

Looking Back

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There's a Russian proverb that goes, "He who looks to the past is in danger of losing an eye. But he who ignores the past is in danger of losing two eyes." I don't know if that's really a Russian proverb. I heard it from Lord Bullock, the historian, biographer of Hitler and Stalin, who was speaking at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem many years ago. And it has always struck me as so applicable to us Jews.

It's part of our tradition to remember, our forefathers, our history, and our enemies. Purim of course is concerned with remembering the eternal and irrational hatred we seem to engender: Amalek (Deuteronomy 25), King Agag (1 Samuel 15), and Haman the Agagite. Both Hitler and Goebels referred to the Jews creating a "New Purim" if they survived. We did, and I guess our new Purim is Israel Independence day. And soon we'll be looking back to life in Egypt three-and-a-half thousand years ago.

On the other hand, just think of one of the most enduring of Biblical motifs, Lot's wife! Don't look back. Go forward! Indeed, both remembering the past and being able to let go of it are part of our great tradition. We remember slavery in Egypt, but we move with anticipation into a Promised Land. We weep by the waters of Babylon, but we dream of returning and rebuilding. We look back in our prayers, nostalgically, to an ancient past with our own King and Temple, but we look forward to a Messianic era.

The rabbis of the Talmud also looked both ways—back to the Sinai Revelation and yet forward to creating new realities in Law and custom. Look at how they responded so brilliantly to the loss of the Temple and introduced a different framework for community worship. The innovations of the Zohar, the medieval mystics, and the Safed of Cordovero and Luria would have been impossible if we had remained in a kind of Kaarite devotion only to the fossilized texts of the past. And was not Hassidism originally innovative, creative, breaking new ground until it too started to look back instead of forward?

It is true that all legal systems look back to the earlier authorities who established the principles or back to earlier precedent. But these are usually springboards to the future. It is religion that is most responsible for looking back, back to its original founders, its glorious past or to some perceived tragic defeat or wrong or assassination, and therefore by nature religion is conservative and slow to change. On the other hand, one of the attractions of religion is that it offers stability, continuity, and security. Particularly at times of change, uncertainty, and excessive license that feeds destructively on itself, that creates icons out of such insubstantial beings as Anne Nicole Smith, Britney Spears, or Princess Diana.

In the case of Torah Judaism we are stuck in an excessive wave of retro. Religiously we are told that the ghettos of Eastern Europe were some sort of spiritual paradise. We often forget the squalor, the hate, the agony, and the

psychological damage of oppression. Instead we rebuild synagogues and rebbes' Imperial Seats in a mock style that, in itself, imitated a nostalgia for medieval castles with crenellations and turrets. The Hassidic world is overflowing with rebbes who take their names from Eastern European villages. As soon as a new great-grandson sets up his own dynasty he has to find a Polish village to name himself after. If it were simply paying tribute to places obliterated in the Holocaust that would be fine, except many of the names are of towns to the east that never were involved. But it's more than that. It's the implication that to go back takes you closer to authenticity. But then what is authentic? Can it only be someone dressed as a medieval Polish baron?

Go into very Orthodox homes throughout the Jewish world and you will see imitations of third-rate antique furniture covered in plastic, heavy chintz or velvet drapes, incongruous chandeliers that can't be cleaned, and bookshelves in imitation antique fretwork—interior décor of eighteenth century petit Warsaw, Vilna, or Budapest. And that is supposed to be "authentic" heimish, Jewish religious! It's small wonder that the dress code is retro too, with black Italian Mafiosi, undertaker broad-brimmed Borsalino hats.

We now idolize scholarly rabbis of the past, and pretend they were all perfect saints of hagiographical proportions who never allowed a bad, selfish, nasty word to cross their lips, or such a thought cross their minds. And it is true that although far more Orthodox Jews nowadays sit and study all day long than was ever possible before (thanks in no small measure to modern secular welfare states), nevertheless giants of Torah are fewer and further between than ever before. We may be pygmies on the shoulders of giants but we have far more pygmies than ever before and perhaps the giants are becoming extinct.

There seems to be an unhealthy preoccupation in religious circles with old burial grounds, with finding and preserving the graves of ancients but caring not a jot for the wider issues of the universe, for ecology, climate change, economic exploitation. That's for non-Jews! Like ethics! A recent survey by a religiously conservative Jewish paper in New York found that almost 60% of respondents thought the science of global warming was rubbish. In other words, apart from being ignorant, they are unconcerned with issues beyond the confines of their ghettos. Just stand on Golders Green Road and watch for five minutes how much rubbish is thrown out of cars driven by outwardly religious drivers. How is it that a religion that intends to be an example to the world is now more laughed at than admired?

The only response of the Torah world to any question or challenge is to throw dirt and scorn in the hope that that will drive away any challenging voice. We look back with religious eyes but we are blinded because no one can see the pain of the living or the needs of the spiritually vacant. All that matters is fitting into a mindset and a social and legal framework that has been tested in the past but creaks in the present.

So what do we do? Simply cutting out chunks of tradition, throwing out the baby with the bathwater has been a manifest failure. On the other hand for

all the triumphalism of the Baal Teshuva Orthodox evangelical movements, they have touched a small sliver of the Jewish world. Not that I disparage that at all. But it still begs the question of why we are not retaining or attracting the majority. Ultra Orthodoxy relies primarily on internal growth, not persuasion. Yet I do not believe much is needed to change attitudes—just smiling and easing up a bit might be enough to chase away the clouds. It's a bit like Israeli PR, a small amount of well-directed effort could have amazing results. The creators of Christianity were right in theory—a bit more love, a bit less law. But getting the right balance has still not been achieved, by them or us or anyone else.

Perhaps our inward-looking pettiness is the result of two thousand years of exile and oppression and having a huge chip on our shoulders as a result. Perhaps it's a reaction to the horror of the Holocaust where one part of the civilized world wanted to destroy the Jews and the other half didn't care. Lord knows, that's reason enough to be emotionally crippled. But even someone challenged can live looking forward and try to improve the quality of his life. Or else he might be so busy looking back he loses his sight altogether. And I fear we nearly have.

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