed.

-He had the seventh son brought, who was the youngest of them all, and the Emperor said, "My son, prostrate yourself before the idol."

-He answered, "*Chas v'shalom* -- Heaven forbid!"

-"Why?" asked the emperor.

-"Because it is written in our Torah:

You shall know this day, and take it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below. There is none else. [Deut. 4:39].

Not only that, but we have sworn to our God that we will not exchange Him for another god, as it is said:

You have accepted the Lord today to be your God. [Deut. 26:17]

And just as we have sworn to Him, so He has sworn to us that He would not exchange us for another people; as it is said:

And the Lord has set you apart today to be His own treasure. [Deut. 26:18]

-The Emperor said to him, "Your brothers, [who were older than you,] had their fill of years and of life and had experienced the pleasure of this world. But you are still young, you have not had your fill of years and life and have not yet experienced the pleasure of this world. Prostrate yourself before the idol and I will bestow favors upon you."

-[The child] replied, "It is written in our Torah:

The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. [Ex. 15:18],

and it is said:

The Lord is King for ever and ever; [even when] the nations have perished from His earth. [Ps. 10:16]

[What is the value of your offers, when] you shall cease to exist, and your kingdom shall cease to exist? You are only flesh and blood, who lives today but will die tomorrow, who is wealthy today but will be destitute tomorrow. But the Holy One, blessed be He, lives and endures for all eternity."

-The Emperor said to him, "See, your brothers are dead before you! Look, I will throw my ring to the ground in front of the idol. Pick it up, so everybody will think you have obeyed my command."

-He answered, "A curse on you, O Emperor! If you are afraid of human beings who are the same as yourself, shall I not fear the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, the God of the universe!"

-He asked him, "But is there truly a God in the world?"

-He replied, "Woe unto you, O Emperor! Do you see that the world is abandoned?" [Clearly, there is a Power behind it.]

-He asked, "Does your God have a mouth?"

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They have a mouth, but cannot speak. [Ps. 115:5].
But in connection with our God it is written:
By the word of the Lord were the heavens made." [Ps. 33:6].

-He asked, "Does your God have eyes?" [Can He see all that goes on in the world?]

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They have eyes but cannot see. [Ps. 115:5]
In connection with our God it is written:
The eyes of the Lord scan the entire world! [Zech. 4:10]."

-He asked, "Does your God have ears?" [Does He pay attention to all that's going on?]

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They have ears, but cannot hear. [Ps. 115:6]
But in connection with our God it is written:
And the Lord listened and heard." [Malachi 3:16]

-He asked, "Does your God have a nose?" [Does He treat people individually?]

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They have a nose but cannot smell. [Ps. 115:6]
But in connection with our God it is written:
And the Lord smelled the sweet aroma. [Gen. 8:21]"

-He asked, "Does your God have hands?" [Does He perform miracles?]

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They have hands, but cannot feel. [Ps. 115:7]
But in connection with our God it is written:
My hand has laid the foundation of the earth." [Is. 38:13]

-He asked, "Does your God have feet?" [Can He be only in one place at one time?]

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They have feet but cannot walk. [Ps. 115:7]
But in connection with our God it is written:
And His feet shall stand on that day on the Mount of Olives." [Zech. 14:4]

-He asked, "Does your God have a throat?" [Does he communicate with lowly man?]

-He answered, "In connection with your gods it is written:
They cannot utter a sound from their throats. [Ps. 115:7]
But in connection with our God it is written:
And speech emanates from His mouth. " [Job 37:2]

-The Emperor asked, "If your God has all these attributes, why does He not rescue you from my hands, just as He rescued Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the hands of Nebuchadnezzar?"

-He answered, "Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were meritorious, and King Nebuchadnezzar deserved that a miracle be performed through him.

You, however, are undeserving. You [are able to kill us only because] we have been condemned to death by Heaven. [In fact,] if you do not kill us, God has many other executioners [who can do so]. He has many bears, wolves, lions, snakes, leopards and scorpions, that can all attack us and kill us. But ultimately the Holy One, blessed be He, will exact payment from you for our blood."

-The king immediately ordered him put to death.

-The child's mother said to him, "...O Emperor, give me my son that I may embrace and kiss him [before you kill him]... Kill ME first and then kill him."

-He answered her, "I will not, because it is written in your Torah:

You shall not slaughter an ox, a sheep, or a goat, and his offspring, on the same day." [Lev. 22:28]

-She retorted, "You great fool! Have you already fulfilled all [of God's] commandments, and is this one is the only one you have left to fulfill?

-He [again] ordered [that the child be] put to death immediately. The mother threw herself upon her child, embraced him and kissed him. She said to him, "My son, go before your father Abraham and tell him, 'My mother says, '[Abraham,] do not feel too proud [about your righteousness] by saying 'I built an altar and offered up my son, Isaac.'" [My] mother built seven altars and offered up seven sons in a single day. [And] yours was only a test, but mine was actually done."

-While she was embracing and kissing him, the king gave an order and they killed him in her arms...

-After a few days the woman went mad and she fell from a roof and died... and the Holy Spirit cried out, "*Al elleh ani vokiya*. For these things I weep." [Lam. 1:16]

-At that time, all the peoples of the world cried out and said, "What does the God of these [people] do for them, that they are [willing to be] killed for His sake at all times?..."

