

To Be Or Not To Be

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Reflections whilst fasting on Tisha B'Av.

The superstitious side of me (yes I do indeed have that little irrational spirit sitting inside my brain that needs to be swatted regularly) says that of course the war would be tough during the Nine Days, but that as soon as it is over and the Shabbat of Comfort begins everything will get better. Sadly, superstition has a rotten record. But hope is good!

I am not pleased with the world, just overwhelmed by hatred on the media, by irrationality and dishonesty and calls for our obliteration that are simply brushed off as unimportant. I ask myself whether it would indeed have been a better world had we Jews not existed? But then there'd be no Christianity, no Western Civilization and no Islam. After all, we Jews started it all. On the other hand, there'd have been no anti-Semitism. Life might be easier.

But since when is "ease" a value? Perhaps our role in this world is to be the grain of sand in the oyster, the irritant that creates something magnificent. People often mistake the idea of "the Chosen People" to mean that we think we're better than everyone else. On the contrary, it means we are burdened with an obligation. God has imposed survival upon us. We are chosen to survive.

You could argue that our religion has done its job in spawning much bigger and more powerful monotheistic religions. The only trouble is that they themselves are not doing such a great job. Perhaps we Jews exist if for no other reason than to remind them of this!

Certainly, you could also argue that we have lost the evangelical plot by being concerned with minutiae, having three fridges or buying special equipment to search for bugs. Perhaps the other religions exist to remind us of the bigger issues! Maybe that's why God wants so many religions, so that no one gets the monopoly and ends up abusing it!

There must be something in a small people that has defied all major civilizations, survived every attempt to annihilate it and indeed is now stronger in many respects than it has been in thousands of years. The question is whether this is because of Israel or despite it. I think it is absolutely clear at this moment that it is because of it.

Does religion justify the existence of Israel? What about all those religious movements that opposed a Jewish homeland? Perhaps the Reform Movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were right. We should have remained Jewish citizens of the countries who were kind enough to let us in. Perhaps the British Jewish aristocracy was right. Better an honor from an English Monarch than a synagogue in Jerusalem.

We could take the Neturei Karta position most pathetically and

sycophantically being hawked around the media at the moment. Zionism is a terrible error. It offends against God and history. We were meant to suffer in exile and be disenfranchised and pray for the Messiah to save us. The secular antireligious State of Israel has only brought more hatred and antagonism towards Jews. It has not solved the Jewish problem; it has created a bigger one. And as for a Jewish state, all we have is another excessively materialistic, corrupt, crime-infested national entity, with sex clubs and prostitutes galore, where the priapic gods of pop and Hollywood matter more than any spiritual values. Even if Neturei Karta might have a Midrashic point, it is dangerously facile to think that Nasrulla or Ahamdinejad would distinguish between those with beards and black hats and those without.

Yes, it is so easy to be destructive and negative. It is the human condition to yearn for material comfort and mediocrity. Why, even some of the most Orthodox of Jewish communities are as seduced by materialism as the most godless of humans. Who wants to fight (or pay taxes) if you can find a good excuse?

The fact is that Judaism has never been stronger or more creative, both religiously and culturally, than it is today, thanks to having a state of its own. Diaspora institutions are pale reflections of what can be found there. It is the only place today where really creative, thinking, non-fundamentalist religious life flourishes, and indeed where more ultra-Orthodox institutions have more students than at any time in our history. Both pragmatically and equitably, we need a state of our own. Indeed, according to Nachmanides (1194-1270 Spain) the Torah was intended and given to be lived within a Jewish state, in a holistic context, not as a minority under an alien culture. Judaism should be practiced in a society rather than in a bubble. That's why we need a homeland, however important the negative reason of having a refuge might be.

I believe that a purely secular Zionism is dead. I only mean the ideology, of course. I do not mean the desire to defend and maintain ones homeland. But the old revolutionary ideology has outlived its original goal which was to achieve a homeland and replace religious Judaism. Despite the efforts of many early pioneers and the bleatings of A. B. Yehoshua, it has not created an Israeli alternative to Judaism. Secular Israelis feel more at home at a rave up in Florida, New York and California than in a synagogue. It is only the religion that gives Israel any identifiably Jewish characteristic.

Yet the religion itself is split between those who want to fight for a land of their own and those who want to live as parasites on them. The parasites have no solution other than giving up. That leaves only those who religiously believe that a home land invigorates and revives our spiritual tradition or those simply born into a state they are committed to defend.

Once upon a time we thought this battle was a battle between states, the Arab States against Israel. Give up a bit, compromise, and we'll live in peace. Nowadays it is clear that it is not. It is a battle of religions. The majority of the Islamic world sees Israel as a cancerous growth forced on the Muslim world, the Dar el Islam. Israel is the beachhead of the American crusaders who must be repelled at all costs so that Islam can regain its old

empire of Al Andalus.

Most of the West is no longer religious, so they simply do not understand religious fanaticism. They do not get it. This is a battle for religious supremacy—except that in our case if we do not fight it, it means obliteration. Oh yes, I can understand those Jews who want Israel out, who want Israel to lie down and hope—the war-weary, the fainthearted and the those who want to be loved by the chattering classes. If you want a land of your own you have to fight for it, and fighting is always painful and messy.

But if we want survive, as the sort of Jew I want to be counted amongst, we have no other option. That's why I am optimistic, superstition or no!

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