[Lam. R. 1:50; story also in Gittin 57b]

We survived because of the faith of people like this woman and her seven sons.

-Similar story in Apocrypha: Hannah and Greek persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes, leading to events of Hanukkah, with "eat pork" instead of "serve idol". [2 Maccabees 7]

-Similar stories abound and are documented. Many Jews in history accepted death rather than be forced to stop practicing Judaism, or be forcibly converted to idol worship, or to Christianity, or to Islam, or to the

new “ism” of the day. They died *l’kiddush HaShem* – for the Sanctification of the Name.

2- God made us survive

The prophet Amos has God saying:

I will not utterly destroy the House of Jacob. [Amos 9:8]

Time: ~750 BCE, when Jews were extremely prosperous and observance was lax, especially among the ten tribes in the North:

Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom [the North], and I will destroy it from upon the face of the earth. But I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob [the South], says the Lord. For, behold, I will command, and I will scatter the house of Israel among all nations... [Amos 9:8-9]

-Does that mean only the righteous/observant are destined to survive as Jews?

-Tradition of the Lamed Vav -- the 36 righteous people for whose sake God preserves the world.

-Haggadah: Vehi-sheamda:

-Ella sheb'chol dor vador 'omdim 'alenu le-challotenu; vехаKadosh Baruch Hu matzilenu miyadam

In every generation they rise against us to destroy us. And the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands.

3-Our stubbornness made us survive

God calls us “a stiff-necked people” eight times in Torah! [Ex. 32:9, 33:3, 33:5, 34:9; Deut. 9:6, 9:13, 10:16, 31:27]. Usually seen as criticism, but is it?

-For you are a holy people to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a special people to Himself, above all peoples that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more numerous than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples... [Deut 7: 6-7; 14:2]

-The Lord your God does not give you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people. [Deut 9:6]

-So God “loves” us and “chose” us, but not because we were numerous or righteous. God does not say why He chose us, but He immediately adds: “for you are a stiff-necked people”. Could it be that we were chosen BECAUSE we are stiff-necked?

-God wanted someone with the stubbornness, the determination, the endurance, the staying power, to follow His commandments and spread

His word in spite of the inevitable persecutions that will ensue. Most people don't have that.

-The Midrash compares Israel to an olive. Just as the olive yields its oil only after being squeezed hard, so Israel must endure great oppression and hardship in order to yield its wisdom. [Ex. Rabbah 36:1]

4-Torah, Talmud and Tradition made us survive

-Kept Jews following same laws, in tight communities, distinct from non-Jews.

-After fall of Temple, rabbis made Judaism portable, not tied to a place, and emphasized study.

5-*Sechel* made us survive

Sechel is intelligence, wisdom, but also ingenuity, creativity, mental agility, street smarts, finding clever solutions rather than use brute force – a *yiddishe kop*, a 'Jewish head'.

6-Antisemitism made us survive

-Born of envy, it forced us to be even smarter and more resourceful to survive.

-It also strengthened our resolve by refusing to give in.

Story of a Jew who fled the Spanish Inquisition by sea, with his wife and child, on a rickety boat. A bolt of lightning killed his wife. A storm rose and hurled his son into the sea. He reached a small, rocky island, shook his fist at God and said:

"God of Israel, I have fled to be able to follow Your commandments and sanctify Your name. You, however, are doing everything You can to make me stop believing in You. But it will not avail You. You may insult me, strike me, take away all that I hold dear, torture me to death – I will always believe in You, I will always love You, even in spite of You!"

7-The Exile made us survive

Being scattered among the nations made it difficult for antisemites to destroy *all* of us. A network of scattered communities makes for resilience.

Conclusion

Ultimately, only faith sustained us as Jews.

- Most Jews, then or now, are not like the woman and her seven sons.
- Yet Judaism has survived ONLY because of people like them.
- Most Jews today, and probably in any age, are not observant.
- Survival rests upon the shoulders of the minority who are. We are the descendants of that minority.
- In 200 years, will all Jews descend from the few who are Orthodox today? 2005 study: If present trends continue:

- 100 secular Jews produce 7 Jews in 4th generation
- 100 Reform Jews produce 10 Jews in 4th generation
- 100 Conservative Jews produce 29 Jews in 4th generation
- 100 mainline Orthodox Jews produce 434 Jews in 4th generation
- 100 ultra-Orthodox Jews produce 3,401 Jews in 4th generation

[<http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/will-your-grandchild-be-jewish-chart-graph.htm>]

-2013 Pew study:

- Today in US: 10% Orthodox, 18% Conservative, 35% Reform, 36% unaffiliated.
- Switching is mostly in the direction of less observance:
 - Among the O, 65% stay O or become C
 - Among the C, 40% stay C or become O
 - Among the R, 7% become C or O

-On the one hand, we must say today:

-*'Al elleh ani vokiya*. For these things I weep. [Lam. 1:16]

-But on the other hand, we can say:

-*Am Yisrael chai!* The Jewish people lives.

Let us end with the traditional greeting:

"May this be the last Tisha B'Av we spend in mourning."